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"I Was Praying for My Very Salvation from My Sexual Abuse": Experiences of Sexual Abuse Survivors in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have thoroughly documented the experiences of sexual abuse survivors; however, many complications may arise for adult survivors who are religious. To our knowledge, there have been no previous studies regarding childhood sexual abuse survivors who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This qualitative research project sought to explore the questions, "What are the gendered messages of femininity that Latter-day Saint childhood sexual abuse survivors have received, and how have these messages impacted their healing from sexual abuse?" Fourteen participants were interviewed as part of a qualitative investigation in a semi-structured format with open-ended questions from an emergent grounded theory design. The researchers analyzed the interviews to reveal results that are grounded in participants' reported experiences. Six themes arose under the category of *Harmful Cultural Lesson and Social Norms.* An additional theme, *Healing through Advocating for Change,* presented alongside a theoretical framework of healing, explores the relationship between the harmful cultural messages that Latter-day Saint sexual abuse survivors internalize, the subsequent impact on a survivor's sense of self, and alternative trauma-informed lessons that lead to healing. The author(s) present these results along with the implications for therapists working with Latter-day Saint sexual abuse survivors, recommendations for church policy changes, and future research directions.

KEYWORDS

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Latter-day Saint; LDS; Mormon; sexual abuse; childhood sexual abuse; religion; trauma

Researchers have discussed the subject of healing from childhood sexual abuse (CSA) in great detail, but have yet to fully examine the way religion interacts with the healing (Bryant-Davis et al., 2015). The #MeToo

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*The first author completed this study under the supervision of the second author; therefore, first person singular references in the article refer to the first author. This article is based on part of the data of the first author's unpublished doctoral dissertation (Choruby-Whiteley, 2018). The second author passed away shortly after the defense of this dissertation, therefore, Susan L. Morrow is listed as an author posthumously in an acknowledgement for her significant contribution in shaping and supporting this research study, as well as her continued influence on the field of Counseling Psychology at large.

movement has led to increased awareness of the widespread sexual assault and sexual abuse of young women and girls, while other movements have begun to bring awareness to the intersection of religion, as evidenced by the popular online discourse of "#ChurchToo" (Bogen et al., 2020). Estimates indicate that anywhere from 24% to 32% of adult women (Douglas & Finklehor, 2005) and approximately 3–17% of adult men (Collin-Vezina et al., 2013) have experienced CSA. The state of Utah ranks first in the country for the highest number of sexual abuse cases (Utah Department of Health, 2011), and given Utah's large population of Latter-day Saints, this suggests that there may be higher cases of sexual abuse among the Latter-day Saint community. Despite this, no known studies have focused on examining CSA within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Effects of CSA in Childhood and Adolescence

The effects of sexual abuse on children throughout the lifespan have been widely researched. Children often blame themselves for sexual abuse (Valle & Silovsky, 2002) and may even believe they wanted the abuse to occur. Such reactions of self-blame are complicated by pleasurable sexual touch or even orgasm as a natural response to sexual stimulation (Kime, 1992; Levin & van Berlo, 2004; Sexual Assault/Abuse, 2017). Coping strategies, such as those documented by Jennifer Freyd (1996), may include blaming oneself or forgetting that one has been abused. Freyd's Betrayal Trauma Theory refers to the trauma perpetuated by adults that the child depends on for survival; if a CSA victim were to maintain conscious awareness that a care-giver figure had betrayed their trust, it would be impossible to feel safe within their home. Therefore, CSA survivors may blame themselves in order to maintain their sense of safety (Zinzow et al., 2010) or develop a dissociative coping response to the trauma, resulting in a partial or full repression of the memory (Heman & Schatzow, 1987; McNally et al., 2001). Others report remembering the abuse, but may repress some of the experience, leaving gaps in their memory (Ghetti et al., 2006). Survivors may turn toward religion and spirituality as they begin to process and make sense of their memories of the abuse (De Castella & Simmonds, 2013).

The Intersections of Religion and Spirituality and Healing from CSA

Religious spaces, (e.g., churches, mosques, etc.) often function as a support system for survivors as they heal from past trauma (Collins et al., 2014). The social support of belonging to a congregation can be a protective factor from mental health disorders (Masten et al., 1990; Ronneberg et al., 2016),

and religion can provide an organized pathway for posttraumatic growth (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013). However, religion can negatively impact the healing process for some. While having a religious identity can help some survivors make meaning of their trauma and find comfort (Harris et al., 2013), others may feel God has forsaken them (Herman, 1992) or question how God or a higher power could have allowed the traumatic event(s) to happen in the first place, which may lead to questioning the existence of God or higher power (Van Deusen & Courtois, 2015). Some CSA survivors report experiencing revictimization when they are doubted or blamed for their abuse by religious community members (Campbell et al., 2001; Cox, 2016; Smith, 1995). Further, the pressure to forgive their perpetrator, a common Christian value (Tracy, 1999), can cause further harm (Lamb & Murphy, 2002; Redmond, 1989). Some CSA survivors leave their religious organization, reporting their abuse negatively impacted their relationship with a higher being (e.g., God, Bhagavan, Allah, etc.) as well as their relationship with their religion or spirituality (Ben-Ezra et al., 2010; Guido, 2008). Sexual abuse by clergy, in particular, may lead to a distrust in church leadership and God (Fater & Mullaney, 2000), with many leaving their religious faith (Mart, 2003).

