

The Experience of LDS Women Receiving Community Support and Caring for Themselves  
in the Stages of Divorce

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Abstract

This qualitative, phenomenological study examined community support and caring for oneself as Latter-day Saint (LDS) women navigated the stages of divorce. Six divorced LDS women participated in semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed through Creswell's modified version of Moustakas' phenomenology and themes were established through meaning units. The following themes emerged: perceptions of failure, where do I belong, support and a lack of support from the overall community. Participants offered additional forms of support needed in this process, and how others can take care of themselves during this time. Participants reported feeling varying levels of support. Implications for divorced LDS women, the LDS church, and clinicians were addressed.

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General Audience Abstract

This study examined religious community support and caring for oneself when Latter-day Saint (LDS) women experience the stages of divorce. There is very little research explaining the level of community support experienced by LDS individuals when going through the stages of divorce. According to research, divorced LDS individuals are the most likely out of this population to seek therapy; therefore it is important for therapists to be familiar with how the community perceives divorce. Six divorced LDS women participated in interviews to gather data. Data was analyzed by reading transcripts of the interviews and identifying themes that describe the participants' experiences. The following themes emerged: perceptions of failure, where do I belong, support and a lack of support from the overall community. Participants reported additional forms of support needed in this process, and how others in the community can take care of themselves during this time. Participants reported feeling varying levels of support. Implications for divorced LDS women, the LDS church, and clinicians were addressed. Therapists can use findings to help gain more understand of what it is like for an LDS women when she divorces in her community.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
General Audience Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables.....	vii
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	1
Problem and its Setting.....	1
Significance .....	3
Rationale.....	4
Theoretical Framework .....	4
Purpose of the Study.....	5
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b> .....	6
Divorce in Religion .....	6
The Stages of Divorce .....	8
Women and Divorce in the LDS Culture .....	9
Divorce for Women vs. Men in Religion .....	9
Community Support from the Congregation.....	10
Divorce Stigma from the Religious Community.....	12
Overview of Church Organization .....	15
Conclusion.....	16
<b>Chapter 3: Methods</b> .....	17
Design of Study .....	17
Study Participants.....	17
Procedure.....	19
Instruments .....	20
Analysis .....	20
<b>Chapter 4: Results</b> .....	21
Perceptions of Failure.....	22
Self Perceptions of Failure .....	22
Anticipation of Community’s Response .....	23
Where do I Belong?.....	24
Self-seclusion .....	24
Different Treatment in the Community: The Scarlet Letter.....	25
A Sense of Belonging.....	27
Support from the Overall Community.....	28
Support from the Local Community.....	28
Impact of Church Leaders’ Support .....	29
Church Wide Support.....	30
Ways to Support Myself.....	31
Lack of Support .....	32
Church Leaders’ Lack of Support .....	32
Unsupportive Comments/Attitudes from the Community .....	34
Additional Forms of Support Needed.....	36
Church Wide Education .....	36
Proactive in Service.....	37

Different Ways to Think About It .....	38
How can I Care for Myself During this Difficult Time.....	39
Advocate for Yourself .....	39
Set Boundaries.....	40
Use your Faith .....	40
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion</b> .....	41
Limitations of the Study .....	45
Implications for Divorced Female LDS Members .....	46
Implications for the LDS Church .....	48
Clinical Implications .....	50
Areas of Future Research .....	52
Conclusion.....	53
References .....	54
Appendix A .....	61
Appendix B.....	65
Appendix C.....	69
Appendix D .....	70

List of Tables

Participant Demographic ..... 18

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **The Problem and its Setting**

Divorce is ever present in our society. If current trends continue, it is estimated that half of marriages in the United States end in divorce (Cohen, 2016). While the existing research identifies several factors that contribute to marital break-ups, it also points to factors that help prevent it—and religion is primary among the preventative factors. According to the research, couples who consider themselves active participants in a faith are less likely to end up in divorce court, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often referred to as LDS or Mormons, are no exception (Braithwaite et al., 2015).

In a 1985 study, Heaton and Goodman found divorce rates for LDS men and women were 14% and 19%, respectively. Their findings put the LDS community well below the then-national average of divorce among people who did not identify as religious--38% of men and 45% of women. The reasons women leave a marriage more often than men are not clearly known, but some studies suggest that women in troubled marriages have more to gain from being single in terms of life satisfaction (Bourassa, Sbarra, & Whisman, 2015).

Twenty years after Heaton and Goodman's work, a 2005 study conducted by Heaton, Bahr, and Jacobson suggested that LDS members' divorce rates rose to two-thirds of the national average or 30% (as cited in Chadwick, Top, & McClendon, 2010). Because the national divorce rate has stayed relatively the same, it can be deduced that divorce in the LDS church is on the rise.

This trend could be particularly alarming for members of a church that puts a strong emphasis on marriage. According to LDS.org, an official LDS website: "Every effort should be made to keep these (marriage) covenants and preserve marriage." Church tenets dictate that

marriages performed in an LDS temple are sealed on Heaven and Earth, meaning the relationship continues after this life (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989; LDS.org).

According to Heaton and Goodman's (1985) research, 5.4% of temple marriages for males and 6.5% of temple marriages for females end in divorce. Since 1985, the divorce rate among temple marriages has climbed dramatically to about 20 percent, according to 2010 research by Chadwick et al.

The LDS church has accommodations for marriage dissolution, its disapproval notwithstanding: "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officially disapproves of divorce but does permit both divorce (the legal dissolution of a marriage bond) and annulment (a decree that a marriage was illegal or invalid) in civil marriages and "cancellation of sealing" in temple marriages (Goodman, 1992). A cancellation of a temple sealing must be approved by the highest authority of the church (the first presidency). Each application for a cancellation of sealing is considered on a case by case basis (Hinckley, 1996). Members of the LDS faith can get a legal divorce, and do not need approval from the church to do so.

Divorce carries a stigma in many religious organizations (Jenkins, 2010) and the LDS church is no exception. It is understandable, then, that members of the church community react when individuals either contemplate divorce or take legal steps to obtain one. (For the purposes of this study, community is defined as non-family LDS members, with whom individuals interact regularly.) However, members of the church have been instructed to "forgive rather than to condemn, to lift and to help (LDS.org)." Indeed, one Brigham Young University professor noted that divorced students are usually welcomed by their peers (Graff, 2013).

This study investigated the lived experience of community support felt by LDS women as they navigated the stages of divorce—in other words, whether women felt supported or

stigmatized by their community. No research could be found to date regarding community support for those going through divorce in the LDS church. The researcher focused on the experience of women because, according to existing research (Chadwick et al, 2010), more women are getting divorced in the church than men. Other literature suggests that women are likely to experience more mental and physical problems due to the circumstances of divorce (Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006). While additional research concludes that women in troubled marriages have more to gain from being single in terms of life satisfaction (Bourassa, Sbarra, & Whisman, 2015). This study will focus on LDS women who live in the United States, where there are over 6 million members (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016).

### **Significance**

As of December 31, 2013, the Mormon faith had more than 15 million members and counting (lds.org). It is the fourth-largest Christian denomination (Limb, Hodge, & Leckie, 2013; Lyon, 2013) in the United States. Because the LDS church is a rapidly growing, it is likely that therapists will encounter more LDS members. People commonly attend therapy to navigate the stages of divorce (Olson, Russel, & Spenkle, 1980). Divorced LDS individuals are the most likely of the LDS population to seek therapy, and there are no known church-sponsored support groups specifically for divorced individuals (Shaw, 1991). As a clinician it is important to be informed of the religious and cultural implications of divorce, because often faith background informs the decision to stay married or divorce (Ford & Richardson, 1994). An aim of this study is to increase the clinical community's understanding of the divorce experience for LDS women. Such research could be helpful to LDS therapists and non-LDS therapists alike, because both are likely to serve the Mormon community.

Finally, while previous studies (Jenkins, 2010; Levitt & Ware, 2006; Mattson &

Scharman, 1994; Mark, 2005) have explored general community support in other religions and the LDS faith, there is no known research that specifically looks at the community support of LDS women in the process of divorce. One study (Mattson & Scharman, 1994) specifically looked at divorced women who reentered as undergraduates at Brigham Young University but did not go into depth about the community's reaction.

### **Rationale**

Qualitative research methods will be used to capture the participants' experience and contribute a rich description of community support—or lack of it—felt by LDS women going through a divorce. A phenomenological approach will be used to examine the lived experience of the participants as they navigate the stages of divorce, and, more specifically, how community response affected that experience. Data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews to allow a rich and textured description of the lived experience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The phenomenological framework developed by Edmund Husserl makes three philosophical assumptions that will be embodied in the proposed study. First, the study will attempt to capture the lived experience of people, specifically, the level of community support felt by LDS women when going through the stages of divorce. Second, the experiences are conscious, meaning they are events that actually happened. Third, the descriptions of these experiences do not set out to explain or analyze (Creswell, 2013), but simply to add to a body of knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of the interviews is to collect the experience of the participant.

In addition to these assumptions there are philosophical perspectives at work in the phenomenological framework. The first is that the study is being conducted to gain wisdom. In

this case, the researcher seeks to learn more about the female LDS perspective in an effort to help educate therapists and the community. The second perspective is epoche, meaning the researcher suspends all judgment until enough data are gathered to formulate one. This step is particularly important, considering the researcher is a married member of the population being studied; bracketing will be used to insure objectivity and guard against bias. The third perspective is intentionality of consciousness, which means that the reality of an object can only be gathered from the experience of the individuals (Creswell, 2013). This is the purpose of conducting interviews.

Phenomenology is a good fit because the researcher seeks to understand the lived experience of LDS women and the level of community support they feel when navigating divorce. The information obtained will be beneficial to therapists who work with LDS clients and the community. All data will be gathered before any themes are proposed; bearing in mind the participants will be speaking about their reality. Combining all of these aspects yields a study based in the philosophy of phenomenology illustrated by Moustakas, which is a part of transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). Transcendental phenomenology is aimed at getting a fresh perspective of the experience, which is what this study hopes to accomplish.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experience of LDS women receiving religious community support as well as caring for themselves as they went through the stages of divorce. Community support will be defined here as whether a participant felt stigmatized or supported; the experience of the participant could be positive, negative, or mixed. Caring for themselves can be described as ways the participants supported themselves during the stages of divorce. This study aimed to help educate those in the LDS community as well as

clinicians about the experience of divorce. The research question was: What is the lived experience of LDS women receiving support from their religious communities as well as caring for themselves as they went through the stages of divorce?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Divorce is a normative event that touches close to half of couples who marry in the United States; at the same time, approximately half of the United States population identifies as religious. (McGolderick et al., 2011). This means that many people of faith are likely to experience divorce. The LDS faith does not condone divorce, yet the rate of divorce is increasing in that community (Chadwick, Top, & McClendon, 2010). This section will review the existing literature regarding divorce in various religious groups, the psychological stages of divorce, the view of LDS women concerning divorce, the view of divorce for women versus men in religion, the level of social support for those getting divorced in different religions, and the stigma of divorce in those religions.

