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Abstract

Religious young adults interpret their single experiences based on an intricate system of influences that include personal beliefs, family, religious teachings, and friendships. This qualitative study of 24 never-married, young Mormon men and women examined the social and cultural construction of singlehood based on: (1) definitions of singlehood, (2) influences on the construction of singlehood, and (3) feelings about being single. A major theme of this research emerged in the way participants defined singlehood: by what they lacked and by seeking to end their temporary single state through marriage. Families and religious teachings interacted to form the strongest influences on participants construction of singlehood, while supportive friends helped respondents feel that they were not alone.

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Religious young adults interpret their single experiences based on an intricate system of influences that include personal beliefs, family, religious teachings, and friendships. This qualitative study of 24 never-married, young Mormon men and women examined the social and cultural construction of singlehood based on: (1) definitions of singlehood, (2) influences on the construction of singlehood, and (3) feelings about being single. A major theme of this research emerged in the way participants defined singlehood: by what they lacked and by seeking to end their temporary single state through marriage. Families and religious teachings interacted to form the strongest influences on participants' construction of singlehood, while supportive friends helped respondents feel that they were not alone. Key Words: Culture, Family, Mormon, Religion, and Singlehood

The script for *Life as an American Adult* has long been established. In this script, the majority of men and women expect to marry at some time in their lives, and 74% of them are married by their 35th birthday (Fields & Casper, 2001). During the past 30 years, age at first marriage in the United States has risen significantly (Fields & Casper), and more adults stay single for a longer period of time. For some individuals, however, singleness carries with it a sense of ambiguity about their place in society (Caplan, 1985; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Schwartzberg, Berliner, & Jacob, 1995) because established cultural norms and implicit expectations of family and friends often deem it requisite to attain the marriage milestone, to live a "successful" life (Austrom & Hanel, 1985; Caplan; Schwartzberg et al.).

According to George Herbert Mead (as cited in Gergen, 1999), "Selves can only exist in relationship to other selves" (p. 123). Thus, the meaning of *being single* for any one person is socially constructed through personal experiences and interactions with the broader culture and members of one's social network, especially family and friends (Gergen). Individuals who come from the same culture typically share some of the same meanings for specific phenomena like marriage and being single (Berger & Luckman, 1966). In U.S. mainstream culture, for example, marriage traditionally has been an important part of society (Schwartzberg et al., 1995) and was regarded as "inevitable, a natural part of the progression through life" (Austrom & Hanel, 1985, p. 15). Although this meaning is changing, the impact of the importance of marriage has not completely diminished. Family members, peers, and members of the larger community often urge singles to find a suitable partner and get married. At the same time, the significant increase and acceptance of single adults in the 20 to 29-year-old age range of the U.S.

population inevitably influences unmarried individuals' view of themselves. Some characteristics of singlehood, such as freedom and independence, are celebrated in the United States and are viewed positively by many. As a result, single adults today often receive very contradictory messages about singlehood.

This situation may be compounded for single adults who are members of distinct religious groups that emphasize marriage and family, and forbid cohabitation practices, such as the Latter-day Saint (L.D.S. or Mormon) culture. These singles are not only influenced by U.S. mainstream culture, but also by the values and ideas shared among members of their L.D.S religion. For those who use their faith and religion as a referent, positions taken by the L.D.S. Church about marriage and singlehood have a significant impact on their attitudes and beliefs (Rutledge, 1993). Religious socialization "involves the transfer of religious attitudes and behavior patterns from one generation to the next" (Albrecht, 1998, p. 278).

In the L.D.S. church, religious socialization is accomplished by sharing the scriptures and teachings of past and current church leaders within family and church settings. For example, The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1995) issued a formal statement regarding the Church's position on marriage and family. It states 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" (p. 102). Moreover, other church leaders have reinforced this emphasis. For example, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin (1997), a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated, "The sweet companionship of eternal marriage is one of the greatest blessings God has granted to His children.... Marital companionship of husband and wife has been fundamental to our Heavenly Father's great plan of happiness" (p. 32). Thus, church leaders emphasize the importance of heterosexual marriage and family, and communicate this message to their members.

Families, in turn, relate these messages to their children, and from an early age Mormon children are taught about the significance of marriage and family. This emphasis continues throughout adolescence and is especially potent in young adulthood. Studies of religious socialization generally indicate that families act as agents of religious socialization, significantly influencing their children's religious attitudes and values (Cornwall, 1988; Stott, 1988).

Research on Single Adults

Much of the existing research on singles focuses on individuals, particularly women, over the age of 30 (e.g., Austrom & Hanel, 1985; Frazier, Arikian, Benson, Losoff, & Maurer, 1996; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Sheehan, 1989). None of the research has addressed familial or religious socialization in conjunction with the issue of singlehood. The following three topics have received the most attention by social scientists examining singlehood: (a) reasons for being single; (b) satisfaction with single life; and (c) perceived social support for single adults.

Reasons for Being Single

Research studies have shown that single adults report three primary reasons for being unmarried: personal choice, external circumstances, and personal deficits or self-blame (Austrom & Hanel, 1985; Frazier et al., 1996; Lewis & Moon, 1997). Using a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire, Austrom and Hanel found that 43% of their participants ($N = 482$, average age = 34 years) were single by choice, and had positive reasons for remaining single (e.g., "too many interesting people to choose from" or "present lifestyle could not be improved by marriage"). They further grouped together 23% of participants who had reported either personal deficits (i.e., too shy or feelings of unattractiveness) or external circumstances (i.e., not having met the right person yet) as reasons for continued singlehood. In contrast, Frazier et al. (1996) used various mailed surveys to determine that the most common responses among 217 heterosexual, divorced, or never-married adults over the age of 30 ($M = 43$) focused on external circumstances or "barriers" (e.g., "I haven't met someone I like at the same time as s/he likes me"). They found participants were less willing to cite personal deficits (e.g., "difficulty in maintaining long-term relationships") as reasons for being single, and when given options participants indicated that they deliberately chose singlehood (e.g., "Marriage is an out-dated, archaic tradition rooted in male dominance…") over naming specific interpersonal deficits that might explain why they were still single.