What is Specific to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or Church of Jesus Christ) has over 16 million members worldwide (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020b). According to the most recent Religious Census, not only is the church the fifth largest religion in the United States, but it is also the fastest-growing (Pew Research Center, 2014; Public Religion Research Institute, 2012). It is also the largest religion to have been founded in the United States (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020). As such, the church has both absorbed and influenced the cultural norms and values of the United States (Trepanier & Newswander, 2012; Van Dyk, 2019).

Church members adhere to rules and commandments set forth by the church that structure their daily lives. Among many other expectations, members are expected to engage in daily prayer and scripture study; refrain from drinking alcohol, coffee, or tea (Doctrine and Covenants: 89); donate 10% of their income to the church in a process known as tithing; and attend weekly sacrament services. In comparison to members of other religions in the United States, members of the Church of Jesus Christ spend the most amount of time involved in church activities each week (Pew Research Center, 2014). The faith is as much a lifestyle and an identity as

it is a religion and has many implications for how one spends their daily life (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020).

The Church views gender as an essential part of one's salvation, as detailed in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, a document revered by members of the church as modern-day revelation (Finnigan & Ross, 2015). The document itself states the importance of family as being central to eternal salvation and states doctrinal assertions about heterosexual marriage while outlining the differing roles of husbands and wives. Men are to "preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families" ("The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 1995; para 7). Women are "primarily responsible for the nurture of their children" ("The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 1995; para 7). These stated gender roles, purported to be ordained of God, are interwoven throughout the structure of the church.

Members attend multiple weekly church meetings, including sacrament, Sunday school, and meetings specifically for youth, men, and women. At the age of 12, children begin either the young men's or young women's program. Girls, ages 12–17, are expected to attend the Young Women program at their church and recite the Young Women's theme each week. This theme highlights the importance for Young Women to develop certain values that relate to both religious concepts (e.g., faith, divine nature, and virtue) as well as concepts of empowerment and becoming a valuable member of society (e.g., knowledge, choice and accountability, and individual worth; Young Women Theme, 2017, p. 1). The Young Women's theme also highlights expected milestones for Young Women to meet in adulthood: to marry, become mothers, and strengthen their home and their family.

In cases of CSA, members understand they should seek to speak with their bishop to "begin the healing process" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d., p. 1). Within the church, bishops are positioned as the leaders of their congregation, referred to as their "ward." Bishops are unpaid clergy who are "called of God to serve in the church" and expect to receive guidance from God in administering to the members of the ward (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013; para 13). Bishops receive guidance from the Church Handbook 1: Stake Presidents and Bishops (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.); however, they receive no formalized training for the position, including no training specific to identifying or addressing cases of abuse or trauma. Many feminists within the church have advocated for bishops to receive specific training to be able to adequately respond to church members who have experienced abuse or trauma (Barron, 2018; Fletcher-Stack, 2018).

The Church of Jesus Christ is reflective of Western cultural norms and values, including prevalent myths about rape that are victim-blaming in

nature (Fletcher-Stack & Alberty, 2017; Jones & Aronson, 1973; McCaul et al., 1990). An example of this comes from the popular book, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, written by the 12th prophet of the church, Spencer W. Kimball. Kimball states, "it is better to die in defending one's virtue [or virginity] than to live having lost it without a struggle" (Kimball, 1969, p. 196). This message is one that is in direct conflict with well-established research about natural trauma responses, as many CSA survivors may "freeze" as a survival strategy and be incapable of fighting their abuser away (Brewin, 2001; Schmidt et al., 2008). Furthermore, this quote sends harmful messages about a CSA's life being worthless after having lost their virginity; essentially, it is better for a woman to be "dead and clean, than alive and unclean" (Fletcher-Stack & Alberty, 2017, para 1). Despite these common cultural norms of victim-blaming, the church has put forth efforts to become more trauma-informed, including the launch of a new website, www.lds.org/get-help/abuse, which provides trauma-informed messages for survivors of abuse and their family members, friends, and church leaders. This website provides information about why abuse is never the survivor's fault, along with links to community articles and resources for survivors to read to understand why they may be blaming themselves for their abuse. This has been called "arguably the most comprehensive resource made by the church" (Bhagwat, 2018, para 3).

Purpose of the Study

Despite the size of the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints, there is little literature available to church leaders that addresses issues of sexual abuse nor information available to psychologists and counselors navigating cultural considerations when counseling a Latter-day Saint CSA survivor. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive framework for mental health clinicians and church leaders as well as CSA survivors within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to address healing and trauma recovery. The overarching research question was: What are the messages that female Latter-day Saint CSA survivors receive about their abuse, and how have these messages impacted their healing from sexual abuse?

Method

Grounded Theory Design and Feminist-Constructivist Paradigm

Given the lack of available literature regarding Latter-day Saint CSA survivors, a grounded theory qualitative method was utilized to ensure theoretical findings accurately captured the multiple realities of participants' lived

experiences (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Herman, 1997). I (refers to the first author throughout) selected a grounded theory emergent design to ensure theoretical saturation for the construction of an inductive, empirical theory that conceptualizes multiple realities while recognizing the subjectivity of both researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Polkinghorne, 2005). I utilized a feminist-constructivist paradigm, which included a first-person rhetoric to further acknowledge the subjectivity of both researcher and participant (Charmaz, 2015; Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm approach centers addressing issues of diversity and power dynamics in an attempt to bring marginalized identities to the forefront (Morrow, 2007; Morrow & Smith, 2000).