### **Divorce in Religion**

A 2006 study conducted in the Netherlands that examined religion as one of five determinants of divorce, found a negative relationship between divorce and religion: those who identified as religious were less likely to be divorced (De Graff & Kalmijn). However, the incidence of divorce varies between faiths—Catholics and Jews had a lower divorce rate compared to Protestants, even while the rate of Catholic divorce has risen with that of the rest of the population (McGolderick et al., 2011).

A further study by Barth and Ben-Ari (2014) suggests divorce is tolerated by different faiths at different levels: In Haredi Jewish communities, divorce is legally allowed but considered socially undesirable. The Catholic Church has no ecclesiastical mechanism for ending

a valid marriage, though it will grant an annulment on the theory that a marriage was void from the start. Many conservative religions place such a heavy emphasis on marriage, that a marriage ending in divorce is characterized as failure (Glass & Levchak, 2014).

As noted above, research shows that people of faith are less likely to divorce, though it does not explain why. A hypothesis for the low divorce rate among LDS members is that partners tend to give serious thought to marriage because the church makes it clear that vows are sacred and divorce is not without repercussions in the church and community (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). As one LDS cleric (bishop) notes, one partner's decision to divorce has sweeping repercussions: "Nobody in the church likes to see divorce because its consequences not only affect the spouse involved but the children as well." (Levitt & Ware, 2006, p. 219).

Many clergy appear to believe that divorce should be avoided at all cost. One examination of the clergy's perspective on divorce, marriage, and intimate partner violence found that a majority of clergy surveyed from 17 Christian and non-Christian religions preferred that couples reconcile rather than divorce even in cases of intimate partner violence (Levitt & Ware, 2006). In other words, divorce was seen as a last resort even in a violent relationship.

According to the Hindu religion, dissolving the marriage bond is tolerated, but not widely practiced (Holden, 2008; W. Sankhla, personal communication, July 10, 2016). There are specific reasons why a member of the Hindu religion can be divorced: adultery, cruelty, deserting one's spouse for two years, conversion to another religion, incurable lunacy or leprosy, venereal disease in communicable form, renunciation, missing for seven years, no resumption of cohabitation even after one year of passing of a decree of restitution of conjugal rights, or judicial separation, and finally mutual consent, which is a newer provision according to the

Marriage Law Amendment Act of 1976 (Pothen, 1989). With all of these specifications it is not surprising that divorce is not widely practiced in the Hindu religion.

### **The Stages of Divorce**

This study is structured around the stages of divorce to determine if the level of community support experienced at each phase varies. There are both legal and psychological stages of divorce (Gray, 1996). For the purposes of this study, divorce will be described as occurring in three stages: the pre-separation, decision-making phase (deliberation phase); the litigation and restructuring phase (transition phase); and the recovery and post-dissolution stage (Lyon, Silverman, Howe, Bishop, & Armstrong, 1985; Goldberg, 1989).

The pre-separation and decision-making phase, also known as deliberation, is when the idea to divorce first comes to light. The purpose of this highly stressful phase is to justify the decision to divorce (Hamilton & Merrill, 1999). The deliberation phase of divorce ends when the decision to divorce is communicated to the other partner. This is also when family members, friends, and peers may feel inclined to weigh in on the couple's decision (Hamilton & Merrill, 1999). This initial stage can be marked by considerable grief and denial (Gray, 1996).

In the litigation and restructuring phase, also known as transition, partners begin to make their decision to divorce official by starting litigation (Hamilton & Merrill, 1999). During this phase grief, denial, and shock are common (Gray 1996). It is not unusual for the legal system to elevate the level of stress felt by the family and couple (Kaslow, 1980). Legal suggestions might exasperate an already existing rift between husband and wife. For example, the husband's attorney might recommend that he continue cohabitation with his separated spouse to reduce pre-divorce expenses despite the increasing tension. In addition, determining child custody can be stressful not just for the parents but for the children as well. A new, two-household parenting

schedule requires adjustment on everyone's part (Kaslow, 1980).

In the final phase of restructuring, the divorced couple starts life separately. Most legal issues have been resolved. This stage marks the beginning of life without the other partner, and usually involves redefining or establishing a new sense of self (Gary, 1996; Hamilton & Merrill, 1999).

### **Women and Divorce in the LDS Culture**

In 1995 the LDS church published a proclamation to the world on families, which stated that a husband and wife have a responsibility to love and take care of one another and their children. It also stated that the primary role of women is to nurture their children (lds.org, 2012). The role of women in the LDS faith is very much shaped by their identity as a mother (Chen, 2014), but it can be deduced that the roles of wife and mother are intertwined because the LDS faith holds that all children are to be reared in the bonds of matrimony (lds.org, 2012). Thus when women divorce they might feel they are failing in two ways: as a mother because divorce affects children (Arkes, 2015; Weaver & Schofield, 2015), and also as a wife. Despite the high stakes, the LDS faith recognizes that divorce is sometimes necessary (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015) and church members are encouraged to provide support to one another when divorce occurs (lds.org, 2012). No known research measures whether the community support the church expressly encourages is actually experienced by LDS women who divorce.

### **Divorce for Women vs. Men in Religion**

A study conducted by Smith and Smith (2000) surveyed 343 men and women from three religious institutions in New York about their beliefs regarding individuals who are divorced or separated. Those surveyed reported an overall lack of support for divorced individuals.

According to this study, there was a lack of support for both men and women. Yet more in-depth research shows that, depending on the religion and culture, divorce can affect men and women in different ways, with some faiths holding men and women to different standards.

In Islam, divorce is discouraged overall, but is more acceptable for men than women (Ayubi, 2007). In addition, Muslim women are more likely to seek support after a divorce than are Muslim men, while both partners are more likely to seek help from family before they turn to their religious leaders (Savaya & Cohen, 2005).

In the Haredi Jewish community divorce is legal, but not necessarily sanctioned. A woman who decides to divorce is expected to financially support her husband, an expectation that can mean a difficult identity shift for many women (Barth & Ben-Ari, 2014).

In the LDS faith men are given the responsibility to provide for, preside over, and protect their families, while women hold the responsibility to nurture (lds.org, 2012). Both men and women are supposed to love each other and their children. There is a warning issued for individuals who do not uphold their covenants, marriage or otherwise, or fail in family responsibilities (lds.org, 2012). They will have to stand accountable before God for their actions. It is possible that men may experience more stigma, because when they divorce, more responsibilities are not being fulfilled to their full extent.

### **Community Support from the Congregation**

Research suggests community support can be instrumental in helping a family through a divorce. According to Marks and Dollahite (2001), a faith-based community is one of the three basic elements of religion; a built-in sense of support is an inherent part of being an active member of a religious community. Marks (2005) defines a religious community as the clergy and fellow congregates, each of which can influence the faith experience for better or worse.

Several studies have found that community reaction has a powerful effect on a person or couple's experience of the divorce process. Greeff and Van Der Merwe (2004) suggest a religious community can provide a sanctuary that helps partners through the difficulty of divorce. A study of divorced LDS women who re-entered college life at Brigham Young University found some women were met with support from their religious cohort, but all participants perceived negative response in varying degrees (Mattson and Scharman, 1994). Those who felt supported described the members in their wards (local congregations) as, "just great" and "really supportive, understanding, caring, and really helped me" (p. 45). Negative responses included being told they were a bad influence, not being asked to participate in various activities, and changing the subject when divorce came up in conversation.

In her 2010 article, Landau highlights how community support can help the community as a whole as much as individual families. Support, she concludes, has a reciprocal effect: if the community supports the family, the family in turn supports the community. Landau asserts that families are the building blocks of society; strong families help build strong communities and vice versa. A family in the throes of divorce, then, can draw strength from a supportive community at large.

Domestic violence appears to be a factor in how a religious community views divorce among its members. Levitt and Ware (2006) found that partners who had been the victim of domestic violence were met readily with a high level of community support, while the perpetrator needed to actively pursue community support before it was offered.

In some faiths, compassion and support appeared to be available even when domestic violence was not a factor. Some congregations offered support groups designed to address divorce. Other members found comfort participating in various activities their churches offered

that were not specifically tailored to the experience of divorce (Jenkins, 2010). In spite of negative views within Protestant religions, support groups or ways of feeling sustained, such as grief classes or websites with supporting material, were offered (Jenkins, 2010).

The body of existing research makes clear that support from one's community of faith can be helpful when going through a difficult time, and that a sense of community is present in most religious organizations. However, the level of community support in the LDS population where divorce is concerned has yet to be explored.

### **Divorce Stigma from the Religious Community**

Stigma from the religious community is a common response when individuals divorce (Gerstel, 1987). Participants in Mattson and Scharman's 1994 study about divorced LDS women reported feeling stigmatized by both fellow congregants and clergy. In Jenkins (2010), participants reported feeling shamed by "sermons that framed the divorce as deviant" (p. 282). Marks (2005) notes that one of the costs of religious involvement is "negative associations with clergy or certain members of the faith community (p. 92)."

Cummings (2015) looked at LDS members who were entering the dating process after divorce. Participants reported feeling isolated from their communities. Some participants reported experiencing a differing level of support depending on where they lived.

Divorce might be particularly challenging for certain conservative Protestant groups, like Seventh-Day Adventists. This is primarily due to the strong values placed on marital vows and the shame that accompanies broken bonds (Webb et al., 2010). However, other groups face stigma as well. A Baptist minister described his congregants as ruthless in their gossiping about his divorce (Jenkins, 2010). Other Protestant individuals in Jenkin's 2010 work reported feeling upset at themselves for ending their marriage. One respondent in the study reported keeping her

divorce a secret for more than 50 years because to her it was a reflection of her failure (Jenkins, 2010).