In meetings with nine ethnographic focus groups, Lewis and Moon (1997) found that *always single* and *single again* women unconsciously switched between internal (i.e., self-blame) and external (i.e., circumstantial) reasoning to explain why they were unmarried. When asked if they were single by choice and why, the responses tended to be "Yes, because I haven't met the right person" and "No, because I haven't met the right person," indicating a general feeling of ambivalence about their reasons for being single.

Satisfaction with Single Life

Studies regarding the life satisfaction of single adults tend to focus on an older single population and combine all unmarried individuals, including never-married, divorced, separated, and widowed individuals (Austrom & Hanel, 1985; Cockrum & White, 1985; Lewis & Borders, 1995). For example, Lewis and Borders found that the majority (78%) of 152 divorced and never-married, 30- and 40-year-old women accepted their single state and ceased to focus on the "what ifs" of the past. In contrast, 47% of individuals participating in Austrom and Hanel's study were unsatisfied with their single state, while only 25% felt satisfied with being single (28% said they were neutral). In this study, individuals who had made a conscious choice to remain single were more satisfied overall than those who were involuntarily single. According to the authors, there tends to be two kinds of single people: those who embrace the single lifestyle and enjoy it thoroughly and those who are unsatisfied with single life and blame their unmarried state on personal or situational inadequacies.

Cockrum and White (1985), on the other hand, note that the influences on life satisfaction for never-married singles were likely to be different from those previously married, and subsequently focused their research on never-married singles. Among 60 never-married men and women between the ages of 27 and 46, they found that the main

predictors of life satisfaction were related to the quality and quantity of human relationships (e.g., social integration, loneliness, and attachment). In other words, individuals who have strong social support systems and low levels of loneliness tend to be more satisfied with life.

Perceived Social Support

Social support is a multidimensional construct that consists of different types of support, including emotional support, integration, tangible help, and information support (Krause & Markides, 1990). According to Procidano and Heller (1983), perceived social support denotes the impact of social networks on individuals. Therefore, the perception that persons are or are not supported by family and friends can impact their perception of themselves within their cultural society.

Austrom (1982) examined whether married individuals had better physical and emotional health than single persons, as had been suggested in previous research. In multiple regression analyses, he found that any individual with a consistent, strong support group would be satisfied with life, regardless of marital status. However, marriage often provided the necessary "expressive and instrumental" social support that individuals needed, especially for men. Austrom also noted that while some single individuals succeeded in creating strong social support systems, they were, in general, more likely than married respondents to report a lack of social support.

In their study of never-married individuals, Cockrum and White (1985) found that supportive friendships were a vital source of validating singlehood as an acceptable way of life. Their findings supported previous research that suggests that supportive family, friends, co-workers, and others play an important part in the life and happiness of single adults by validating singlehood as an acceptable adult status, thereby reaffirming to never-married individuals that they are not deviant. Shostak (1987) argued that a supportive group of friends is necessary to deal with issues of loneliness among single adults. He noted that socialization with other singles plays a critical role in the development of a positive single experience because it allows single adults to share dating experiences; offer emotional support; provide a listening ear for single life discouragements and delights; and share common perceptions of life, love, and being single.

With a sample of single women, Sheehan (1989) examined loneliness as it related to childhood and current relationships. Using attachment theory to examine the idea that loneliness is the result of a lack of secure relationships, she found that loneliness was not related to being single, but rather to a lack of security in personal relationships with friends, spouse/partner, and family.

In sum, the reasons for being single and the support singles receive from their social network all contribute to singles' feelings of satisfaction with their unmarried state. What is not yet well understood, however, is how young L.D.S. single adults construct their meanings of being single. Within this specific culture, religious teachings, family relations, and friendships may be particularly influential in singles' attempts to make sense and create meaning of their single life. Thus, the present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining the following questions: How do L.D.S. singles define what it means to be single in a predominantly marriage-oriented culture? How do they

feel about being unmarried? What influence do family, friends, and religion have on the meanings of being single?

We note that most research findings about singlehood, with Lewis and Moon's 1997 study being an exception, are based on survey designs using Likert scales to collect data. These studies do not explore the meanings of being single from the perspective of single persons themselves. We argue that meanings of singlehood are socially constructed through one's life experiences that are situated in and reinforced by important social contexts, such as one's religious faith, and that these meanings are subject to change during the course of singlehood. We believe that increased knowledge of how single persons themselves give meaning to their single status can add important information to the body of research on single adults. In addition, this knowledge may assist practitioners to understand what influences the unique and shared views of singlehood held by those with whom they work in therapeutic and other settings.

We used symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework to guide this study because it specifically focuses on the importance of meanings in understanding human behavior. According to the tenets of this theory, culture and society, the broadest social systems to which people belong, shape individuals' knowledge and reality. It is through their interpretations, however, that people make sense of and explain the knowledge and reality imparted by these social systems. Interpretations, thus, allow people to create and modify meanings (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Both the development of the questionnaire and the interpretation of the data were based on these theoretical principles. Because the researchers are the instruments through which qualitative studies are designed, and data collected and interpreted, the next section offers a brief description of the experiences of singlehood among the authors of this study.

Researchers' Single Selves

In addition to being a life-long member of the L.D.S church, I [JD], the first author, am a never-married woman in my mid-twenties. With several years of experience within the L.D.S. culture as a single individual, I have had time and opportunity to establish a knowledge base of the specific language used within the L.D.S. single culture, the subtle pressures of being single, and the tensions and ambiguities associated with this stage of life.

By this time in my life, I have had struggles with being single. I have felt the bitter disappointment of broken relationships (too many times, it seemed), when I hoped at least one might progress into something more, eventually leading to marriage. I have known what it feels like to be single and surrounded by others younger than I who had successful relationships leading to marriage. I have sometimes felt like I missed the boat, and my chances of finding a suitable partner and making a relationship work have passed me by. At times like those, I wonder whether there is something wrong with me that makes it so hard to find the right partner.