Sampling Procedures

Recruitment involved purposeful snowball sampling, including social media posts and flyers (Patton, 2002). A larger number of potential participants ($n = 128$) initiated contact via e-mail over the course of two phases of data collection. I sent an initial demographic and inclusion criteria survey to all interested research participants and then selected participants via purposeful selection methods in an effort to obtain maximum variation (Patton, 1990). Participants were included if they self-identified as a childhood sexual abuse survivor who was actively attending Latter-day Saint church services at the time of the abuse. Out of the 128 interested individuals, 25 were selected as participants as part of a larger, unpublished study of Latter-day Saint CSA survivors that included participants of various gender identities. For this current study, I selected the interviews of 14 participants who were assigned female at birth to capture the experiences of female gender socialization for Latter-day Saint CSA survivors. I utilized Polkinghorne's (2005) recommended format for interviews and met with participants for a preliminary interview to provide information about the nature of the study and obtain informed consent before proceeding with the audio-recorded interviews.

Participants

The first author interviewed all participants included in this study, the majority of whom identify as White ($n = 10$), cisgender women ($n = 11$), and who currently identify as Latter-day Saints ($n = 12$) and attend church services weekly ($n = 7$). Table 1 provides more details about participants' social identities. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, demographic information is provided in aggregate to identification of specific participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Categories	
Age (years)	
18–23	3
24–29	3
30–35	2
36–41	2
42–47	2
65–70	2
Gender Identity [a]	
Woman	11
Non-Binary	1
Genderfluid	1
Gender non-conforming	1
Location	
Utah	10
Tennessee	1
Michigan	1
Kansas	1
Oregon	1
Race	
White	10
Asian American	2
White and Hispanic	1
White and Native American	2
Current Religious Identity [b]	
Latter-day Saint	12
Agnostic	1
No Religious Identity or Affiliation	1
Reported Current Frequency of Church Service Attendance	
Weekly	7
Monthly	2
A few times a year	2
Previous psychotropic medication [a]	6

Note. $N = 14$.
[a]All participants were assigned female at birth.
[b]Reflects the identity reported at the time of the interview.

Sources of Data

The first author collected multiple sources of data to ensure that the data corpus was complete and rich in content. The data collected included individual interviews, follow-up interviews, analytic memos and journals, and field notes. Participants were encouraged to submit their written journals or other writings that they referenced in their interviews when available. The first author also collected archival data of public commentaries (e.g., opinion editorials published in newspapers) that discuss the topic of sexual abuse in the Latter-day Saint community. Analytic memos assisted in organizing emerging themes that were identified during the data collection process that aided the analysis process in developing categorization and building theories (Charmaz, 2015).

The interview protocol for qualitative research encourages an emergent design for the research project (Morrow, 2005). Thus, interview questions were approximate and were adjusted at times to accommodate for emerging themes (Charmaz, 2015). The approximate interview questions were as

follows: (a) What have been your experiences as a Mormon [insert appropriate gender identity here]? (b) Please share with me as much as you feel comfortable sharing about your sexual abuse. (c) What messages have you learned about sexual abuse and healing from abuse within church settings?

The individual interviews were semi-structured, allowing for additional questions to be asked to collect an accurate portrayal of each participant's individual experience (Polkinghorne, 2005). The average duration of the 14 interviews was 114 min with a range of 62–198 min. I approached interviews utilizing Kvale's (1996) criteria for quality interviews as I actively worked to clarify and verify participants' answers during the interview to verify my own understanding, elicit feedback through co-constructed meaning, and explore the deeper meanings of participants' stories.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory data analysis as detailed by Charmaz (2015) was utilized via initial coding and focused coding. For initial coding, data was coded line-by-line via the data analysis program, Atlas.ti (Woods et al., 2016). During focused coding, the data were organized into emerging themes and codes. The larger unpublished study, which included participants of various gender identities, revealed findings about shared experiences across gender identities of Latter-day Saint CSA survivors. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) Elaborative Coding Technique provides specific techniques to revisiting data from a larger study. These techniques guided the data analysis in an effort to ensure the coding of the larger unpublished study did not prescribe meaning to the present data subset, which focuses specifically on women's experiences. The core of this data analysis technique was a reflexive process of "critical scrutiny and interpretation" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 275), which enabled me to re-immerse myself in the data through a reiterative process of analysis, writing, and refining. After developing the empirical framework, I elicited feedback from the participants from this data subset to ensure that my findings represented their experiences. Four participants provided feedback that clarified the findings and aided in the process of co-creating meaning from the data (Ponterotto, 2005).

Researcher as Instrument: Salient Identities and Trustworthiness

A feminist constructivist paradigm embraces the researcher's perspective as the co-constructor of meaning (Morrow, 2005). As a Latter-day Saint CSA survivor myself, I am positioned as an insider into the population I am studying (Adler & Adler, 1987). I am a White, English-speaking, able-bodied, middle-class, United States citizen (by birth), a first-generation college

graduate, Latter-day Saint, cisgender woman, feminist, academic, mother, and early career clinical-track assistant professor in Counseling Psychology. As an active member of the church who is also a sexual abuse survivor, I believe I am seen as an insider to the population I am studying; however, in the Latter-day Saint faith, there is a polarized insider/outsider culture. Among active members of the church, there is considerable distrust for members who stopped attending church, who are often referred to as "apostates." Among members who have left the church, there is a similar distrust of active members. I am a convert to the church; I joined when I was 16 and without any other members of my family. As a convert, I often feel positioned as an outsider looking into my own community, as I have not had the experience of growing up in the church and thus have also not internalized many of the rigid cultural norms. I see my position to the church as a strength to this research as I am often able to understand the cultural phenomenon that my participants share with me, while simultaneously holding a genuine curiosity regarding cultural norms I have not internalized. I endeavored to maintain my role as an insider with many of my participants, while recognizing that I can never fully be an insider in the cultural polarized dichotomy that exists among active Latter-day Saints and ex-members.