Burr, McCall, and Powell-Griner, (1994) highlight the potential for those in the Catholic Faith to feel more destabilized and disconcerted by doctrine and norms if they divorce. Additionally, the authors believe these feelings might override any direct protective effect of association with the religion. Another element of Catholic doctrine that might alienate is that divorced persons are precluded from remarrying within the Church unless given an annulment (Ellison, Wolfinger, & Ramos-Wada, 2013). However, in recent years the Catholic divorce rates have increased with the rest of the world's, hence expanding demand for annulments (Ellison et al., 2013). An annulment in the Catholic Church is when the preformed marriage ceremony becomes null. In fact, divorced members who do not have an annulment cannot participate in communion, an essential part of worship in the Catholic faith (Sheehan, 2016). In the eyes of the Catholic Church remarriages without previous annulments are adulterous because religiously the partners are still married to each other (Sheehan, 2016). This might present challenges as members try to disassociate from their first marriages.

Jenkins (2010) addressed how four members experienced the Catholic Church during their divorces. They reported feelings of humiliation and embarrassment during the Mass when the priest would discuss marriage. While divorced members of the Catholic faith report feeling disgraced, the church does provide support. Catholics in Jenkins' study (2010) were referred to support services outside parish resources.

The Haredi Jewish tradition, according to one spiritual leader, frames divorcees as outcasts (Barth & Ben-Ari, 2014). In this community divorce is legal but not necessarily endorsed. While there is reported stigma in the Jewish community there is also support available

for divorced individuals (Jenkins, 2016). Like the Catholic Church, most support services take place in community centers or other community locations (Jenkins, 2010).

In Judaism family is the stabilizing force of an individual (Herz & Rosen, 1982). There is a central belief of family as a sacred institution, and divorce is seen as a violation of the concept of family togetherness (Herz & Rosen, 1982). Similar to the Catholic and Mormon religions, in the Jewish tradition there is added need for the writ of religious divorce also referred to as a *get*, and only a husband can grant this. In secular terms, the *get* is like a divorce ceremony (Jenkins, 2010). It is common in certain instances of divorce for members to withdraw from the religion; some even express fear of gossip or harsh judgment (Jenkins, 2010).

In Islam, divorce is frowned upon, but women are more stigmatized than men (Ayubi, 2007). Children might also experience alienation from their faith community as a result of their parents' decision to divorce (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009). After Christianity, Islam is the second largest world religion (Ahluwalia & Zaman, 2010). According to Ayubi (2007) overall divorce is discouraged in Islam, but for men it is more acceptable than women. In an article by Bromfield, Ashour, and Rider (2016) divorce is highly secretive in certain areas where Islam is practiced.

According to this same article that specifically looked at divorced Muslim women in the United Arab Emirates, women face a great deal more social stigma than men do. In fact, many women discouraged other UAE women from divorcing because of the social stigma that accompanies that choice. "In Islamic tradition, men can say the word *talaq* to his wife, which means 'I divorce you.' When the word is uttered three times by a husband the couple is considered to be divorced" (Bromfield et al., 2016, p. 292). Divorce can be very disruptive in this society especially for women because so much of the female identity is wrapped up in

spousal and maternal responsibilities (Al Gharaibeh & Bromfield, 2012; AlMunajjed, 2010). In addition, according to Savaya and Cohen (2005) Muslim women are more likely to seek support after a divorce than their male partners. However, both spouses are more likely to first seek help from family before they turn to their religious leaders (Savaya & Cohen, 2005). This could potentially be attributed to the secretive nature of divorce in this culture.

Afifi, Davis, Denes, & Merrill (2013) suggest the way a church views divorce can play an important role in whether partners decide to split, with some allowing their faith to make the decision. Couples who disregard church tenets and divorce anyway risk stigmatization; for many, the rules of faith are much like the rules of law—those who violate them are not unlike criminals.

### **Overview of Church Organization**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints comes with a unique organization including a lay ministry and a three-hour church schedule. Members are placed into wards, or local congregations, based on of where they live. In addition to geographical boundaries wards can be organized by qualifiers like marital status (single or family), language (Spanish speaking, Mandarin-speaking). Language and marital status are the most common qualifiers but there can be others. Bishops, who are like pastors, oversee wards. Just as parishes are organized into a diocese, wards are organized into a stake and overseen by a stake president and his counselors. Stakes are defined by geographical boundaries and a stake president is given a number of wards to oversee. Bishoprics (bishop and his two counselors) and a stake presidency (stake president and his two counselors) are always male. All leaders in the church including stake president and bishop are part of a lay ministry. One is called to be a bishop by the stake president. Bishops provide counsel and are there for members to turn to in times of need. They usually serve for a period of five years, but there is not set time.

Just as members might turn to the bishop in times of trouble, it is common for members experiencing a significant trial, like divorce, to discuss their feelings with the stake president. Members who are seeking a cancellation of sealing must always speak with a bishop and stake president as part of that process. All cancellations of sealings must be reviewed by the first presidency, but starting that process involves local church leaders.

Church meetings are usually held on Sundays and are three hours long. One of these hours is spent with everyone meeting together to receive the sacrament, communion, and hear talks, sermons, from members of the congregation. Another hour is spent in Sunday school. All members including adults attend some form of Sunday school. Lastly, members attend another form of Sunday school that is divided by either age and/or gender. Children ages 3 to 11 attend primary. Girls ages 12 to 17 attend young women's; boys ages 12 to 17 attend young men's. Men age 18 and older attend priesthood. Women age 18 and older attend relief society.

All members of wards are given callings, opportunities to serve those in their ward. Some examples include Sunday school teachers, ward missionaries, and youth leaders. The relief society is run by women, a relief society president and her counselors. During all of these meetings members are instructed in doctrine, however the subject matter might be more tailored to those in attendance. Men and women who attend priesthood and relief society are given an additional calling of home or visiting teachers. Men are called home teachers and women visiting teachers. Each is given a responsibility to watch over the members assigned to them. Usually all adult church members are given a visiting teaching or home teaching assignment unless they request otherwise.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that marriage is an important aspect of many religions; that means community

and clergy alike frown upon divorce. In some cases, people of faith who divorce have found a high level of support in their religious communities; in others, the social stigma only adds to the already considerable list of struggles most parting couples feel. This study will explore where the LDS church falls in the wide spectrum of experiences women of faith encounter in terms of support in a time of marital crisis.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

#### **Design of the Study**

This study employed qualitative semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in keeping with Moustakas' phenomenological design (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected and then analyzed by reducing the information to themes. Bracketing was done to set aside personal bias to ensure a fresh, untarnished perspective because the researcher is a lifelong member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and was married in the temple. Neither the researcher nor her immediate family members have experienced divorce.

#### **Study Participants**

Female members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were recruited for the study. Participants were interviewed between June 2016 and November 2016. All participants were female members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who had been married in the temple and who has been divorced for one to five years. Participants varied in age from 25 to 64 and lived in the United States. In the interview it was not specifically asked if participants were remarried, however, two reported being remarried. Often during the interview participants would clearly link level of community support to a stage of divorce. When this happened it is specified in the findings.

Table 1					
<i>Participant Demographics</i>					
<u>Participants</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Years Married</u>	<u>Children</u>	<u>Years Divorced</u>	<u>Length of Membership</u>
1	25	3	0	2*	No data
2	64	40*	9	4*	56
3	61	34	2	5	28
4	37	14	4	3	Lifelong
5	28	5*	1	2-3	Lifelong
6	33	12*	2	2*	Lifelong
*Numbers rounded up to the nearest whole number					

Table 1

Inclusion criteria were: married in the temple, U.S. residents, member of the LDS church, and divorced for at least one year and no more than five years. Those divorced more than once were excluded from the study. Including women who have been married more than once might make it difficult to determine the influence of the first divorce experience on the second divorce experience. For example from their first experience, did they elicit more support, reject support, or fail to perceive support the second time they went through a divorce. It might be difficult to distinguish between eliciting more support, rejecting support, or a failure of support for one single event since it might be based on the number of participants was six, which comports with the requirements of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). Eleven women were interested in participating in the study, seven were interviewed. One participant's data were discarded due to more than one divorce. Two participants were interested but did not qualify and two decided not to participate. According to the research by Gray (1996) the third stage of divorce can begin six months after a divorce is final. In order to be sensitive to this life cycle transition the researcher chose to interview people who have been divorced for a year.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used. The recruitment script was sent to LDS members in the community and to various ward (congregation) listservs. If members fit the

criteria, they were invited to participate, which fits the description of purposive sampling.

Snowball sampling was used when all those who participated were asked if they knew anyone who qualified for the study. To avoid a conflict of interest, no participants were selected from the researcher's current congregation. Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon place. If location was an issue, the research suggested a phone interview.

### **Procedures**

Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, a recruitment email was sent to various ward listservs in the United States, DC metro area, and to the Virginia Tech MFT listserv. The Virginia Tech marriage and family therapy program's listserv contains e-mails of alumni, faculty, and other professionals connected with the program. Specific LDS members in the United States were sent the recruitment e-mail in an effort to help the researcher recruit participants. These members were selected due to knowing the researcher and geographical location. They were instructed to send the study information to their community listservs or anyone who they thought might qualify for the study. The recruitment script included a description and rationale of the study, a list of eligibility criteria, a statement of what was involved in participation, and contact information of the researcher. A copy of the recruitment script is included in Appendix B.

Once responses were received, a follow-up email was sent thanking the responders for their interest, and confirming that they met the participation requirements and would agree to audio recording. A time was then scheduled to meet or talk over the phone and consent forms were signed before the interview took place. Interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken during the interview. All interview data were password protected; notes were kept under lock and key. The recordings were transcribed and coded to highlight major themes. To improve

credibility and accuracy, transcripts were sent back to the participants to provide them an opportunity to add to or change their responses. One participant returned her transcript with minor corrections. Others reported that they were going send in their corrections but never did.

### **Instruments**

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning a set of basic questions was asked along with follow-up questions as the researcher deemed necessary to deepen the understanding of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2003). The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The focus of the interviews was on understanding the level of support experienced by the participants as they navigated the stages of divorce in their LDS communities. A set of demographic questions was asked first, followed by questions to determine what support the participant received, and, finally, how the participant reacted to the experience of support or lack thereof. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **Analysis**

The analytic strategy used for this research study was based on work from three individuals. One of Moustakas' phenomenological approaches was based off of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Creswell, 2003). Then in 2003 Creswell presented a modified version of Moustakas' phenomenological approach. The researcher used the approach as follows: After the text was initially read, the coder and researcher went through the transcripts again and made notes in the margins of how the participants experienced the level of community support as they navigated the stages of divorce. Each note was given equal weight. The researcher and coder then grouped the notes into meaning units, statements that describe what the experience was like for the participants. Some notes described one aspect of the participant's experience, whereas other notes described another aspect. The coder and researcher then developed a textual

description of what transpired and how participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). This process led to a thick rich description of the “essence,” underlying meaning of the participant’s experience with the phenomenon, thus painting a picture of the lived experience of community support experienced by LDS women as they navigate the stages of divorce (Creswell, 2003).