At the same time, however, I also enjoy being single. I do not have to worry about anyone else's schedule but mine. I have known the guilty relief of being able to hand my nieces and nephews back to their parents and return to the quiet and solitude of my non-baby-proofed house. While I have enjoyed the freedom of singlehood, I also desire a family of my own. I know that all things happen for a purpose and I have faith and trust

in God that things will work out as intended for me. As an insider, I have also had an intimate access to other singles in the L.D.S. culture who share similar experiences and feelings. This background allows me, as a researcher, to have a unique insider perspective on how it feels to be an unmarried adult in the Mormon culture.

I [KWP], the second author, am a married woman in my fifties. Because I have been continuously married since my mid-twenties, my experiences as a single person are long past. However, some of my memories of that era remain fresh. I was raised in a family that was active in the Roman Catholic church, a religion like the L.D.S. church, which places strong emphasis on marriage and family life for its members. I dated early and often, and never believed that I would spend my adult life as a single person. However, I was determined to pursue an advanced education and career, and so I turned down a couple of early marriage proposals to remain single. I was also "jilted" by steady beaus a couple of times over the years. After completing a master's degree and relocating to a new state at age 23, I resumed dating. I met my husband just 2 months afterwards. Looking back, I can see that dating post-Master's degree had a more purposeful objective; namely that of finding a spouse.

I have lived in Utah for over 8 years now, and have some understanding of the L.D.S. faith, including the issues surrounding singlehood among local college students and young adults who have not yet found a spouse. A difference [in addition to religious background] between many of these students and me is that in my own early adulthood, I always felt that completing higher education before marrying was desirable. Among many single persons of the L.D.S. faith, my perception is that there is no cognitive dissonance in combining marriage and pursuit of a higher education.

I [SN], the third author, am a single woman in my mid-thirties. While I am originally from Germany, where I grew up in a traditional nuclear family surrounded by a large extended network, I have lived alone in the United States for the past 9 years. Most of my friends in the United States are married whereas many of my friends in Germany are still single, reflecting the overall higher age of first marriage in Germany versus that in the U.S. In contrast to many of the participants of our study, who felt pressured by family, friends, church leaders, or society at large, I only feel pressured to get married in terms of my ability to have biological children. Currently, however, I am not interested in dating: My focus is on my academic career.

Input from each researcher promoted varied ideas during the development/design of the study and subsequent data analysis. The insider [JD] understood and could more easily explain aspects of the L.D.S. faith that influenced the study's findings. The outsider [KWP] could more readily compare and contrast the L.D.S. meanings of singlehood with those of non-L.D.S. or mainstream societal meanings, to understand how meanings of singlehood are uniquely constructed by the study's sample. For example, one category that emerged and contributed to respondents' meanings included a feeling of pressure to marry that was experienced by some of the relatively young [ages 20-24] persons in this study. While this is quite common among young adults in the L.D.S. faith, such pressure to marry in young adulthood is no longer the norm for the majority of young single adults in the U.S. today. These different viewpoints enriched our findings.

Method

The design for this study best fits Caelli, Ray, and Mill's (2003) notion of a generic qualitative study. In our study, we sought understanding of the phenomenon of singlehood from the perspectives of young adult members of the L.D.S. church. However, we did not adopt some of the customary ways of doing phenomenological research, especially in our method of data collection and analysis. Caelli and associates indicate that generic qualitative studies must address four key areas to establish credibility: (1) the theoretical positioning of the researcher, (2) a demonstration of congruence between methodology and methods, (3) strategies to establish rigor, and (4) an explanation of the analytic lens. How we met these criteria will be discussed throughout the methods section of the paper.

To understand the phenomenon of singlehood, the study utilized individuals' own words in describing and understanding the extent to which the unique relationship between family and religion frames meanings of singlehood. That is, participants shared their own experiences and provided insight into what it means to be a young single adult member of the L.D.S. church. Qualitative data were gathered from 24 L.D.S. young single adults via an open-ended questionnaire, completed via computer disk in a word-processing program, to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of never-married singles in the L.D.S. culture. Approval for this research was gained from Utah State University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Permission was granted to conduct this study based on the information that there would be no more than minimal risk to the subjects, as they were asked questions regarding their cultural beliefs and practices via a unique qualitative method.

Prior to the start of this study, permission to extend an invitation to participate in a church setting was granted from the stake president of the Logan University Fifth Stake in Logan, Utah. Generally, L.D.S. church membership lists are not used to solicit information. However, in certain circumstances, church leaders have the authority to grant a researcher permission to utilize members under their stewardship. After explaining this research to the stake president, I [JD] was given permission to invite participants in one ward within the stake. It was agreed that this ward would best serve the purposes of the study because there were a variety of individuals in the ward with regard to age and education. Other participants were recruited in University classes.

Participants

To be eligible, participants needed to be single, never married, between the ages of 20 and 29, and participating members of the L.D.S. Church. While many 20- to 29-year-old singles in the culture outside the L.D.S. faith may not yet worry about being single, this age range was chosen for the present study because of the strong emphasis on marriage and family within the L.D.S. culture, and the resulting younger than national average age at first marriage in Utah.

Of those eligible, 24 individuals (10 men, 14 women) chose to participate in the research project. The majority of participants were between the ages of 21 and 25, with the average age being 23 years old (women averaged 22 years, while men averaged 25 years). With the exception of one participant, who had left the religion for a time and was

re-baptized at age 21, all participants were active and life-long members of the L.D.S. church. Most of the participants were in their junior or senior year of college and came from a variety of majors (e.g., family and human development, business, mechanical engineering, math/physics, exercise science, and geography). Many considered Utah or Idaho "home," while 4 participants came from other states, and 1 participant had grown up mostly in Mexico. Participants came from varied family types. Although most were from a two-parent biological family, 5 were from a mother-stepfather family, and 1 came from a single-parent family. Most of the participants reported that they were currently unattached (i.e., not dating anyone), while others were in various stages of romantic relationships (i.e., casually dating, exclusively dating, or engaged to be married).