I embraced subjectivity through "connected knowing" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 103) and viewed my connection with participants as "an integral part of the human relationship between the knower and the known … replac[ing] mere observation" (Morrow, 2005, p. 255). I embraced this subjectivity; however, I also tasked myself with constant reflexivity to develop continued awareness of my biases to ensure the results reflected a fair representation of the participants' viewpoints (Morrow, 2005). I utilized the following rigorous procedures to manage biases: maintaining a self-reflective journal to make my own assumptions explicitly conscious to myself, meeting bi-weekly with a peer research group of other qualitative researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), eliciting participant feedback, and meeting individually with the second author for individual research consultations, often weekly. The second author on this paper, Dr. Sue Morrow, was both my academic advisor as well as a dear friend and mentor. She knew me on a personal level and was able to bring my awareness to any assumptions and biases as they arose. These strategies ensured a credible analysis through multiple steps of challenging and refining the theoretical findings as they emerged.

Results

The main category of findings is *Harmful Cultural Lessons and Social Norms*; this includes six themes related to cultural lessons or social norms,

which participants described as impacting them negatively. The category *Healing by Advocating for Change* includes participants' hopes for their church and societal changes to protect future CSA survivors. Lastly, these findings are further organized into a framework to demonstrate the impact of harmful messages on women Latter-day Saint CSA survivors.

Harmful Cultural Lessons and Social Norms

All participants in this study referred to harmful lessons and social norms they were exposed to and how these lessons influenced how they viewed their sexual abuse (see Table 2, column 1). They noted that although these common religious lessons were not intended to be harmful, the internalization of these messages within a context of sexual trauma was particularly damaging to Latter-day Saint CSA survivors, as their experiences reified the antithesis of how women within this religion are supposed to represent.

A Woman's Value is Connected to Her Virginity

Participants had nuanced and entangled relationships between the concepts of virginity and their self-worth. These concepts were further complicated by religious teachings regarding the importance for women to marry and become mothers, which was integrated throughout the church lessons participants received. Rena (all participant names are pseudonyms) reflected on how she learned this from a young age: "from the time I was a toddler, it was hammered into me that marriage was the most important thing that would ever happen to my life. If I couldn't [get married], then I would be a waste of space." As participants spoke about the pressures they felt to get married, they would also reflect church teachings they received about preserving their virginity for marriage. Another participant, Amanda, reported that the connection between marriage, virginity, and value made her feel worthless after her abuse, since "no man in the church would ever want to marry a woman who wasn't a virgin."

Nearly every participant spoke about "object lessons" they sat through at church as young women. These lessons compared their virginity to physical objects such as a licked cupcake. Jordan remembered being taught, "your cupcake is your virginity. If somebody else licks the cupcake, nobody else wants it. It's a bad cupcake. It's a gross cupcake. It's a tainted cupcake." Rena recalled a similar lesson involving being given a smashed piece of cake versus a piece of cake that was intact; Gudri's object lesson involved a flower that had all of the petals plucked off to represent how the flower (loss of virginity) had lost its beauty.

There was observable increased laughter as participants discussed these object lessons. At times, this conveyed a sense of comradery with me

Table 2. An Empirical Framework of Healing for Latter-Day Saint Sexual Abuse Survivors.

Harmful Cultural Lessons and Social Norms	Impact of Sexual Abuse	Resulting Impact on Sense of Self	Trauma-Informed Alternative Lessons	Alternative outcomes that supports sexual abuse survivor's healing process
A woman's value is connected to her virginity	Loss of virginity.	Feeling undesirable, perceived loss of value; "Would anyone want to marry me if I'm not pure?"	Women are valuable regardless of their virginity. Jesus Christ loves everyone individually.	Maintain a strong sense of individual value and worth independent of one's virginity.
Women must protect their purity.	Sexual abuse happens despite efforts, such as wearing modest clothing.	Self-blame, "I must have done something to cause this."	Teach lessons about consent, with the clear message that no one is responsible for the decisions someone else makes.	Survivors are able to identify that they did not consent to their abuse, leading to reduced self-blame for the abuse.
Women have no sexual desires.	Sexual abuse sexualizes the child at an earlier developmental level, leading to a heightened awareness of their own sexuality and/or increased sexual behavior.	Feeling abnormal, "girls aren't supposed to masturbate, there must be something wrong with me."	More balanced lessons normalizing women's sexuality and normalization of sexual exploration as an expected response to trauma.	Sexual abuse survivors are able to openly talk about and sort through their complex feelings about their bodies and newfound sexuality as they are healing from their abuse.
Women of color (WOC) are not believed.	Secondary trauma perpetuated by others not taking the sexual abuse of WOC seriously, or committing racial microaggressions by blaming the sexual abuse on a the WOC's racial identity	Lack of support and validation, risk of not being taken seriously, "How can I trust anyone to actually believe me and validate my sexual abuse?"	Explicit messages provided to leaders at church about a trauma-informed approach, followed by intensive anti-racist equity work to ensure that the environment at church can be supportive of all survivors of abuse.	WOC are able to share about their sexual abuse experiences with reduced risk of not being taken seriously, leading to more healing connections with others.
Sexual sin is almost as serious as murder.	Sexual abuse leads to blaming self and believing the abuse was an act of sex rather than an act of abuse.	Deep shame and loathing, "I am no better than a murderer".	Explicit messages at church about what abuse looks like that focuses on how abuse is never the survivor's fault. More lessons about the value that everyone has regardless of sins or mistakes that are made.	Survivors are able to reduce their shame and feel more connected to their inherent value.
People who feel guilty about something have sins to repent for.	Sexual abuse leads to increased guilt and shame.	Belief that the sexual abuse must be sexual sin to be repented for, which leads to blaming self for the abuse.	Provide church leaders with trauma-informed training to ensure that they can identify when someone is experiencing guilt originating from trauma.	Survivors are explicitly told that they have nothing to repent for, leading to decreased self-blame