Throughout the analyses process bracketing was done by writing down any bias to ensure that the results were not being clouded. During the interviews and throughout this process, the researcher used bracketing in an effort to ensure that personal experience with the LDS faith did not cloud objectivity in data collection or analysis. Brackets can be found in Appendix D. Member checking, detailed transcriptions, inter-coder agreement, and thick rich descriptions in the results were used to establish credibility and trustworthiness. A pilot interview was also conducted to ensure the interview questions elicited the data sought. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and gave the transcripts to another female student in the program for inter-coder agreement. This student was not a member of the population being studied. This coder received the same instruction but coded independently of the researcher. Before the coder and researcher read the transcripts they bracketed their experience of the phenomenon. Both read the transcripts at least twice to gain a sense of the overall content. As researcher and coder bracketed their experience they hoped to provide the most balanced view possible.

#### **Chapter 4: Results**

Participants had much to say about their experience of divorcing while a member of the LDS church. They talked about their self-perceptions as they divorced as well as the response from their LDS community. Sometimes these perceptions were in concert and sometimes they diverged. They struggled with perceptions of failure and where do I belong? They experienced

support and a lack of support from the overall community. Participants also described ways in which the community might have better supported them as well as how women going through a divorce in the LDS community might care for themselves. The themes presented are in no particular order.

### **Perceptions of Failure**

Perceptions of failure was a theme found in the data. Participants described different aspects of failure. Subthemes of the section are self-perceptions of failure and anticipation of the community's response.

**Self-perceptions of failure.** Two participants expressed frustration regarding this notion that they did everything right and their marriages did not work. When talking about the first stage of divorce one participant said:

You know I felt like I did everything right. I got married in the temple. I waited to have sex until I was married . . . I knew him for over two years or more . . . It wasn't the stereotypical Mormon let's get married after four months of knowing each other. I am very careful about my decisions in life. I was just kind of frustrated. Well I did everything right. It's like why is this not working? (Participant 1)

Another participant described the recipe that she followed for what she thought would be a successful marriage and still had it fall apart.

Well wait, I did everything right. Like I waited until marriage and I got married in the temple . . . and I didn't work and I, I put off college to watch my children and . . . support him and give him all . . . and I was happy to do it, and it was fine. And yet he just leaves. So how is it that I did everything I was supposed to do and yet it all fell apart? (Participant 4)

They felt they “did everything right” and still faced the trial of “the dirty D word.”

**Anticipation of community’s response.** Participants also talked about their emotional reaction to the community’s response to their perceived failure. Participants expressed concern and surprise at their community’s reply to this very public experience.

When in stage one, a participant questioned what the response from the community would be when they find out she is divorced.

So I wondered what that would have been like because the overall stereotype of you know divorce is like it's the dirty D word . . . And in a religion that focuses so much on family and eternal families, and marriage, I mean that's kind of hard to even think of that.  
(Participant 1)

Feeling embarrassed because of the “dirty-d word.” Five out of six participants reported feeling fearful of negative responses and feeling embarrassed about divorce. When going through the second stage, one participant expressed the following fear.

I was terrified because you know when I came to this decision I was like . . . this is something that is not normal . . . I felt like in some ways a failure. Like I was a disappointment. Or they wouldn't understand or they would think that I messed up and

In addition to being fearful of others’ responses, three out of the six participants expressed embarrassment as a result of going against cultural and religious norms. When discussing stage two, two participants expressed feelings of embarrassment related to their decision. One said, “It's embarrassing . . . I mean, especially temple marriage is such a huge thing in the LDS community . . . it feels like such a huge failure.” (Participant 1) Another participant reported embarrassment at the idea of not being a good example to others because she did not represent the ideal that is taught in church.

I didn't want people to know I was divorced. Because that's not what you teach in the church. We want to be the example of the ideal that we teach. And I'm such a bad member and I can't really set a good example for others being in a situation that's not cool. (Participant 2)

Half of the participants felt embarrassed about their divorce due to the how seriously marriage is taken in the community.

Two participants said they had followed the guidelines for successful LDS living and yet their marriages still failed. They felt like they did everything right and did not deserve to be placed in this situation. Others expressed apprehension or embarrassment about their “failure,” including not living up to certain church ideals or not being a good example to the community.

### **Where do I Belong?**

Participants struggled to find a meaningful place in the community after their divorce. Some participants self secluded as a result of community reactions. Others questioned where they belonged based off of different treatment in the community. Some participants did feel a sense of belonging.

**Self-seclusion.** Three participants discussed the desire to seclude themselves as a result of reactions they received from their community. One participant mentioned how the first six months (third stage) after divorce were very difficult due to her community’s lack of understanding.

Well so at this point going to church was painful . . . The first six months post divorce was just incredibly painful. You feel . . . like you've gone through a death, and you're mourning it like a death . . . but you go to church and you see all these people and you,

you're kind of like . . . you have no idea . . . [I'm] going through this death. (Participant 4)

Another participant discussed not abandoning the religion and her beliefs, but wanting to pull away socially because of the lack of understanding from her community.

I found myself and still find myself . . . not pulling away from the church . . . my love of the gospel got strengthened through it all. I have been pulling away from people. And I'm like oh you don't, you don't understand and shouldn't. I don't expect you to understand. I don't, but I also like I can't handle those . . . stupid questions. So I'm just going to kind of distance myself. (Participant 5)

One participant described secluding herself from her ward as a way to manage feeling like an outsider:

I didn't go to church either because me or one of the girls was sick or we were just so tired . . . and I'm usually like a 100 percenter . . . I was like well technically we could go to church, but I'm just not. . . So you know of course at that point the relief society president sent a few of her counselors to come talk to me and check in on me . . . I'm just like you know I'm totally stressed out and exhausted physically emotionally and everything. And they listened and they cared, but that was it. There was no like resulting increase and support to me. So it was just hard . . . support did continue, but it didn't like increase at any point. So I had to accept the fact that like okay this is how much I can expect from my ward. I can't expect more, and that's hard when you need more and you're just like okay I guess, I guess we're just going to suffer a little. (Participant 6)

**Different treatment in the community: The scarlet letter.** All participants discussed trying to find a new identity as a divorced woman in their LDS community. When discussing the second stage, one participant reported feeling like she was in limbo because there was no

example or protocol of how to navigate the transition from a married member to a divorced dating member.

There isn't actually a lot of things out there for people that are divorced . . . because you are not (don't belong) in a family ward and you can't go to the singles ward yet because that would be inappropriate. And so like you didn't really know what to do with yourself because okay this is the decision I've made. I want to be around people who I can make friends with and have good relationships with because a lot of time you are lonely . . . because it's kind of like you are a scarlet letter, like don't touch. (Participant 1)

One participant reported feeling surprised that she did not experience the different treatment that she was anticipating.

I definitely never felt like the scarlet letter stigma that I was kind of afraid of initially. I didn't feel like I came to church and people were so judgmental and critical for sure. And then in my ward I, you know, I have a calling and they like made sure that like I was like involved. (Participant 5)

One participant also explained how in the second stage it could be difficult to make an introduction in her ward without going through the story of why she got divorced and possibly sharing her story with those she did not feel comfortable with.

What was more of an issue for me was introducing myself to new people. Like if somebody new moved into the ward it was like, okay it's hard to make a proper introduction because you know you always say, oh where are you guys moving from, but then they ask what brought you here. Are you from here? And I had to say, no I'm not from here, but I've been living here a few years. And then they say well what brought you here. And I'm like, well, my ex came to start his PhD program. Awkward silence . . . So

that was what was really awkward was like starting the new relationships. Cause it's actually kind of nice; it's like you want to tell the people who are close to you but you don't, you don't want to tell every single person. Cause you don't feel like talking about [it] every single time. (Participant 6)

A participant told an anecdote of needing to maneuver the situation of asking if you are related to someone, a very common LDS tradition.

Are you any relation to (name of previous husband)? . . . And I said, "No but he's the father of all my kids." And he just got this mortified look on his face . . . He was, he was, he was embarrassed. I was willing to chat with him and say, yeah, you know we got divorced three and half years ago, whatever, but he was mortified and . . . I said next time you talk to him tell him hello for me. And he's just like sure, and he just kind of tried to get away from the conversation. (Participant 2)

Another participant reported feeling that as a result of her divorce fellow ward members saw her differently. She tells of being asked to a dinner with other single mothers in the ward and given a party gift. "They were doing this to be kind, but it was kind of like their heart was in the right place, but the delivery was all wrong . . . it felt like a demotion; like I no longer was . . . seen as valid." (Participant 4)

**A sense of belonging.** Despite participants struggling to find a place, some did find a sense of belonging, and felt embraced in their communities. This enabled them to cope through this difficult transition time and gain a sense of belonging. A participant reported feeling included in the ward due to service:

The family ward I was in . . . they didn't really reach out and give me responsibility to make me feel like I was a valued member of the ward, I feel like I probably would have

struggled a little bit. I'm a strong person myself, and I can do a lot of things on my own, but it was nice to know that they wanted me too, but too that they trusted me too. Because sometimes I think, oh divorced—there must be something wrong with you. So it was nice that they were like, you know, just because this happened to you doesn't mean that you can't be a valued member of the ward. (Participant 1)

From feeling welcomed at church participants to making introductions, participants struggled to find their place in the community after their divorce. Participants discussed the difficult situations they faced in a culture that emphasizes family togetherness and how they made themselves feel more at home during the transition.

### **Support from the Overall Community**

Participants reported feeling supported not only in their local community members and leaders but by the church as a whole. Participants reported engaging in different activities to make sure that they were supporting themselves through this transition. Participants reported feeling the majority of community support in stages two and three.

**Support from the local community.** All participants reported on the support that they felt from their wards during the stages of divorce. One participant discussed how her friends approached the situation. “You know a lot of our friends would say we love you both. We want to be there for you and support you.” (Participant 2) One participant described how she felt supported by her relief society presidency during the second stage of divorce. “I said, ‘Hey, can I talk to you?’ and all three of them were kind of sitting there. And so I broke down and shared that with them . . . You know it was good.” (Participant 4)

Another participant remarked on how fortified she felt as everyone started to learn about her divorce during stage two.