Procedures

After reading and signing an informed consent document, each participant was given a numbered packet containing a paper-copy of a questionnaire as well as a copy of the questionnaire on a floppy disk in Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect files. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire in either Word or WordPerfect, and to save their responses to the accompanying disk: This procedure saved time and reduced the errors that typically occur in the transcription process. Participants were told they could complete the paper-copy of the questionnaire if they felt more comfortable with it, and/or if they had unresolved computer difficulties.

The participants were prompted to answer questions about their beliefs via computer disk rather than face-to-face interviews or focus groups for two reasons. First, this method allowed adequate data collection in a short period of time. Second, we thought that if the participants were able to maintain some anonymity, thoughts and expressions about their singlehood or dissatisfaction with the church (doctrine or members) would be more readily shared. In a face-to-face setting, some participants might be reticent to share negative experiences and feelings with someone who they knew belonged to the faith.

Participants were also asked to record their name, phone number, and email address on a separate sheet of paper so that the principal researcher could contact them to remind them to return their packets: This information was not tied to the numbered packet they received. Participants were asked to return the entire packet to the principal researcher's office within a few weeks. Reminders were given via email or phone at 1week intervals for 2 weeks. A total of 41 packets were distributed, and 24 packets were returned within a 3-week period, for a response rate of 59%.

Questionnaire

Consistent with our beliefs that singlehood is a socially constructed phenomenon, we sought to develop a questionnaire that would allow us to understand the nature of this construction. Initially, we carefully reviewed existing surveys and questionnaires on similar issues. Based on the existing literature and the first author's experience with the L.D.S. culture, we developed open-ended questions on several factors (e.g., family of origin, religious teachings and beliefs, social interactions with peers) thought to have a potential influence on young adult L.D.S. singles' construction and meanings of

singlehood. The authors then pilot tested these questions with a group of eight L.D.S. men and women between the ages of 21 and 26. Results showed that some questions were redundant: These were subsequently deleted or combined with other questions. Pilot-test participants were also asked to comment on confusing wording or phrasing within specific questions; these were clarified. Additional questions were developed based on the pilot test results (e.g., "What is the difference between being single and being married?" "Why is getting married important?" "What do you expect marriage to be like?") to draw more responses to specific issues.

In its final version, the questionnaire consisted mostly of open-ended questions (see Table 1) assessing participants' personal thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of marriage and singlehood; their feelings about their single status; the perceived pressures to date and get married; and the influence of their family, friends, and religious beliefs on their attitudes toward being single. Demographic data on gender, education, dating activity, family type, and religious activity/experience were also collected. No identifying information was requested on the questionnaire, allowing participants to maintain anonymity and to answer questions freely. The entire questionnaire consisted of 68 questions and took participants on average two hours to complete. Table 1 lists example questions for each topic.

Table 1
Example Questions from Questionnaire by Topic

Dating experiences	How do you define the words "date" and "dating"? How often per month do you go on a date (as defined above)?
Personal beliefs	How would you explain being single to someone else? To what extent is getting married important?
Family beliefs	What does your family believe about marriage and being single?
Religious practices and teachings	What does the L.D.S. religion teach about marriage and being single?
Peer influences	How have your friends influenced your views of marriage/the way you feel about being single?
Personal perceptions of marriage and singlehood	What is the difference between being single and being married?
Personal feelings about singlehood	Are you satisfied with your current single status?
Perceived pressures to date and marry	Do you feel pressure to get married in the near future? What sources of pressure do you see most consistently in your life?

Influence of family, friends, and religious beliefs on attitudes toward singlehood	Please describe your perceptions of how your parents/religion/friends view you as a single person In what ways has your family/the L.D.S religion/your friends influenced the way you feel about being single?

Data Analysis

Upon the return of the completed questionnaires, the principal researcher [JD] first read the questionnaires through two or three times. Then, an analytic memo was created for each respondent to capture general impressions of his or her view of singlehood. The second author also read each questionnaire and created a similar memo to be used in discussion with the first author about the coding scheme. This process helped us to better acknowledge the participants' constructions of singlehood and make sense of the data as we sought to develop themes. Completing the analytic memo for each participant helped us to see repeated concepts and ideas, and take note of attitudes and feelings toward singlehood. For example, key words and phrases such as "trusting in God," "right [time/place]," "temporary," and "progress" were mentioned in these analytic memos, giving us a sense of the participant's definition and construction of singlehood.

We used the QSR NUD*IST™ computer software (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1995) to manage and code the data as we developed themes related to singlehood in the L.D.S. culture. Initially, answers to specific questions were grouped into codes. For example, the researchers sought to identify whether participants explained singlehood as positive or negative and grouped responses to various questions into three categories: "meaning of singlehood positive," "meaning of singlehood negative," and "meaning of singlehood mixed." Next, these data pieces were read and re-read until specific meanings were identified. For example, comments under "meaning of singlehood positive" reflected the idea that singlehood provides time for self-improvement and friends; that happiness is a state of mind unrelated to marital status, and that participants felt they were not ready yet to get married. The "meaning of singlehood negative" category included comments in which participants remarked that they felt worthless, unsuccessful or incomplete, and spoke of feelings of loneliness and the need to progress towards marriage. Finally, comments in the "singlehood mixed" category were defined by "but" statements that showed a mixture of positive and negative ideas side by side (e.g., I'm happy with being single, but I wish I dated more).

As data analysis proceeded, we looked for ways in which coded categories were related to each other to discover patterns and themes. During this process the first and second authors identified and cataloged several concepts, including the definition of singlehood, the definition of marriage, the influence of family, and the influence of religion. Through a process of several months' analysis and discussions, major themes, such as defining singlehood as a temporary state, emerged and were labeled. They formed the basis for the presentation of findings in the results section of this paper.

We used Guba and Lincoln's (1989) notions of dependability and trustworthiness to establish confidence in our findings. Dependability was addressed by a process that began with both first and second authors' reviews of the data and independent coding of

general concepts and patterns. Discussions of the emerging coding scheme, by both researchers, occurred several times during data analysis, with any discrepancies resolved at these meetings. The third author, who is quite knowledgeable of the research on singles but is not a qualitative researcher, read several drafts of the findings as they were written. Her questions helped clarify and elaborate several findings. We followed this process to establish dependability, and to ensure that the interpretations of the data were the product of several lenses. Thus, we engaged in a way of seeking trustworthiness known as progressive subjectivity (Guba & Lincoln).