who had also experienced these object lessons; therefore, we laughed and connected over how outlandish these lessons appeared in retrospect. Other participants appeared to use laughter as a tool for emotional regulation as they appeared uncomfortable as they expressed how damaging these object lessons were. Carolina shared, "They were talking to us like we had done nothing. I remember thinking, 'if only they knew – I've already done some of these things. So, what does that mean? Is everybody else here not like me?" Carolina's reflection highlights how these lessons resulted in participants feeling isolated from their peers as they internalized the direct message of these object lessons: their virginity had been damaged, leaving them impure, undesirable, and, thus, having lost their value.

Women Must Protect Their Purity

Multiple participants also referenced lessons about the importance of protecting their purity and virginity. These lessons exacerbated their feelings of shame for not fighting off their abuser(s). Heather described a time when her uncle told her that she needed to be "more pleasant" and avoid going out late at night, or else, "something terrible could happen to you and you'd be ruined for life." Heather internalized these messages, including (a) she would be a worthless woman if she lost her virginity and (b) her personality and demeanor (i.e., nice and kind) could have prevented her rape.

Tinkerbell reported a strong internalization of the need to protect her sexual purity. She was taught as a child during a church service that she shouldn't let anyone touch her. However, Tinkerbell experienced a freeze trauma response during her sexual abuse that she described as being "paralyzed in fear." She reflected on how her experience led her to not tell anyone: "a lot of church lessons focus on having a conscious decision to stop [CSA] from happening, so I felt like if I explained the way it happened, it would seem like I didn't do anything to stop it." Tinkerbell stated during the interview that she had spent most of her life questioning whether she had really been abused or not; so while she reported that that she felt concerned that others would not believe her, she also internalized the belief that she should have fought to protect her virginity and thus struggled to believe herself.

Women Are Responsible for Men's Sexual Desires

Participants reported learning implicit and explicit lessons that they were responsible for men's sexual thoughts and arousal. Tinkerbell recalled being directly told, "Guys have these urges, and women are more morally sound and have more of a mental capacity to take control of the situation – as if

men don't have any control over their bodies or minds." Other participants reflected on lessons they received about how their role as a woman was to help control men's sexual urges by not wearing revealing clothing. For Rena, this concept led to her blaming herself for her sexual abuse: "I read the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet about modesty and the importance of what you're wearing, and I believed my outfit made him do what he did." The publication that Rena refers to is a pamphlet that is written for youth in the church. It contains advise from leaders from the church on standards for youth to uphold. The specific section that Rena refers to states:

> When you dress immodestly … you also send the message that you are using your body to get attention and approval … Young women should avoid short shorts and short skirts, shirts that do not cover the stomach, and clothing that does not cover the shoulders or is low-cut in the front or the back. Young men should also maintain modesty in their appearance. (*For the Strength of Youth*, pp. 6–7)

Rena spoke about how the explicit message contained in the pamphlet led to her believing that she was responsible for her CSA because of her clothing choices. Other participants reported learning this message directly in church contexts and additionally having this be upheld in social contexts as others policed what they wore and how they behaved when in the presence of other young men.

Women Do Not Have Sexual Desires

Participants in the study reported the lessons they received at church about sex and chastity were vastly different from the lessons that their male peers received. Lessons intended for men focused on preventing men from masturbating and viewing pornography, while lessons intended for women referred to a woman's responsibility to protect their virginity and keep men chaste. Thus, participants reported feeling that they weren't supposed to have sexual desires. Rosemary brought up this idea with sarcasm and frustration: "Women's sexuality [e.g., sexual urges and desires] is ignored at church. Lessons on chastity [are] really about men and pornography." Rosemary said the last part of her quote with a sarcastic tone to convey a point—that men's sexual desires are unfairly acknowledged and prioritized while women are positioned as the keepers of men's sexual urges.

The idea that women were not supposed to have sexual desires became more perplexing to participants as they began naturally experiencing increased sexual desires following their abuse. Many participants named that they became sexually active after their CSA and that this included exploring their bodies individually via masturbation and/or engaging in acts of sex with others. Carolina stated that she believed having sex with her boyfriend helped her to heal as she was able to reclaim sex as an act of

pleasure for herself. She faced conflict with her church leaders over her sexual activity, and she reflected how her bishop "never understood that maybe I was sexually active as a teenager because I went through my sexual abuse thing." Amanda reflected on her own experiences with this when she went to her bishop to repent for masturbating, and he responded with surprise and denial, saying, "No, women don't masturbate. I don't think this is possible." Amanda explained that her bishop's reaction to her led Amanda to believe for years that other women don't masturbate and that her own sexual desire and masturbation mean that there was something "deeply wrong" with her. Amanda's bishop demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of women's sexuality and women's bodies, which further cemented the idea to her that women are not supposed to have sexual desires.