I felt supported with my ward and my stake when I decided to get divorced. When people slowly start(ed) to find out . . . my fear was nicely surprised and met with love and support, which I was very surprised with. (Participant1)

Two participants remarked on the encouragement they received through service that their ward provided especially during the Christmas season.

I opened the door and there was Christmas. And my home teacher who I have known all the years . . . And he handed . . . me some cash so that I could buy things for the kids.

Those are the things that warm my heart and make me cry. (Participant 3)

Another participant talked of how she had a doorstep full of boy scouts who showed up wanting to help her out.

One time the scouts came over. That was really cool . . . they just came over and said, "We're here, what do you need fixed?" . . . and they went and fixed several things that I just couldn't get to. Changing filters. You know . . . that kind of stuff that you just never really did because your spouse did. (Participant 4)

**Impact of church leaders' support.** Five out of the six women made mention of the impact specific church leaders made on them. One woman talked of feeling like her divorce was justified when, at the beginning of the second stage of divorce, she told her bishop.

When I met with my bishop . . . It was so funny, cause I would tell my friends, you know your divorce is like justified when you tell your bishop, and the first response is a smile and just a "yes!" (Participant 6)

One participant stated how buoyed up she felt during the second stage when a church leader addressed her feelings of inadequacy

He goes, "Those feelings of inadequacy, feeling like you don't belong... that's a lie... I

want you to know that.” And that was very touching to me. Cause I think a lot of people who are divorced, you do wrestle with those feelings. (Participant 1)

One participant also described approaching her leaders during stage two with difficult doctrinal questions.

So, as much as my priesthood holders have been support, I have also beaten them around their heads and shoulders saying, ‘You show me the words in these books so I can understand where is he or where am I.’ . . . And so you know I was just waiting [for] them to, ‘Ahhh, here she comes!’ on certain Sundays when I needed those questions answered . . .

I: So . . . did they ever . . . turn the other way?

P: Nah. Good men. (Participant 3)

When LDS members are sealed in a LDS temple they are married to each other for time and eternity, meaning that their relationship exists now and will continue after death. Receiving a cancellation of sealing means that the binding relationship has ended in this life and the next life. According to a participant’s report, the church changed the requirements for members to receive a cancellation of sealing. The new regulations allow members to receive their cancellation more quickly.

**Church wide support.** A few of the participants (two out of six) talked about how they felt reinforced through receiving their cancellation of sealing quickly from the first presidency. “I got my cancellation very easily. My bishop was really sensitive in helping me. I think I really lucked out with my experience.” (Participant 1) Another participant mentioned how she felt particularly supported by the church’s decision to change the process of cancellations of sealing.

I really appreciated that the church has changed their position, or rule is the right word,

on getting my sealing canceled. I was able to do (it) before I even ever met my current husband or even started dating again . . . I often joke it's easier to get your sealing cancelled then it was to get a divorce in the state of (state). (Participant 5)

Participants cited these examples of compassionate church policy and direct interaction with members as allowing them to feel embraced when they were transitioning through this difficult life stage.

**Ways to support myself.** While all of the women expressed feeling supported by others they also mentioned how helpful it was for them to serve and share their stories of divorce. Two women reported serving in the temple after their divorces. One participant stated that she came to certain realizations about her community and faith as she made the choice to serve.

I don't remember who it was, but somebody encouraged me to start working in the temple, and so through all of this I went and I worked in the temple on the weekends . . . that was really nice because I felt like it kind of made me realize the church is perfect but the people (in) the church aren't perfect. So if I'm not happy with the way people are responding that doesn't have . . . anything to do with the church. (Participant 5)

Another participant felt supported through her opportunity to serve in her ward during the second stage. She reported being asked to help with activities for girls ages 8 to 12. "It was nice that they were like you know we want you to teach our young girls. We want you to be part of the ward." (Participant 1)

Another participant shared the importance of sharing her story with those around her during the third stage. She was asked to speak in front of her ward regarding the trials that she had been through.

And I introduced myself. I said, "You know I came here 28 years ago. I came here as a

wife, a mother, and now I am not a wife. I am a mother, I'm a grandmother.” And I went through some of the bumps and I explained it . . . publicly I pronounced so that nobody else had to. It didn't have to be a whole “let's not talk to her or ask her where her husband is” or any of that. (Participant 3)

Two other participants remarked on the relief they felt from sharing their story with someone.

I actually felt impressed to talk about it one time, and I found that another friend, a friend that I made in the ward . . . was actually a divorced person too. And it was nice because in the family ward you didn't necessarily have a divorced friend, but here I found a divorced friend and she knew what it was like. (Participant 1)

In one way or another support was experienced by all participants. Some participants received support from their local community in the form of different church members helping them or talking to different church leaders. Other participants shared how they felt supported by serving others and sharing their stories of divorce.

### **Lack of Support**

Participants reported at times feeling a lack of support from church leaders and their community church members. Often members of the church consult with a church leader when they find themselves in trying times. When participants would confide in a bishop or a stake president they reported feeling dismissed. While all participants reported that they felt supported by their local church leaders, a majority of participants (five out of six) described some element of church leadership that was not helpful.

**Church leader's lack of support.** In the first stage, one participant described her stake president's response when she told him about her marital problems.

I confided in him just generally. I didn't get down to the nitty gritty details of, just, you know, I've been trying this, I've been trying that. This is the results I'm getting. What is your opinion being a church leader . . . and he kind of made a joke . . . but I didn't necessarily appreciate the insensitivity that way. Even though I know that probably was not what he meant. You know, this is my life . . . but the only thing he could tell me, "Well you know everything works and if you have faith things will work out." I was kind of frustrated with that answer because, you know, at that point that's all I've done is having faith. . . And so when the church leader was like "Just have more faith." You're like, really, that's all you can give me?" So it was frustrating. (Participant 1)

During the first stage another participant described how she felt as if her marital problems got dismissed when she and her husband talked to her bishop.

The bishop was the only person who was aware that there was a problem. And it was pretty dismissed actually. He, he was willing to send us to counseling and pay for that, but nobody else knew . . . During that stage we were in the middle of changing wards. So they were, they were in the middle of restructuring the boundaries . . . So when I went back in there, the Bishop said, "I just think you guys need to figure out . . . why you fell in love in the first place." And so I felt very dismissed, like wait, no, this is so much bigger than us not remembering why we fell in love. (Participant 4)

This same participant felt as if her bishop lacked support for her during her divorce. I was crying out and seeking someone to help me talk reason and help . . . I couldn't even get in to see the Bishop, meanwhile my life and my marriage is falling apart . . . I didn't feel like at the time I got the help . . . the emotional support more than anything. (Participant 4)

Another church member described how she purposely reached out to her leader when she was in the first stage, and then was ignored.

I do remember . . . calling my bishop and just saying I'm not happy. I don't think my marriage is going to last. I don't know what to do and . . . his response was very, like, very hands off . . . I kind of feel like my bishop like washed his hands of it . . . I don't want to like sit in my bishop's office and tell him my sob story anyways. But I felt like . . . I could have used . . . a little bit of support . . . (Participant 5)

Participants not only had difficulty with church leaders but also church members.

**Unsupportive comments/attitudes from the community.** According to participants, church members would gossip, give unsolicited, naive advice, or back out on promises of practical support (i.e. household responsibility, childcare, etc). Such instances led participants to question how supported they were by their community. Those interviewed talked of church members giving unsolicited opinions about the participant's divorce.

There's one man in particular (that) stands out. He . . . told me that if he (ex-husband) loved me and loved my daughter and loved God that there . . . should be no reason why I'm breaking my temple covenants. And that I needed to go down to the local pizza (place) and sit with him over dinner and just work out our differences, because I had made temple covenants that shouldn't be broken. I just remember looking at him: Well, I can't answer those questions (the way) that they should be answered so . . . end of conversation. (Participant 5)

Another participant described being in a relief society lesson and feeling targeted. Someone brought up divorce, and I'm sitting in my chair and . . . it turned negative very quickly . . . people were like, "I think people who get divorced are very selfish people.

They don't really have the right priorities in their life to make it work.” I'm sinking in my chair like, oh my gosh, like if these people found out what I was and what I've been through, I wonder would they judge me as harshly? . . . And so I just had to tell myself don't take that personally, they don't understand. (Participant 1)

One church member talked about how she felt betrayed by one of her female friends. Very few women knew. One woman said something about it and I went to her and said, “I told you in confidence. That is what I expect. I do not wish to be part of gossip. I think it's inappropriate.” (Participant 3)

This same participant reported how angry she was when news of her divorce spread halfway across the country.

P: . . . I got a call from someone . . . he called to say, “Well, you know there's a rumor that's made it all the way out to (name of state) and I'm just wondering?”

I: Wow, how was that for you?

P: Made me angry . . . (Participant 3)

One participant felt a lack of practical support that made her second guess how people viewed her and her situation. (Practical support meaning with household responsibilities, child care, etc.). When she met with her stake president he extended an offer to arrange childcare for her once a month.

It never happened. So that was not helpful, because I was like hoping it would happen and it never did, and I don't know why it didn't happen cause I never talked to him about it . . . And so, then it was also like, wait does somebody think I'm not deserving, or are people just not able to help? Like, how does this fit in with my understanding of what's available to me? (Participant 6)

Two women reported feeling stigmatized by being singled out in their wards for being divorced. One of the participants said, “I think sometimes in an effort to single out in the right . . . way it kinda feels like you're . . . singled out in the wrong way.” (Participant 4) Another participant expressed similar sentiments.

I didn't want to be treated differently. I didn't want like a pity party. Like okay, yes, my life has crumbled, but here I am picking (up) the pieces and I'm happy to be at church and I'm happy to be here. Like don't make me feel bad . . . (Participant 5)

According to participants, church leaders and members at times led participants to feel a lack of support. Participants felt as if their concerns were ignored by church leaders, and at times members made participants feel like they were being scrutinized for their decision to divorce.

### **Additional Forms of Support Needed**

Participants discussed what could be done differently to support its female members as they go through the divorce process. These areas included church wide education and making divorced women feel included. In addition, participants suggested what not to do.

**Church wide education.** One participant expressed confusion over what was okay and not okay as a separated member, and what the next steps were to get a cancellation of sealing. She reported that written materials on being a divorced member of the church and what is expected from divorced members would be helpful. The participants reported that the materials that were available were not helpful.