Trustworthiness was also sought through establishing credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To that end, peer debriefing occurred between the first and third author to help the first author understand her own position and values as well as her role in the inquiry. In the beginning stages of research and during data analysis, the third author posed searching questions, challenging the first authors' assumptions and role in the research, by, for example, asking why an experience was interpreted or understood in one way versus another. This process helped the first author to redefine and better understand her role as researcher.

Results

Three main themes emerged as a result of this research. The first, and most prominent, theme was that L.D.S. single adults participating in the study tend to view singlehood as a temporary state, with marriage being a major goal. This theme was closely tied to the second theme, that personal religious beliefs and teachings, and family beliefs about singlehood and marriage, play a major role in the development of singlehood as a temporary state. The third theme was that friends and peer relations play a supporting role during a person's single state. Each of these findings is discussed.

Singlehood is Temporary and Marriage is a Goal

For nearly all participants, singlehood was described as a temporary state that would lead to marriage. This construction was shaped by strong spiritual and personal beliefs about both marriage and current single status. Constructions of singlehood also were affected to varying degrees by perceived pressure from others to marry (e.g., family, church members, and friends), with some respondents seemingly more affected by pressure than others.

To understand how young adult men and women in the L.D.S. church derived their meanings of singlehood an explanation of church teachings about marriage and its role in eternal life is necessary. For members of the L.D.S. church, "marriage is more than a matter of social convention or individual need fulfillment… it is central to the exaltation of the individual person" (Holman, 1995, p. 300). An important component of L.D.S. theology is the belief that men and women are children of heavenly parents in a premortal life: Just as children can grow to be like their parents, so men and women on earth can grow to become like God (Matthew 5:48, King James Version). Part of becoming like God, and eventually an exalted being, is to come into the highest patriarchal order of the priesthood by entering into *celestial* or *eternal* marriage. This sacred marriage ceremony can only be performed in a holy temple by an officiator with

proper priesthood authority, to validate the sacred promises made by spouses to each other and to God, intended to be in force for eternity (Duke, 1995). Thus, "Latter-day saints believe that the marital and family bond can continue in the post-earth life, and indeed is necessary for eternal life" (Holman, p. 300).

Obviously then, the principal of eternal marriage is of the utmost importance, and members of the L.D.S. church believe that marriage is imperative for religious progression. As one female participant, age 23, said, "marriage is very important and… we will not be able to be fully exalted without." Other participants cited scriptural text and referenced other L.D.S. teachings and beliefs in explaining the importance of marriage. Marriage, as an ultimate goal for these individuals, often created the sense that singlehood meant they were lacking "something". Although most participants said they were satisfied with being single, they also identified it as a temporary stage of life and looked forward to the day when they would end that stage.

For the majority of participants, this temporary nature of singlehood was expressed initially in the simple act of defining singlehood as not being married or engaged, and not having a significant other (e.g., "being single… means that you are not exclusively seeing anyone; when you start dating only one person, you are no longer single," [20-year-old woman]). In other words, once single adults are seriously dating, engaged, or married they have effectually ended their single state.

Participants evaluated their singlehood based on their personal goals, some of which tied religious progression to personal development. Some indicated that singlehood was an opportunity for freedom. One man, age 23, felt that "being single is an opportunity to really get to know yourself, be adventurous, [and] do things on your own, unrestricted." Several participants implied that this type of freedom would disappear once they were married. For example, one 20-year-old woman stated that she did not feel ready for marriage. She said, "I want to see the world before I am tied down." This idea of marriage as restricting freedom was expressed by both male and female participants.

Others, however, looked forward to ending their single state, explaining that they were unsatisfied with being single because "it gets lonely once in a while" (man, age 22). A 22-year-old woman explained, "The difference between being single and married will be having to think about someone else and what his wants and desires are. The changes in marriage will be… sharing a life with someone else." Understanding how these individuals described marriage also gave insight into their construction of singlehood as temporary.

Marriage brings companionship

Marriage was often described by the participants as a source of companionship, a way to end their lonely single status. For participants, companionship encompassed the notions of spousal friendship, a sense of safety with a partner, giving and receiving support, and lots of love. This was very well expressed by a 20-year-old woman who said

> [Marriage brings] a powerful sense of loyalty and responsibility and
> 'attached-ness'…. [It provides] a connection… that can't be made with
> other people you're not married to. [It will be] the ultimate connection
> with someone. I hear it's hard sometimes, but that the value of having that

> connection makes getting through the hard times possible…. I dream
> about marrying someone who is my best friend and someone I wouldn't
> worry about being afraid to be all of myself when I'm around him.

One 25-year-old woman, using her parents' friendship and marriage as an example, said, "My parents have fallen in and out of love, but because their friendship is so strong they make their marriage strong." She indicated that she looked forward to having this kind of relationship with her own spouse.

Many participants in this study expected marriage to be difficult but also rewarding, in part because that companion would support them through trials and difficult times. A 29-year-old man shared, "I know there are hard hard times [and] trials, but after all the bitterness, you find peace and happiness when you [as] a couple have had [to] overcome the trials." In addition, participants mentioned that working together and compromising to achieve goals within marriage was important. For example, a woman, age 23, said "When you're married, you must work as a team; singles don't experience that sort of teamwork." Most of these single adults acknowledged that marriage would not always be easy, and that there would be ups and downs. To them, the thought of having a companion to rely on for support, however, would make overcoming these challenges within marriage easier to endure. Many recognized that marriage could be a difficult process, but believed it to be worth their while. Ultimately, it would bring love, excitement, and joy to their lives.

Marriage is progression

Respondents described attainment of marriage as a form of personal growth and spiritual progression. A 25-year-old woman explained,

> When one marries, it seems they enter into a different status and rank in
> life; to a single person that status is illusive, unknown and very enticing. It
> seems that life doesn't really begin until one marries and starts a family.