Women of Color Are Not Believed to Be Victims of CSA

In addition to the victim-blaming myths experienced by other participants, women of color reported additional barriers to being able to safely disclose their CSA to others. Some expressed overarching frustration being in predominantly White congregations and dealing with White cultural norms that felt disconnecting. Guidre stated that she wished she could talk with other women in her ward and connect more vulnerably in general, but felt that cultural norms of politeness and how her church had "always been this way" made it too difficult for her to have honest conversations in her ward. Tinkerbell expressed similar frustrations about her ward, but also reflected on how she felt like she couldn't disclose her CSA to her friends at church because it would further place her out on the margins of her social groups at a time when she already felt excluded: "I was separated from my [White] friends [and] the church, like, I was Asian, that already separated me from them. I didn't want to [disclose my CSA] and be further away from them. I wanted to be part of the crowd." Tinkerbell spoke about her explicit frustrations with church culture and how she felt unsafe to be vulnerable at church with others. She had negative experiences being in predominantly White wards where members would bring up her race in tokenizing and exoticizing ways that led her to believe that if she ever disclosed her CSA to another White member that "they would try to attribute it to my race, because that's what people do for some strange reason." Tinkerbell felt that she couldn't talk to anyone about this knowing that they would try to attribute her sexual abuse to her racial identity. As a result, Tinkerbell felt that confiding in others was not worth the potential consequences, so she kept her experience a secret from everyone. She even explicitly stated, "I'm not going to tell anybody. And I didn't. And I was alone." This highlights the intersection of race and CSA within the church,

as women of color carried the mental load of assessing whether they could disclose their CSA to those around them.

Sexual Sin is Next to Murder

This harmful message comes directly from a scripture from the Book of Mormon that states that sexual sin is "the most abominable above all sins", with the exception being "the shedding of innocent blood", (Alma 39:5, *Book of Mormon*). Out of this scripture comes a phrase that is commonly taught in church lessons, "Sexual sin is next to murder," (Kimball, 1969, p. 61) As previously noted, Latter-day Saint CSA survivors will often blame themselves for their CSA and equate their sexual abuse with sexual sin. Nicole explained how being taught this concept increased her feelings of shame as an eight-year-old as she thought to herself, "what I've done is almost as bad as murder." Nicole said this impacted her self-image, as she believed she was "the worst human alive," which led to experiences of depression. Carolina referenced to how she was told explicitly that her sexual sin was next to murder by a "very loving bishop" who she felt had good intentions. She reflected, "I don't think he meant to traumatize me, he just was doing… what is part of our culture." Carolina was able to name the ways in which she could now look back and see how this specific scriptural message wasn't given to her in order to intentionally harm her, and how this message is a part of a larger Latter-day Saint cultural norm of emphasizing the seriousness of sexual sins. It clearly has unintended consequences, particularly for CSA survivors who are likely to blame themselves for their abuse, leading to an internalization of deep shame.

If You Feel Guilty, You Need to Repent

Multiple participants explained and described receiving the message that feelings of guilt were a sign of having sinned. Therefore, as guilt became connected to sin, so did the sexual abuse. Nicole described an impactful meeting she had with a bishop as a college student at Brigham Young University. He suggested that her feelings of guilt meant that she needed to repent for her sexual abuse: "Like, if you're feeling bad [guilt], that means you have work to do. So, I'm, I can't give you a temple recommend, and it's gonna take a very, very long time for you to be forgiven." A temple recommend is an authorization that is given to members of the church who are found to be in good standing with the church that can be taken away from members when the bishop believes that they may have something to repent for. Nicole's bishop stating that he would not give her a temple recommend communicated to her that he believed she was unworthy to go to the temple because of the feelings of guilt stemming from her sexual abuse.

The bishop's reaction hurt Nicole, and she eventually decided not to attend church, demonstrating the impact church leaders can have on survivors' feelings of safety.

There were participants who thoughtfully and intentionally chose not to tell any of their church leaders about their sexual abuse, out of fear of potential consequences if they did. Rosemary described her decision to not to disclose any of her sexual abuse to her bishop: "I mean, there's still those quotes out there [from past church leaders] about how you should repent if you've been sexually abused … .so I refuse to talk to a bishop about sexual sins." Heather described her belief that she needed to repent for her abuse, as she went to church each Sunday and sat silently in Sunday school instead of interacting with her peers, praying to God. "What I was praying for was my very salvation from my sexual abuse." Heather wished someone could have told her that the abuse was not her fault and that she did not need to pray for forgiveness.

Healing Through Advocating for Change

Part of a sexual abuse survivor's healing process may involve reframing their sexual abuse to give their experiences meaning. This standalone category reflects participants' desire for change which permeated throughout each interview (see Table 2, columns 4 and 5). Participants often stated that, in connection to their participation in the research, they hoped sharing their stories would help to create change in the church. Some participants went so far as to say that they hoped the leaders of the church, specifically the Prophet and the Apostles of the church, would be able to read this study directly to understand the ways in which policies could change to help CSA survivors in the future. Gudri stated, "I hope [this research] goes to parents, bishops, Young Women leaders, visiting teachers … Our culture needs this, desperately needs this … It's a huge problem." Many participants echoed Gudri's desire for increased awareness, hoping that the pain they had gone through would be shared and bring about change within their community.

Annaka found healing through engagement in activism and advocacy for other childhood sexual abuse survivors. At the time of the interview she served as a teacher in the Young Women's program in her ward where she adapted church lessons to be more trauma-informed. Due to her experiences of shame and guilt from her CSA, she wanted the girls she taught to know that if they feel guilt or shame, "it's not something to be condemned for, it's not something to be ostracized for … if we all [focus] on how God loves us … then we will make [good] choices that make us feel worthy." Every research participant shared similar hopes for changes to lessons in

the church to help prevent future CSA survivors from being exposed to the harmful messages they experienced. Annaka specifically highlights how centering her lessons around love in relation to God and Christ could help the girls in her class learn how to make good choices while preserving their feelings of self-worth.