There was zero materials. Like you had the conference talks, which made you feel like bad, and I know that's not the intention. But it's just like you're going through what you are going through, you don't want to hear, “Well, don't do it . . . .” They didn't have a

website for divorced people and that's the thing that I thought was so funny . . . . They have these things for pornography and alcohol abuse and all these other things. But I think that the church is also trying and accepting more . . . . But like there was a huge lack of material support from the church . . . . And there wasn't even, you didn't even know what was expected of you for being a divorced person. I asked the bishop is there something from the church where they give you checklist of what's expected of you or what you're supposed to do. He's like, no. (Participant 1)

Another participant mentioned the idea of pre- and postmarital education as well and support groups for Sunday school.

First off, we need to have for real marriage classes . . . . Before a couple gets married, I truly believe there ought to be a bishop working with these two. So that they can really understand . . . . And I know we have marriage classes that are to be taken if/when they get offered. . . . And then you know, I don't know if I'd partake, but a class saying okay you're divorced are you okay? (Participant 3)

**Proactive in service.** Another area that was suggested was being proactive in service and limitations. One participant gave the following advice. "I think it's just the typical, do your visiting teaching, just cause you know, I wish I had a friend." (Participant 1) Another participant urged members and LDS divorced women to be proactive in giving and seeking help.

Just yeah, put your hand out, and help. And like I said, if I knew someone or if someone needed to call me I'd be more than happy to say . . . . why don't we go get something to drink or . . . . ask them if they want a beer and see how they take it. (Participant 3)

One participant suggested that support could be both practical and emotional and worked best if it was proactive.

... Offer and lend support where you can . . . Invite them over for dinner or invite them to a . . . girl's nights. . . Be in constant contact. Help the kids, like pick up for activities and drop off, cause all of a sudden you are just in such survival mode . . . Drop off a dinner if you know they're going to be working that day. That kind of-proactive. If you just say, "Hey, let me know what I can do to help," . . . [I'm] not going to say anything. I'm not going to ask for help . . . Go over and mow their lawn. Go over and fix something or say, "Hey, we're here." (Participant 4)

Another participant said:

If you make an offer, follow through and be specific. And if you make a specific offer, definitely follow through. And... help take some of the initiative . . . Vague, general offers are not that helpful . . . I'm not for a lack of support. I'm a lack for help. I'm a lack for childcare. I'm a lack for getting dinner on the table, so you know I need to know specifically who I can call on for what, and when people make that very clear to me, it does me a favor . . . (Participant 5)

**Different ways to think about it.** Another topic that some of the participants addressed was different ways of thinking and approaching divorce for church members. Two participants suggested that church members should not assume or pry.

I think the biggest thing is don't assume. Don't assume the worst of people because it's two people who tried . . . I suffered three years trying to make it work, so don't sit here and tell me you got what you wanted. Well, no I actually didn't want that. (Participant 1)

Another participant said:

I would say don't make any assumptions about the reason. Don't pry . . . Don't make assumptions . . . it's so easy for people to look at the very limited information they have

and be like, oh, he was the jerk. Or she's the jerk. And sometimes even when it looks very obvious to be that way it is not. (Participant 6)

While these two participants warned of intruding, one participant said that there came a time when she wanted people to ask her question about her divorce.

Go ahead and ask the questions . . . I'd rather have somebody be up front and right out why . . . Whether I agree with it or not, I like the honesty. So I can't say that this is good advice for everyone, but I like it . . . I would say still, still ask questions, still invite them places, and don't be offended if they don't accept, keep inviting them because when they're ready, they'll know that you're there, and maybe they're just not ready to be out in the social circles and that type thing. (Participant 2)

Advice given to community members consisted of what to do and what not to do.

Participants suggested efforts that could be done on a local and church wide level. All participants reported wanting the community's help through the process.

### **How can I Care for Myself during this Difficult Time?**

Not only did participants offer ways that the community could help, but they also offered advice to women going through the stages of a divorce. Their strategies included: advocating for yourself, setting boundaries, and using faith as an added support.

**Advocate for yourself.** One participant suggested that women who are enduring a divorce need to advocate more for themselves to get the help they need.

Get up off your bum and find the assistance that you need and if you don't get it from . . . the relief society president or the first bishopric member or whatever go up the ladder. Go . . . to someone who will . . . listen to you. And it's okay if you turn around and say, "Bishop, we're just not doing it. You're not doing it for me. I'm feeling worse." Or just

not [to] go back to him. It's okay. It's your eternal progression, your children, your life . . . Just do it. (Participant 3)

Another participant suggested not depending solely on the ward to satisfy the entire demand for support. "Don't count on just them . . . use your ward, but realize its . . . limitations. And realize even a ward is not going to be enough." (Participant 6)

**Set boundaries.** Three participants discussed the notion of setting boundaries as a way to care for oneself. One participant said there were times when she was tired of talking about her divorce.

I told one woman, "You know I really don't want to talk about this. But I'd like to talk about anything else." And then I thought that was really stupid . . . what if she brings up something else, but she told me about her kids. (Participant 3)

Another woman reported that she needed to set a boundary with her time when it came to serving in church.

When I got divorced I had like three callings at the time and a visiting teaching assignment of four people. And for a short while I was trying to do it all, and people were like going to the bishop, and telling him that they were mad about how many callings I had. And he was like, "We told her we will release her as soon as she says, but she doesn't want to." Well finally I hit the point where I'm like, okay, I need a break. So when I, when I said I was ready I got released from those all immediately including my visiting teaching. I've never not had a visiting teaching assignment. (Participant 6)

**Use your faith.** Four out of the six participants referred to focusing on different aspects of their religious beliefs and practices to support themselves. One participant reported feeling supported as she relied on her belief in God to help her through what was happening. "It doesn't

matter what is going on around you. Who says what or what is happening. [God] is so intimately aware of you. I think it does get better . . . there is strength for you and there's strength through you and strength through God.”

Another participant reported feeling supported as she followed the counsel of her leaders. “Stay really close to your leaders and get all the support and help you can from them.”

(Participant 2) One participant talked about the value she saw in maintaining her own individual covenants since her marriage covenants had been broken. “Just maintain your covenants and you will have peace and I did. Because I put all my focus on . . . I'm going to maintain my covenants no matter what.” (Participant 4) The participants encouraged women who might find themselves in the same situation to put themselves first by advocating for themselves, setting boundaries, and leaning on their faith in God and church doctrine.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

As Bahr and Jacobson’s 2010 research states, the divorce gap is narrowing between LDS members and their non-religious peers (as cited in Chadwick, Top, & McClendon, 2010). However, in the Mormon faith there is a strong emphasis on marriage and its sanctity. While the LDS church does not condone divorce, certain accommodations are made for special circumstances. Stigma surrounding divorce exists in many religious organizations (Jenkins, 2010) including the LDS church.

Considering these beliefs, this study sought to understand how LDS women experienced community support as they navigated the stages of divorce. The stages of divorced used in this study are the deliberation phase, transition phase, and the recovery and post-dissolution stage (Lyon, Silverman, Howe, Bishop, & Armstrong, 1985; Goldberg, 1989). Several participants reported feeling like a failure throughout the stages of divorce. However, there were few clear

trends related to level of support and the stages. Sometimes participants were unclear when certain examples of support happened. During the sections of the interview that asked about advice, participants would tell examples of community support, but they would not define what stage it happened. At times when participants were describing an example of community support that illustrated one stage it sounded like it fit better in another.

Using the stages provided a framework to conceptualize the study, but it yielded few clear patterns in the analysis of the data. To some extent the stages of divorce did not appear to be a useful conceptualization for participants given that many would tell their full experience regardless of the interview being organized in stages.

Six divorced LDS women were interviewed. The following themes emerged: (a) perceptions of failure, (b) where do I belong, (c) support from the overall community, (d) lack of support, (e) additional forms of support needed in this process, and (f) how can I care for myself during this time.

In examining the results, a theme of participant's asking why they had to endure this failure was observed. The statement of "I did everything right!" was apparent in this study and in Cummings' research (2015). Many participants reported feeling embarrassed because they did follow what was taught in the LDS faith regarding marriage and divorce, and their marriage still fell apart. They were worried they were going to be perceived differently. And some participants did feel like they were treated differently as a result of their new status of divorced. This finding is consistent with studies of other faiths that found being divorced might be seen as a personal failure (Glass & Levchak, 2014; Arkes, 2015; Weaver & Schofield, 2015).

One participant referred to the stigma surrounding divorce as "the dirty D word." She reported that her fear of the community judging her negatively was not realized; she felt

supported. This response mirrors what church members are counseled to do, which is to encourage and support one another when divorce occurs in the community (lds.org, 2012).

Participants cited many different ways they felt supported by their community.

Regarding support, participants described how they felt supported by their community, specifically church leaders and members. The majority of participants discussed feeling supported in stages two and three, while in stage one they had yet to communicate their decision to divorce. Many participants described their community as creating a sanctuary to help them through the difficulties of divorce just as Greeff and Van Der Merwe (2004) research suggests.

At times the community was a secure base, and leaders provided comfort and support as participants navigated through the uncertain waters of divorce in the LDS religion. While all of the participants felt supported in some way there was also at theme of supporting oneself through being a part of the community. This is consistent with Landau's 2010 research that examined how the community can be supported just as much as the individual. Many participants in this study were assisting their ward by serving in callings or sharing their stories with other women going through a similar experience.

As in the research of Mattson and Scharman (1994) those who found support also faced a lack of support. Five out of the six participants experienced church leaders and church members as not helpful. Half of the participants did not receive support from their church leaders during the deliberation (first stage) leading up to their divorce. This appeared to be an emotionally tense point in the decision to divorce that was potentially aggravated by the dismissive attitude of leaders. Jenkins' 2010 research highlighted the negative impact members and church leaders can have; she described how a congregation scrutinized their minister as a result of his divorce (Jenkins, 2010). Participants in both studies felt judged by their communities in ways such as

gossip, unsolicited advice, and singling out.

All participants offered suggestions of what could be done differently to help and support women in the divorce process. Some of the ideas were premarital and postmarital education, support groups, Sunday school lessons about the divorce process, and resources for members about how the divorce process works in the LDS church. According to Jenkins (2010), even religions that do not view divorce positively offer aid in the forms of support groups, grief classes or websites.