Similarly, a 23-year-old woman said if she were married, in her parents' eyes, "I would be more adult… I would be more on my own… I would [be] expected to provide for myself." Along with progression, participants also depicted marriage as a growth opportunity and something that brings a sense of completeness. For example, a 24-year-old man said, "[Marriage] … allows growth that can never come to those who remain single." Likewise, a woman, age 20, felt that if she was married, "the leaders in the church would view [her] as more complete, further on the track of progression than [she is] now. Not totally complete, but closer than [she] was as a single person." For most of these singles, then, marriage is perceived as an opportunity to develop, to grow, and to become better individuals.

One participant (a 29-year-old male), however, viewed singlehood and marriage differently than his counterparts. To him, marriage was not necessary for his spiritual progression, and he expressed some hesitance to marry, despite feelings of loneliness and desire for companionship. He readily tied these feelings to childhood experiences of parental divorce and instability, making him wary of marriage. He explained,

> I am satisfied [with being single] to the extent that I haven't met the right person. I would prefer to be single than have a bad marriage and family life. I am dissatisfied [with being single] because I deeply yearn for the intimacy, love, sharing, and trust that can come from a healthy marriage.

Later, he added, "Being single is lonely. Being single is better than being in an unhealthy or abusive relationship." Others have found that parental divorce can influence their children's attitudes towards marriage. In her study of young adult L.D.S. women, Schmidt (2001) found that women who had experienced parental divorce in their early adolescence were reluctant to marry, and sometimes ended their romantic relationships when they seemed to be progressing to a more serious state.

Overall then, for most of the participants, defining marriage as a goal and something to look forward to gave them a sense of purpose for their singlehood. They sought to be productive and take time to better themselves with the freedom of singlehood, while waiting to find that "best friend" who would provide them comfort, support, and love during the bumpy marriage road ahead of them.

The Influence of Family and Religious Beliefs on the Construction of Singlehood

Family influence

Families greatly influenced participants' views of marriage and singlehood. If families expressed *positive* views about being single, then the participants tended to be more positive about their single status as well. For example, one 20-year-old woman indicated she had a "non-traditional upbringing… where [her]… dad was the one who was home." Of her family, she said

> They like me being single right now, and even if I were a lot older and not married, they'd be fine with that (I think). We have extended family who never got married or who [are] being single again after divorce, so it's not like my parents or sister don't know of people who are happily single. And as far as *eternal progression,* they know that some people don't get married here on this earth. Whenever my parents talk about the family that I'll have someday, they still sound as if it's a far away time – so it's expected, but not pressured.

Likewise, one man said that his family believed that "marriage is one of the greatest things you can ever do, [but to] stay single until you find the right one, and only do it once." He later indicated that his parents were the most influential in his life, concerning marriage and being single, and that his mom had told him not to get married before he graduated from college. Even though he expressed a strong desire to get married, the support he felt from his family as a single adult enabled him to feel a release from the potential distress of single life.

If families expressed more *negative* views about singlehood, participants also felt more *negatively* about singlehood, expressing it as a lonely place with an "anywhere-but-

here" attitude regarding their single status. A 22-year-old woman felt that being single was stressful because she had not lived up to her or her family's expectations. She said, "I feel like I need/want to be married before [my younger sister] is. [She] is 5 years younger than me and I don't want to be an old maid." Her brothers, "sometimes …will make comments after I have done something saying, 'No wonder you can't get any guys.' Those kinds of things make me feel like I am worthless."

Some participants expressed *uncertainty* about being single, often conveying opposite desires and needs about being single. However, they did not always identify a direct source of pressure or discontent. For example one 22-year-old woman said, "Right now I would like to date more, but it is okay that I am not. I guess that I am content, but not content." Another woman, also age 22, said

> I am okay with being single, but I would enjoy going on more dates. It seems like I go through spurts. Sometimes I go on more dates… sometimes I am in a famine. When it rains it pours. Right now I am in a drought. I would like to change that but I don't really know how I would do that. It is really hard to be some places where everyone has someone to be with. I feel like such an outcast.

Many of these "but" statements highlight mixed feelings about being single, such as those of a 20-year-old female who said, "I enjoy my independence and the things I can do because I am single (going to dances and stuff) but I feel a lot of pressure to find someone and get married."

Other participants felt simultaneous pressure and support from family members, which allowed them to see and appreciate the complexity of their single status. For example, a 24-year-old man said

> For the most part, [my family is] very good about [supporting me as a single adult]. Some times they'll start in on me, naming people I should date. One time my mom expressed her concern by saying, "I just don't want you to go see your son's football games with a walker."

Another man, age 29, explained, "My sisters… say… come on it's your turn, it is time now, every one of your cousins of your age are married but you. They also give me advice and support." One woman (age 23) divulged that her family often joked about her single status, "Last Christmas I asked my dad what he wanted… and his only response was a son-in-law." Although she said, "I don't think it… makes me emotional that I'm not married," she later commented on the influence of her older brother,

> I can tell that some of his attitudes about getting older and needing to get married have rubbed off on me. I guess I don't want to find myself in his shoes – 25 years old, single, and watching as your options are all getting married off right before your eyes.

Church and religious beliefs

The idea of having faith in God and marrying the right person, at the right time, in the right place appeared many times in the responses. For example, one 24-year-old male said, "I have had opportunities for relationships that I've learned from. I don't want to rush into marriage, and I know that the Lord will give me the opportunity when he sees fit." In general, it seemed to be an idea that kept participants from "feeling like [they were] stranded here, being single" (woman, age 20).

For a few participants, the influence of the L.D.S. church in general triggered feelings of frustration with their single status. As one 22-year-old man poignantly expressed "being single sucks." He explained, "If you are a male and have returned from a mission and aren't married you are almost worthless." However, participants who saw a separation between the religious teachings of the Church and the people within the Church pointed to the more negative influence of church members and the overall positive influence of the religious teachings. For example, one 22-year-old woman said

> The L.D.S. religion has validated my feelings that everything will be all right. I know that I am an okay person even if I am not married…. The L.D.S. culture (or people) has made me feel like I am worthless because I am not married.

Not all of the participants expressed a distinction between church and culture; those who did, however, pointed to the more negative influence of church members and the overall positive influence of the religious teachings.