Empirical Framework of Latter-Day Saint Sexual Abuse Survivors' Experiences

An empirical framework (Table 2) is presented to summarize the findings and explore the specific ways that these harmful messages intersect with the experience of CSA. I provided examples in each row to show how these intersecting experiences may present in real life. The quotes in the table are not participant quotes; however, they do reflect and summarize participants' thoughts to provide clarification and demonstrate the clear impact on a survivor's sense of self. The column, "Alternative Trauma-Informed Lessons" contains proposed approaches in response to the previously identified harmful cultural lessons and social norms. Research participants directly suggested many of these approaches, and they reflect participants' overall desire for change.

Discussion

This is one of the first known qualitative studies researching the experiences of Latter-day Saint childhood sexual abuse (CSA) survivors. Therefore, the empirical framework provided is the first known framework for understanding their lived experiences. Many of the findings from the data are similar to past literature about CSA survivors in general; however, certain themes were unique to CSA survivors who are Latter-day Saints. The core category, *Harmful Lessons and Social Norms,* reviews both the unique and familiar lessons that Latter-day Saint sexual abuse survivors internalize, which are in many ways, reflective of those upheld in modern-day society in the United States. The standalone theme, *Making Meaning Through Advocating for Change,* reflects participants' desire for changes to be made for future generations of sexual abuse survivors. The empirical framework presents possible alternative approaches and an explanation of the ways in which these trauma-informed changes could help assist survivors in the healing process. This is not an exhaustive list of potential beneficial changes, but rather a suggested approach to provide Latter-day Saint survivors with positive messages meant to reduce internalized guilt and shame and to assist in the healing process. Table 2 is presented as an empirical

framework to potentially be utilized by anyone who works with Latter-day Saint CSA survivors.

Many of the harmful messages reported by participants are intertwined and reinforce one another. The theme, A *Woman's Value is Connected to her Virginity,* intersected with the theme, *Women must Protect their Purity,* as both messages uphold one another in a cyclical process that deduces a woman's value to her ability to protect her virginity. Valenti's (2009) feminist critique of women's virginity argues that virginity has become synonymous with purity and morality in modern society, and yet, as it is a social construction, virginity is nearly impossible to define. This analysis is especially true for CSA survivors who may wrestle with whether they had lost their virginity from their abuse (Shaw & Lee, 2015; Wellman, 1993). Participants in this study faced additional confusion and turmoil as they received messages of how their virginity is connected to their value, leaving Latter-day Saint CSA survivors questioning whether they are of any value anymore. This was further illustrated by participants who reported increased feelings of guilt and shame, particularly as they sat through object lessons that compared their virginity to items that had lost their value once used. Furthermore, in object lessons involving food, such as cupcakes or chewing gum, the underlying dehumanizing message is that a woman is an object to be devoured.

In the theme *Women have no Sexual Desires*, participants reported an increase in sexual desire and sexual behavior following their abuse, which is a common response to CSA trauma (Fergusson et al., 1997; Noll et al., 2003). This can happen for multiple reasons and serves multiple purposes. Some theorize that sexual abuse leads to children being more aware of their developing sexual bodies, which may lead to increased sexual behavior (Browning & Laumann, 1997), while others theorize that sexual activity is a form of recreating traumatic memories to process abuse (e.g., Brown et al., 1997; Herman, 1992). Although many participants had different experiences with masturbation and sexuality during their healing process, there was a common chronological phenomenon they reported: (1) experiencing sexual abuse; which led to (2) a heightened awareness of their own sexuality and/or increased sexual behavior (which often led to masturbation or being more sexually active than they previously were); (3) being taught about the law of chastity in church settings; which led to (4) an inner conflict about how to reconcile one's sexual habits with living the law of chastity. Literature put forth by the church does not appear to include an understanding or an integration of increased sexual behavior being a natural response to sexual trauma; therefore, CSA survivors felt increasingly ashamed of their sexual behavior.

The theme *Women are Responsible for Men's Sexuality* reflects on written materials from the church to teenage girls that those who wear revealing clothing are "using their body to get attention," (*For the Strength of Youth*, p. 6). This idea reflects a larger societal message about how women who wear revealing clothing are "asking for it," (Brockman & Wyandt-Hiebert, 2013). Additionally, the pamphlet contains detailed guidelines for young women's clothing but not for young men. This also reflects larger societal norms around the unequal and unfair ways feminine clothing is scrutinized (Edwards et al., 2011), which originates from patriarchal ideas that young women's bodies are more sexual than men's, and thus need to be covered. This further perpetuates the victim-blaming myths that (a) men cannot control themselves and (b) women and girls can prevent rape or CSA through their clothing.

The theme *Women of Color are not Believed to be Victims* reflects societal manifestations of the Jezebel stereotype and highlights the intersectional complexity of racist, victim-blaming messages that prevent women of color from being able to safely disclose their CSA to others (Saad, 2020). This finding is in contrast to the White participants in this study who reported speaking up about their sexual abuse as a part of their healing process. Furthermore, white supremacy encourages the centering of White women's fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) while simultaneously victim-blaming and discounting women of color who speak up about their own sexual abuse experiences. Overall, this research finding reflects current research regarding how White children's sexual abuse is taken more seriously over their peers who are children of color (Alley et al., 2019).