While all participants reported feeling supported, the advice they had to give to their communities included giving support in both emotional and practical ways and being specific when offering help. Because divorce is not widely discussed in the LDS church, more than one participant wanted concrete guidance. Participants described wanting clear answers to questions such as, “Can I date while I am separated?” or “What will be the spiritual ramifications of my divorce?”

More than one participant expressed the desire for a support group for LDS divorced women. It is curious that the LDS church does not have a website specifically devoted to members who are divorced when the church has resources for other life challenges. For example, there are LDS websites of support for how to be a gay, practicing member of the church and how to overcome various addictions. Divorced members of the church might feel an increase in the shame of divorce because there are resources for these issues but not divorce.

While the participants gave much advice to the community, there was also advice given to divorced LDS women such as advocating for yourself, setting boundaries, and using one’s faith to care for oneself. This subtopic of advice as it pertains to LDS women supporting themselves speaks to the resilience of the participants. They used their resources to bolster

themselves through the tests that their community presented to them.

The inquiry for this research was structured around the stages of divorce. As was mentioned in chapter two, the research question was formatted this way to determine if the level of community support varied at each stage. A review of the data illustrates how most participants received the least amount of community support during the first stage of divorce. If the decision to divorce has not yet been communicated to the partner, the chance that the community would be aware is small. Participants reported feeling varying levels of support once they made the decision to divorce in stages two and three.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of the major limitations of the study is that the researcher is a female member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Bracketing was used to prevent the researcher's experience from overshadowing the participants' voices. Because the researcher is an active member of the LDS religion, she was concerned about giving equal weight to the voices that felt supported and the voices that did not feel supported. In an effort to create balance she might initially have given too much weight on either side in an effort to counteract positive with negative. Through bracketing the researcher was able to filter some of this bias and present the description of the phenomenon.

The researcher did not plan to reveal her LDS affiliation but disclosed it one time when a participant asked how she obtained certain recruitment information. This could have made it easier to disclose because the researcher was familiar with the culture and religious implications of divorce. However, the participant might have been more cautious to filter language to not to make the church look bad.

The small sample size—six women and the methods of sampling were other limitations

to the study. The purpose of phenomenological research is not generalizing data from the study but to add rich descriptive information about the phenomenon. Therefore, having a small sample size and methods of sampling could limit the amount of description possible.

A potential explanation of the small sample size is due to the subject matter of the study. As has been mentioned divorce in the LDS religion is a difficult topic that might discourage participation due to feelings of shame. In addition, some participants were self-selected and may have already been interested in the topic based on past experience. This study only interviewed women who were active members of their congregations. Having women who remained in the church through their divorce may have limited access to women who felt less supported.

### **Implications for Divorced Female LDS Members**

For many people divorce is a normative life cycle event. While the number of divorced LDS members has increased, this topic is seldom mentioned in the community. The participants of this study displayed courage as they described their experience with the phenomenon that is so common to so many and so foreign to LDS members.

Church members are taught to follow Christ's perfect example and when one falls short sometimes it can lead to feelings of guilt or shame. Church doctrine teaches that all are expected to fall short. However, that does not prevent members from self-shaming. Potentially shame can prevent one from reaching out for support and perpetuate feelings of failure. Participants might have questioned where they belonged, because they did not adhere to the "norm." Feelings of shame might prevent them from reaching out because they tell themselves they do not deserve acceptance or aid. Shame could prevent divorced women from feeling settled after this transition. The emotion of shame could have intensified depending on the level of community support experienced. The level of shame felt by participants could also have informed the advice they

gave to other divorced LDS women and the community. Depending on the level of shame experienced, participants might advocate for others to reach out for support or protectively set boundaries.

Because divorce is not widely discussed in the LDS faith, many of these participants had to blaze their own trails to readjust after the divorce. To do this, they had to try a variety of techniques even if it meant going against social mores. For example one participant spoke of going up the ladder of authority to find a church leader who would give her emotional relief and answer doctrinal questions. While this is not breaking any overt rules, it is unorthodox. Members do not commonly ask to meet with certain church leaders besides their bishop.

This was one of the risks participants were willing to take to feel support from their community. At times there appeared to be this atmosphere of feeling unsettled in this role as participants navigated this uncertain territory trying to reach a new normal.

There are two principles in the church that tend to lead to self-neglect. One is the principle of service; all members are instructed to be actively engaged in serving others. The other principle is self-sufficiency. Both principles influence a common misconception that it is improper to ask others for help. Doctrinally, members are taught to follow Christ's example of selfless service and be self-sufficient. However, sometimes the message gets misconstrued as one should not need help. Consequently, when a request for help is sent, that means others need to sacrifice while the person helped does not serve.

Therefore, it is acceptable for members of the community to provide service if they want to, but asking for help goes against covert rules. One of the themes that participants highlighted was that they wanted members to be proactive in giving support but did not report being active in asking for support. Participants reported letting people serve them, but they did not report being

specific in their needs. One of the reasons for this could be participant's reports of not wanting to be a charity case or "project." It could be helpful for either a community leader or women going through the stages of divorce to converse about what her needs are once the second stage of divorce begins. It might open the lines of communication and help the individual confront feeling like a burden.

The LDS Church is similar to other Christian religions in assigning values to certain choices. For example, marriage is good; divorce is bad. Through the results of this study, it is clear that divorce is much more complicated than good or bad. Participant reported experiencing a wide range of emotions and levels of support. Often times it easier to put things in a category to make more sense out of them. When the church engages in simplistic categories, understanding of a complicated situation can suffer.

The communities' perceptions of divorce very likely influence the level of community support that participants experienced. If the majority of the community disapproves of divorce, that might lead church members to not offer support. At the same time, if the community accepts divorce, church members might be more likely to give support. Almost all participants reported a mixture of helpful and unhelpful experiences, which suggests that the community's perception of divorce is mixed.

### **Implications for the LDS Church**

One participant reported following a recipe, of having done everything right and still having her marriage end in divorce. She had been under the impression that if she did everything right, she would have a successful marriage. The doctrine of the LDS church does emphasize that keeping commandments and covenants will lead to happiness, but perhaps it is important for the religion to continue to highlight that happiness might not be constant or immediate. In

addition, in a partnership, like marriage, one can keep their covenants and commandments but their partner has agency to do as they please.

Participants also reported being fearful about the response of others, embarrassed about divorce, rejected from their ward, and awkward in the role of divorced LDS woman. Thus, it would be important for members of the community and church leaders to be sensitive to feelings of divorcing members and do as instructed “to lift and to help”(LDS.org). When offering support and voicing opinions in the community, it is important to realize that there are those who were divorced, and who feel as if they did not have a choice due to their partner’s behavior. Additionally, being mindful of lesson content as it impacts divorced members would be helpful.

Standardized support and instruction for the LDS divorce process was mentioned by two participants as something that would be helpful to supplement the support received from their community and leaders. The church has websites and support groups for addictions, yet there does not currently exist a website or support groups for members experiencing a divorce. One participant called on the church to create standardized guidance about what she can or cannot do when going through a divorce and what she needs to do to be “right” ecclesiastically.

Participants described how helpful it would be for the community to be specific in ways they can help. As one participant expressed, she is far less likely to take someone up on a passive offer of “Is there anything that we can do for you?” This offer is often extended in LDS interactions. However, there is a covert rule of not appearing to need help. Hence, according to participants it is more helpful for members to take initiative of being helpful instead of just offering. Regardless, leaders and members should continue to check in or and follow up to ensure that needs of practical and emotional support are being met.

There was a conflicting message, in that one participant said she appreciated questions

being asked, however other participants warned against prying. In these situations, it might be advisable for church members to ask the divorcing individual if she would like to talk about the experience.

### **Clinical Implications**

These findings offer understanding to therapists, LDS and non-LDS alike, working with LDS women navigating the stages of divorce. First, the research highlights how experiencing a divorce for an LDS woman can be emotionally difficult. They might experience feelings of “I did everything right and I am still getting a divorce” or “People will see me as a failure.” Additionally there might be feelings of awkwardness in trying to establish a new social role as a divorced LDS woman. As a clinician it would be important to make a space for the client to discuss and process what makes her think she is a failure. Those in the community could reinforce an idea of failure, but there are things that could negate it. Asking the client about how her faith community challenges and affirms a sense of failure could be a good question. It would be important for the clinician to sit with the feelings of failure and shame and validate them. There is a cultural expectation that positive emotions, are the only feelings LDS members should exude. Thus, when one is not doing well, it leads to pushing down of emotions that are then covered up with an automatic response that invalidates the current experience. Validating feelings that client’s might perceive as difficult, could prevent them from dismissing them in the future. It would be beneficial to address self-care especially when the client feels the community is insensitive to her situation. Some participants reported still having feelings of failure even in the third stage of divorce. Thus, it would be important for therapists to realize that these feeling of failure might not subside quickly. There might be a lot of uncertainty and second-guessing, since previously clients might have felt like they “did everything right,” only to be in uncharted

territory.

Second, it is important for therapists to realize the complicated environment that divorced, female, LDS clients might find themselves in. Clients might simultaneously feel supported by some parts of their community, but feel a complete lack of support by other parts. Almost all participants felt varied levels of support from their church. There was not a monolithic response. Despite times of support, clients might feel they don't belong, and still want to find a place in that community and feel accepted as a divorced member.

Therapists should ask about the times a client felt supported and the times when she did not and what kind of messages she internalized from the responses. Therapists might need to ask clients how they can begin to feel more at home in their communities with their new identity. Therapists might need to encourage clients to use the resources available to them in their wards even if it means that they might have more attention on them. Their religious community as a sources of support is something they can use as a coping skill.

Family is central in the LDS faith and is frequently discussed in church lessons. To members of the LDS faith there is a central belief that marital and family relationship solemnized in LDS temples continue after this life. Therefore, dissolving that bond is not something that is taken lightly. LDS members are encouraged to support those in their communities with or without a crisis. Congregations are often organized by families or single adults. In congregations that consist of single adults there is much emphasis on marriage. However, in congregations that consist of families it is common for there to be talks or lessons on strengthening marriage and family. Clinicians need to realize that women in this position might constantly be receiving covert feedback of you "don't belong because you are not in a family." Yet, that does not mean that members will want to leave their faith tradition. If a clinician suggests that it might be more

helpful to leave their faith tradition off of the stigma, he or she might risk alienating their client. If a clinician sees the community as doing more harm than good, a better question to ask clients might be what helps you stay in the community? Just because a woman is navigating stages of divorce and experiencing stigma does not mean that she wants to leave her community. Thus, it might be hard when members going through this process feel like they have done this to others but do not feel like they are getting the same treatment in return.