The link between church and family

Because the family is such an icon in the L.D.S. church, many participants also talked about the connection between family and religious beliefs. For most participants, family and L.D.S. religious beliefs are mutually influential in developing attitudes toward marriage and being single. In many cases, family values and church principles become personal precepts by which these single individuals live. One 25-year-old woman expressed this idea when she said

> My mom always expresses great faith that the Lord has a plan for me and my responsibility is to be happy with my situation. I know that my parents pray for me to have the capacity to choose wisely and to use discernment. Knowing their support, love, and faith affects my perception of who and what I am.

The support this young woman felt from her family, and the idea that God would guide her, shaped her more positive view of being single. Several of the respondents showed the influence of both family and church on their views of singlehood. The account of a 24-year-old man illustrates this as he explained, "[My family believes that] marriage is good when it is time…. [The L.D.S. religion teaches that] marriage is good at the right time and [to] the right person after prayers and answers have been offered and received."

His responses show the close relationship between teachings in the L.D.S. church and family precepts.

Friends Play a Supporting Role

Most participants said that their single friends were supportive of their single status. As one 20-year-old woman expressed, "Why would another single person pressure me? Only married people do that." These single adults felt validated in feeling lonely at times or feeling like it was difficult to find a marriage partner because of their friends. The support from friends often helped participants to counterbalance the pressure they felt from their family or from church members. One 29-year-old man said that his brother "as [his] best friend [was] someone [he could] trust and discuss things with." Other participants named family members, roommates, or close friends as people they trusted to provide support. In a few cases, participants said that although they had some friends who were not supportive of their single status, they did not let it bother them.

Friends' experiences with dating and marriage also had some impact on participants' construction of their single status. Some participants related their friends' positive dating experiences as influencing their desires to marry. Other participants with a positive attitude toward singlehood noted the influence of friends' negative marriage or dating experiences. Friends, then, had an impact on the feelings and attitudes these individuals had toward singlehood. Mostly, friends helped to normalize participants' feelings toward singlehood.

Summary

The main theme to emerge from this research was that singlehood is a temporary state and is viewed by most as an opportunity for progression, both spiritually and developmentally. This construction is created through individual attitudes concerning both marriage and one's current single status as well as by the extent of pressure or support felt from family members, religious teachings, and church members. Friendships helped to ease the burden of the pressure to marry and for most, created a supportive network of individuals who were experiencing virtually the same thing at the same time.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how L.D.S. singles define what it means to be single in a predominantly marriage-oriented culture; how they feel about being unmarried; and what influence family, friends, and religion have on their meanings of being single. The findings reported here suggest that young single members of the L.D.S. culture construct singlehood as a temporary stage, with marriage as a significant future goal. In accordance with the tenets of symbolic interactionism, participants in the current study developed specific ideas about being single that were shaped by an intricate interaction of personal experiences, religious beliefs and practices, social network influences (i.e., family and friends), and the larger social and cultural messages about singlehood and marriage. Religion, especially for members of the L.D.S. faith, plays a significant part in shaping participants' single reality. Faithful members of the L.D.S.

church not only believe the doctrines they are taught, but they also live them and "do not separate [their] daily mundane tasks and interests from the meaning and substance of religion" (Brown, 1964, p. 81). In this way, the L.D.S. religion shapes the subjective interpretation of life for many of its members.

L.D.S. single adults between the ages of 20 and 29 are in a stage of life when marriage is an expectation. Consistent with L.D.S. religious teachings, participants in the current study explained that being single is a temporary stage on the road towards marriage, and most often defined singlehood by what they lacked (i.e., a potential marriage partner) rather than by what they had. During this temporary stage, participants talked about the opportunity to get to know oneself, to get ready personally and developmentally for the time when one has a partner, and to enjoy one's freedom in the meantime. Others felt as though they were in a state of limbo, characterized as a place of existence somewhere between youth and adulthood. Being single meant missing out on a relationship that was expected to be difficult, but also rewarding, in part because the partner would provide support through trials and difficult times. Thus, marriage for these singles was perceived as a necessary step for progression into adulthood, as an opportunity to develop, to grow, and to become better individuals.

Meanings attached to concepts such as singlehood and marriage are created by society, and as society changes meanings also change. For many single adults living in the United States, the reality of singlehood is currently in transition. Until recently, singlehood has been associated with negative images (Schwartzberg et al., 1995; Shostak, 1987), and marriage was emphasized as the doorway to adulthood (Austrom & Hanel, 1985; Schwartzberg et al.). Study participants who referred to feeling like they were "old maids," "lonely," or "worthless" help illustrate that these negative stereotypes of singlehood have not yet completely disappeared among this particular cultural group. However, the increasing number of unmarried single adults in the United States today (Fields & Casper, 2001) as well as social acceptance of single lifestyles – (as illustrated by television shows such as *Friends* and *Frasier*) have contributed to the feeling among singles that they are not alone.

The current view of singlehood as popular and desirable in the mainstream U.S. culture has also impacted those from the L.D.S. culture, but to a lesser degree. Similar to the respondents in Shostak's (1987) study, participants in the present study also appreciated freedom and independence as singles. Thus, many L.D.S. singles are also following the trend of finding single life attractive. However, unlike many singles in mainstream U.S. culture, they do not see singlehood as a possible permanent stage of life. This is due, in large part, to the emphasis placed on marriage by social systems, such as family and religious organizations, to which these individuals belong (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Congruent with symbolic interactionism, participants' meaning of singlehood was shaped not only by society and the larger culture, but also by their families and religious beliefs, with a unique interdependent relationship between the latter two. This connection was illustrated when participants cited similar definitions of singlehood according to their personal beliefs, their family's beliefs, and their understanding of the L.D.S. church's beliefs about singlehood. Moreover, family beliefs about singlehood and marriage often focused on church teachings. Thus, family and religious precepts generally shaped the personal construction of singlehood adopted by many of these young adults. Despite their

individuality, participants in this research often shared the same meaning for specific phenomena like marriage and being single because these definitions derive from a common cultural and religious background. In the L.D.S. culture, where family and religion are held sacred, the impact of these specific social systems is paramount.