Research Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study is the first known of its kind. Therefore, the findings are ground-breaking and provide a foundation for exploring the multifaceted experiences of Latter-day Saint CSA survivors. The empirical framework included provides a guide for those who may want to understand what unique messages Latter-day Saint CSA survivors may receive. Furthermore, the findings may be applicable to CSA survivors outside of the church as many of the messages reflect broader Western cultural norms and values. As such, this study has multiple strengths: it highlights the importance of this topic, seeks to explain in-depth what is unique to the culture within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and is a foundational starting point in raising awareness for the unique experiences of marginalization of Latter-day Saint CSA survivors. However, this is not an exhaustive study nor is it one that explains other factors that likely impact the healing process.

For future studies, it may be important to develop a quantitative study that explores the correlation between church experiences and internalized shame. It would also be important to continue to explore other factors that impact one's level of internalized shame. Furthermore, there is currently no data regarding the rates of sexual abuse that occurs among members of the church. Understanding the prevalence of abuse that occurs in the Latter-day Saint population may be an important starting point for understanding the scope of this issue.

The demographics of the participants have some limitations. Although ages varied widely, the majority of participants identify as White and cisgender. Ultimately, this is reflective of the current demographics of the body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Pew Research Center, 2014). One significant finding, *Women of Color Are Not Believed,* highlights the existence of complex intersecting experiences for women of color in the church who are CSA survivors, yet it only begins to name that there is an effect and does not explore what this unique intersecting experience is. It is essential for a future study to center women of color who are CSA survivors within the church given that the sample of this study was predominately comprised of the experiences of White women.

Implications for Clinical Practice

Therapists who work with Latter-day Saint clients who have survived CSA should be aware of the unique experiences that these clients may have had. Given the variety of experiences in the church, it is important for a therapist to assess with the client what their experiences have been with their bishops and their ward around disclosing their sexual abuse and whether these experiences may be impacting the client's internalized sense of shame, guilt, or self-blame for their sexual abuse. The provided empirical framework may be a helpful tool for assessment, as clients can read through the summary of different messages and identify what messages they have heard or internalized.

Therapists should also be aware of the unique messages their Latter-day Saint clients have heard surrounding their sexuality and virginity. For sexual abuse survivors, these messages may contribute to their internalization of guilt and shame. However, it may be beneficial to review this topic with Latter-day Saint clients who are not sexual abuse survivors as well. It may be relevant for counselors to discuss the ways in which clients were taught about their sexuality and virginity and how they learned these messages, particularly if the clients sat through object lessons on virginity. Additionally, counselors and therapists may consider providing psychoeducation to church leaders about human sexuality and how sexual behaviors

may increase as a result of sexual abuse. Receiving this information from a therapist, who can be viewed as a trusted authority figure, may be a powerful intervention tool in normalizing human sexuality for Latter-day Saint CSA survivors experiencing increased sexual feelings or behaviors and feeling shame for this process. Therapists should be aware of the alternative trauma-informed lessons that participants advocated for, as is located within the fourth column of the empirical framework (Table 2). Each of these alternative lessons can be applied within the therapeutic setting in a way that validates and supports a Latter-day Saint's faith while also providing an alternative perspective to reduce experiences of shame and guilt. Therapists often miss multicultural opportunities to affirm a client's religion (Mayers et al., 2007); therefore, it could also be helpful for counselors to allow their Latter-day Saint clients to discuss the ways in which these spiritual activities are healing for them and to understand and welcome the importance of the client's religious identity in a therapeutic setting.

Implications for Church Policy and Social Justice

Participants' interactions with church leaders varied in levels of support. This is a reflection of the differing levels of awareness that bishops have around sexual abuse, which further indicates the need for bishops and other church leaders to receive uniform training to gain skills to adequately respond to trauma survivors in their congregation. It is important to highlight that bishops are lay clergy, who may not have any previous exposure to trauma literature or understand natural responses to trauma. These individuals, while often well-intentioned, are left to rely on their own personal perspectives on trauma and are likely informed by larger societal systems of victim-blaming and rape myths.

The National Advocate Credentialing Program (NACP) is an organization that offers standardized 40-hour training for volunteers who work with sexual abuse and sexual assault survivors (NACP, 2018). Currently, there are programs available in each state in the United States; furthermore, the NACP provides information about how organizations may develop their own curricula in order to be approved by the NACP. This could be one potential direction for the church to investigate. The program operates under the assumption that anyone who works with sexual abuse or sexual assault survivors needs to go through a process of unlearning rape myths and understanding the basics of trauma responses. This would be valuable training, but furthermore, it would ensure bishops have the support they need while in the difficult position of learning how to support survivors of various traumas.

The church utilizes lesson plan manuals for the various church programs, such as Sunday School. Current messages within these manuals about virginity and the law of chastity can create a culture of victim-blaming. Church lesson manuals should be edited to contain explicit instructions to teachers to permanently discontinue object lessons regarding virginity to ensure that these lessons cease. Lessons on chastity should include explicit messages about what abuse is, how abuse is never the survivor's fault, and how there is no need to repent for being a victim of abuse. The empirical framework (Table 2) provided in this study may serve as a helpful guide for members who specifically work with youth to assist in providing lessons that support those in their classes that have experienced sexual abuse.

The present study provides an empirical framework of healing for Latter-day Saint CSA survivors. It serves as the foundation for both greater understanding of Latter-day Saint CSA experiences and provides a guide for future directions for change. Religious communities both reflect and influence the societies of which they exist in, and therefore, the findings of this study likely represent greater Western values and messages about gender and sexuality. Future generations of CSA survivors may find a supportive religious community to heal in if the Latter-day Saint community listens to the voices of CSA survivors and integrates the findings of this study into the organization.

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