Of course, not all of these findings are generalizable. Clinicians could use the results of the study in their work with LDS female members as a conversation point. They might be able to ask questions in the following format, “According to an article I read about LDS women going through the stages of divorce, the church offers divorcing members varying levels of support. Does this fit with your experience?” Clinicians who find themselves working with divorced LDS women could use the questions in the interview guide to discuss and process the level of community support experienced by clients if relevant to therapeutic goals.

### **Areas of Future research**

A number of areas for further research surfaced. One of these was touched on by participants during data collection. However, there was not enough concrete information to create a theme. Some participants reported how the community’s response affected their children. Beliefs and expectation from the community toward participants’ children evoked concern. An area of future research would be to examine the experience of community support LDS children in encounter when their parents’ divorce.

The focus of this study was women, thus it would be interesting to examine men’s experience with the community as they navigate the stages of divorce. From there, further research could be done to determine if there are any similarities or differences between men and

women. Additional studies could examine the level of community support when LDS members experience life cycle events that are not deemed acceptable such as having a child out of wedlock or engaging in substance abuse. Existing research on the level of community support experienced by member when divorcing is sparse. Therefore, more in-depth research could be done in different faiths to determine the level of community support experienced by women when they decide to divorce.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study examined the experience of community support felt by LDS women as they navigated the stages of divorce. Participants felt varying levels of support from their community as they experienced the divorce process. Communities could do a number of things to strengthen their support of divorcing members, including providing more emotional and practical support, writing materials explaining what it means to be a separated or divorced member of the church, and having support groups for those members who have undergone a divorce. The research addressed a complicated topic in a religion where the number of people getting divorced is growing. Varying support is available to those encountering this phenomenon.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

**Research Question:** What is the lived experience of LDS women's community support when going through the stages of divorce?

Participation Requirements:

- A female member of the LDS church
- Married in the temple
- Participant initiated the divorce
- Divorced for at least six months
- Not remarried to the divorced spouse

Interview Guide (Semi-Structured)

#### 1. Introduction and Permission/Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The purpose of this interview is to understand the experience of community support encountered by LDS women when they decide to divorce. The interview should take between 30-45 minutes to complete. Our conversation will be recorded for accuracy and later transcribed. Identifying information will be removed from the transcript in order to protect your privacy and confidentiality. Once the transcription is complete, I will send a copy to you to read over to see if there is anything else you would like to add or change. As my way of saying thanks, a \$25 Visa gift card will be given to you at the end of the interview. If you withdraw from the interview for any reason you will not be penalized. Do I have your permission to record?.

#### 2. Demographic Questions:

a. Age \_\_\_\_\_ ?

- b. Years married \_\_\_\_\_?
- c. Number of children \_\_\_\_\_?
- d. How many years a member of the LDS church?
- e. Months/years divorced \_\_\_\_\_?
- f. Please briefly explain, in approximately four sentences, why you decided to divorce?

### 3. First Stage of Divorce: Preparation/Decision Making Phase

The first stage is when the idea for divorce first surfaces.

- a. Please describe to me what you experienced emotionally when you were going through this first stage of divorce?
- b. Who in the church community did you talk to?
- c. Did anyone in the church community approach you wanting to talk about your decision?
- d. How would you describe the reactions you received from the church community?
- e. What was your experience with those reactions?

### 4. Second Stage of Divorce: Transition

During this phase partners are starting to involve the legal system in order to make their decision to divorce official.

- a. Could you describe to me what you experienced emotionally when you were going through this second stage of divorce?
- b. Who in the church community did you talk to?
- c. Who in the church community approached you wanting to talk about your decision?
- d. How would you describe the reactions you received?
- e. How did you experience those reactions?

### 5. Third Stage of Divorce: Recovery

This is the stage where both partners in the relationships are able to start life separately.

a. Could you describe to me what you experienced emotionally when you were going through this third stage of divorce?

b. Who in the church community did you talk to?

c. Who in the church community approached you wanting to talk about your decision?

d. How would you describe the reaction you received?

e. What was your experience with those reactions?

6. In Conclusion

a. What was helpful from the community?

b. What was not helpful from the community?

c. What do you wish would have been done differently?

- Ecclesiastical leaders (clergy)
- Fellow Ward Members
- Church wide level
- Anyone else on the LDS community

d. What advice would you give to the community in regard to supporting an LDS woman through a divorce?

- Ecclesiastical leaders (clergy)
- Fellow Ward Members
- Church wide level
- Anyone else on the LDS community

e. What advice would you give to an LDS woman going through a divorce?

- And in regard to her LDS community?

Thank you for your time and participation in this interview. I just want to check to see if there was anything that you wanted to add or if there was anything that was unclear. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me.

## Appendix B

## Consent Form

**VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE  
UNIVERSITY****Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects  
Involving Human Subjects****Title of Project: The Experience of Community Support when  
LDS Women Decide to Divorce**

**Investigator: Abigail Burton (Co-investigator and graduate  
student in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program)  
[fisher4@vt.edu](mailto:fisher4@vt.edu) 619-392-4807**

**I. Purpose of this Research Project**

For my thesis I am conducting a qualitative study of the lived experience of female members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS faith) when going through the different stages of divorce. I will be gathering data through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The purpose of conducting this research study is to describe the perceived level of community support experienced by a LDS woman when her church community learns that she is divorcing. Community support will be defined here as whether a participant felt stigmatized or supported; the experience of the participant could be positive, negative, or mixed. This study aims to help educate those in the LDS community as well as clinicians about the experience of divorce.

**II. Procedures**

Should you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in one face to face interview or one phone interview. Both will be audio recorded. The interview will take between 30-

45 minutes. Should you agree to a in person interview it will take place at a mutually agreed upon location. No matter what the location the interview will take place in privacy behind closed doors. Participants are expected to provide their own transportation to and from the interview site.

### **III. Risks**

The interview requires you to discuss your life when you were going through the stages of divorce. This could potentially be difficult because of the emotional pain that can be associated with divorce. If at any point in this process you find it too emotionally difficult to continue you may request to stop the interview without penalty. Included below are a list of mental health agencies should you wish to initiate services due to the subject matter of the interview.

LDS Family Services [\(301\) 694-5896](tel:3016945896)

Jonah Green and Associates, LLC [\(301\) 466-9526](tel:3014669526)

### **IV. Benefits**

One of the benefits of participating in this study is that it will help society know more about

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LDS women's experience with divorce in their community. This perspective could be particularly beneficially to mental health professionals. Another potential benefit is the community learning from the participant's story and making appropriate changes where needed.

No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

## **V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Data from the interview will be audio recorded and stored on my password protected personal computer. No identifying information besides first names will be used in the interview. At no time will the researcher release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent. The recording will be erased when all useful information from the recording has been used to revise the interview guide.

The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

In some situations, it may be necessary for the researcher to break confidentiality. If the researcher has reason to suspect that a child or an elderly or vulnerable adult is/was abused or neglected or that a person poses a threat of harm to others or herself, the researcher is required by Virginia State law to notify the appropriate authorities.

## **VI. Compensation**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

## **VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a subject should not continue as a subject.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you

will be compensated for the portion of the project completed in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

### **VIII. Questions or Concerns**

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board Project No. 16-495 Approved July 21, 2016 to June 9, 2017

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore at [moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu) or (540) 231-4991.

### **IX. Subject's Consent**

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_ Subject signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject printed name

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*(Note: each subject must be provided a copy of this form. In addition, the IRB office may stamp its approval on the consent document(s) you submit and return the stamped version to you for use in consenting subjects; therefore, ensure each consent document you submit is ready to be read and signed by subjects.)*

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

**Recruitment Script**

Hello!

I am now recruiting for a study exploring the level of community support LDS women experience as they go through a divorce. This thesis study is being conducted to satisfy program requirements for a master's degree in human development with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech. The purpose of conducting this research study is to describe the perceived level of community support experienced by LDS women when her church community learns that she is divorcing. Community support will be defined here as whether a participant felt stigmatized or supported; the experience of the participant could be positive, negative, or mixed. This study aims to help educate those in the LDS community as well as clinicians about the experience of divorce.

Participant eligibility includes:

- Female member of the LDS church
- Marriage was in the temple
- Divorced for at least 1 year and no more than 5 years

What is involved in the study?

- An in-person interview or phone interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The researcher will ask questions about your experience with your LDS community during each stage of divorce.

Potential benefits of the study include: Helping society know more about LDS women's experience with divorce in their community. This perspective could be particularly beneficial to mental health professionals as they help LDS women who are contemplating or experiencing divorce. Another potential benefit is the community learning from your story and making appropriate changes where needed to better support divorcing LDS women.

Potential risks of the study include: The interview requires the participant to discuss her life when she was going through the stages of divorce. This could potentially be difficult for the participants because of the emotional pain that can be associated with divorce. There is also a potential of breach in confidentiality. However, every effort will be made to ensure privacy. The participant will be given the opportunity to stop the interview if at any point she finds it too emotionally difficult. On the consent form there will be referrals for mental health services should the participant feel like she would like to receive services.

I invite you to participate in this study. If you are interested in this trial study, please contact me at [fisher4@vt.edu](mailto:fisher4@vt.edu) or (619) 392-4807.

Thank you!

## Appendix D

### Bracketing

What is it like to get divorced? I have no idea, especially in the LDS community. Before I began this process I thought that participants would feel more stigma than support due to two reasons. First, I heard more stories or comments of stigma from members. In one ward I was in women shared their experiences of how they were trying to make sense of their divorce and the bitterness and confusion the situation created. Growing up it was not uncommon for me to hear members' gossip or give their opinion about those going through the divorce process. Second, from a doctrinal sense the church teaches that divorce should be avoided. The evidence that they cite is ancient scripture and modern day revelation.

As I became more entrenched in this process there was the realization that it was both. Participants felt stigmatized and supported. As a member of the community it was relieving to hear the times when participants told of the Christian ways that members offered support. Other times it was embarrassing to hear the lack of support that participants were met with. When writing about the participants' experience, I was sometimes concerned about how others who read my research might unfairly judge the church or participants. Through bracketing, I came to the realization that my job as the researcher is to report the events as the participants described them. I cannot control the opinions of future readers. At times when I was writing the discussion section I was curious if the feedback and interpretation of the data is fair. Again, there was the realization that this is the opinion of the researcher and I cannot cover all perspectives of the phenomenon being examined. Through bracketing I was able to present a more unbiased version of my data.