Additionally, participants' positive expressions of being single were strongly impacted by their family's and friends' positive attitudes toward singlehood, and by the fact that they were actively working toward marriage, by dating and interacting with members of the opposite sex in various formal and informal settings. It could also be explained by their college student status, which gave them regular exposure to potential marriage partners. Participants' negative feelings about being single were explained by the pressures they perceived from family, friends, and church. For example, it seemed that one man's sense of worthlessness stemmed mostly from the fact that he, as a young L.D.S. adult, had not yet achieved the paramount goal set by his religious and cultural reference group. Although no one influence was solely responsible for how L.D.S. singles felt about being single, family and religious beliefs had the strongest impact on the development of meanings.

Some individuals made a distinction between family beliefs and religious beliefs. For them, both factors were important influences, but family as the agent of religious socialization was the stronger factor in developing meanings of being single (Albrecht, 1998). As Schwartzberg et al. (1995) wrote culture influences family, and "family experience shapes the fit with culture" (p. 31). Congruent with Cornwall's (1988) and Stott's (1988) work regarding the significant influence families have on religious and personal beliefs and practices, the family system for these participants interprets and expresses cultural messages about marriage and singlehood in unique ways, aiding in the development of attitudes toward and meanings about being single for individual family members.

Meanings of being single were, to a lesser extent, influenced by peer relationships. Supportive friends were perceived as persons who helped to balance any pressure participants may have felt from family or their religion. They not only helped to normalize single life, but also constituted a group of individuals who could talk about common experiences, and share thoughts and ideas about their single life (Cockrum & White, 1985; Shostak, 1987). For many of these L.D.S. single individuals feeling support from and an emotional bond with their other single friends encouraged the development of more positive attitudes toward being single.

Limitations of the Study

One of the benefits of qualitative research is the opportunity to obtain rich data on a particular topic. Using a small sample can aid in this regard. We acknowledge, however, that the study's sample characteristics necessitate caution when interpreting its results. Specifically, only one religious group was studied, and most of the participants grew up in two parent families. Further studies with more diverse samples, including those from other religions and family backgrounds as well as those previously married, would be beneficial to strengthen our knowledge base.

Additionally, the participants in the current study were between the ages of 20 and 29, an age range in which pressure to marry is not an issue for most of the general

population. However, because of the emphasis on marriage and family within the L.D.S. culture, first time marriage occurs at an earlier age in Utah than in the rest of the nation. Consequently, the pressure to find a partner begins at an earlier age as well. Despite the young age of the participants in this study, their experiences and the multifaceted ways in which their meanings of singlehood are shaped may be similar to singles in older age groups. Thus, singles' personal experiences with dating, perceived social support from family and friends, and the influence of religious beliefs and practices, likely shape the feelings and perceptions of other single adults in other cultures and of other ages. However, unless similar studies are carried out in different cultural and societal contexts, it remains unclear whether the same factors which shape the meaning of singlehood for this sample will be important factors in other samples.

Conclusions

Conducting this study has been an interesting and beneficial experience both academically and personally. Academically, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature on singlehood in contemporary U.S. culture, by focusing on how young adult members of a distinct religious group construct meanings of singlehood and marriage within social and familial contexts. As such, the findings help us to better understand why meanings of singlehood vary within U.S. culture, and give us insight into the factors that contribute to both positive and negative constructions of single status.

Participating in this research study has been very interesting and helpful to me [SN]. I learned new information about the teachings and organization of the L.D.S. Church, the attitudes of young single members of the church, and how these attitudes were shaped by the interaction of family, religion, and culture. This knowledge makes it easier for me to understand the strong and urgent desire for marriage and the pressures many of my students seem to experience. While my attitude toward singles in the L.D.S. culture has not changed, I feel more understanding of what they may be experiencing.

For me [KWP], this research project has answered some important questions. Prior to reading and analyzing our participants' responses, I would wonder why the young college women who told me of their distress at being single at ages 21 or 23 were so *worried* about getting married. It seemed perfectly normal to me to marry a year or so after one's education was *completed*. However, reading both men and women's responses to the questions posed in this study led me to the realization that strong religious teachings, reinforced by family, friends, and local culture, have a profound impact on personal meaning of being single and married. Then, I thought about my behavior at their same ages. Was I really different from them? I began attending my Catholic college in Fall, 1969 in dresses and skirts, and finished my degree clothed in jeans, long hair, and tie-dyed shirts. I marched against the war in Vietnam and attended women's consciousness-raising groups. Yet, when my [master's] education was completed, I, too, went in search of a mate, but without the level of self-awareness that these young men and women possess. I'm not so different from them! Our goals were the same. This new awareness promotes a new level of tolerance and understanding that I hope to practice when I interact with my students in the future.

My [JD] personal views of singlehood have been reinforced through this research. Although I would not have termed it as such until now, I also view singlehood as

temporary and look forward to the day when I can end my "lonely, single status." Like many of the participants, I recognized that this might not happen soon or even at all. I continue to look for ways to develop personally, and find peace and happiness with my single status in a marriage-oriented culture. I was surprised while conducting this research to find so many single adults of different ages with similar experiences. This research has also reinforced my idea that it is necessary to find a positive sense of self and a positive direction in life, regardless of marriage status. This positive direction can bring a sense of fulfillment in terms of lifetime progression. For some, including myself, this sense of purpose and fulfillment may not be as strong as the feeling of fulfillment that marriage and family can bring to a single individual. For example, I will always long for marriage and never stop striving to find that "someone" with whom I can share my life. However, I believe that strengthening my self-esteem as an individual can only strengthen me, both as a single individual and as a married individual.

Therefore, I believe it is important for parents and family to be supportive of their single adult children and encourage positive personal development and self-esteem. I also believe that church leaders do much already to strengthen self-esteem by teaching correct principles, asking members of their ward to serve others in church callings that may also strengthen personal progress. I believe it is the individual who must choose to be happy with being single – seeing the positive influences around him or her – and make the most of the opportunities afforded him or her during this time.

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