Introdution

Women within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS] offer an instructive lens through which to view how maternal practices, specifically childbirth and raising children, shape traditional religious women and contribute to their religious devotion. Drawing upon an ethnographic study, this essay explores how maternal practices are religious practices that act to alter the interior of women, particularly women from an American LDS community I worked with. As such, they are pedagogical tools that contribute to subjectivity, or personhood, and have the potential to transform women into more pious subjects. After introducing the LDS church, and the ethnographic and methodological specifics of my study, this essay will: examine pedagogies of maternity as religious praxis and explore the ensuing theoretical implications; analyze notions of agency and subjectivity, and reflect on the pedagogies and transformative gifts of parenthood.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

There are currently over thirteen million Latter-day Saints throughout the world. One sociologist, Rodney Stark, has made the controversial prediction that if the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to grow at its current rate that it will be on track to becoming the next major world religion. Headquartered in Salt Lake City, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints now employs hundreds of men and women to help administer the affairs of the church. With over 52,000 full-time missionaries serving in hundreds of locations, the church has continued to grow at an astonishing pace. There are members of the LDS church residing in 160 countries around the world, and in 2005
more than 240,000 people joined the LDS church. The LDS Church is currently led by Thomas S. Monson, who was named the sixteenth President of the LDS church on February 4, 2008 at the age of eighty.  

**Ethnographic Particularities**

My ethnography focuses on a community of Latter-day Saints, who are located within four wards (congregations), each adjacent to one another in a suburban environment in northern California. Although my field notes are comprised of Sunday services in one ward, my interviewees came from the members of several of the wards bordering the congregation that I observed, which altogether only comprises about 10 square miles. For confidentiality reasons and ease of reading, I refer to the community as Bay Town.

Within the LDS church, wards are constructed by geographical boundaries, upon the approval of church leaders in Salt Lake City, Utah. Thus, members are discouraged from attending congregations if they do not live within the geographical boundaries. Ward members are brought together by geography and expected to build a cohesive congregation, despite differences. Of course, geography can produce many similarities, mainly relating to socio-economic variances, which might be reflected in racial and ethnic diversity, or lack thereof.

The LDS community I studied in Bay Town, California consists of an array of “families”, including those who are single, single parents, widows, traditional families, and couples without children. While a typical congregation consists of approximately 240-350 members, only about 45-50% attend weekly services. The ward I attended has about 95 families, of which roughly 45 attend weekly church services; and it is
approximately 85% Caucasian, mostly middle-aged and middle-class. There are some variations in age, racial and ethnic background, and class, but the average congregant is a white, middle-class, family member in the throws of raising children. The racial and ethnic diversity of the particular LDS community that I worked with, albeit slight, consists of families who are Chinese, African, African American, Tongan, South American, Mexican, Malaysian, and Vietnamese. While my interviews consisted of both women and men inside and outside of the Bay Town ward I attended, my observations of Sunday meetings came solely from this particular ward.

Like any social group, each ward has its own culture, a subtle form of implicitly agreed upon mores. These communal mores are also informed by the larger LDS society within the U.S., and are an important source for glimpsing the culture produced by those that constitute the community.\(^7\) The ward and community that I worked with portrayed a high level of integration with the local community, including through work, volunteerism, school, and extracurricular activities.

**Methodology**

I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-one women and fifteen men, ranging in ages from 27 to 79. The women and men had varying family situations, from those who are single and never married, to those in blended families, divorced, widowed or both. Most interviewees have children. The socioeconomic status of these subjects were mostly middle-class but a few were working class or upper-middle class. Overall, there was a continuum of different life experiences. Because of the complementary gender norms embedded within the LDS cosmology, I worked with both men and women for clarity towards gaining a wider picture of the community, while primarily focusing upon
women. Insights and conversations with the men helped delineate differences, similarities and nuances probably not apparent when exclusively interviewing women.

**Latter-day Saint Gendered Theology**

To understand why maternal practices are considered acts of piety for LDS women, it is necessary to recognize the primacy of the belief in a pre- and post-mortal existence, and the belief in the “mutuality of spiritual and material worlds.”

Latter-day Saints believe that in a pre-mortal existence, or an afterlife, ‘spirits’ were created from matter that had existed forever. In this way, “human spirit, or “intelligence,” is eternal, without “a beginning or an end.” For Latter-day Saints the belief in a pre- and post-mortal existence includes gods who create spirits, which become embodied and, in turn, create additional beings. In this way, subjectivity, or personhood, does not change; it merely becomes embodied. According to LDS belief, spirits need bodies to progress towards eventual deification, which is dependent upon a male/female partnership, or what the LDS call “eternal marriage.”

Within the pre-mortal construct, or the life before birth, Latter-day Saints believe that gendered spirits gathered to hear and vote on a plan that included corporeality, moral agency, redemption through Jesus, and an eventual return to live with God. According to LDS belief, God unveiled His plan for humans to become embodied and live on the earth so that they could prove themselves by using moral agency to obey God. For the LDS, the fall was part of God’s plan, and since humans would exist within a fallen world (subject to temptations and sin), it was important to provide a way for them to become pious enough to return to live with God. The role of Jesus as a savior was proposed as a way to redeem the sinful nature of humankind.
Latter-day Saints believe that agency, which is typically defined by feminist theorists as the ability to act “freely” (a concept I will critique below), is a principle that existed before mortality, is essential to existence, and that mortal or human agency was enabled by Jesus’ atonement.\(^{13}\) Most Latter-day Saints define agency differently than many feminist theorists have traditionally defined it. For the LDS, agency is the ability to choose between obedience and disobedience to God. During this same pre-mortal meeting, where God revealed God’s plan, Lucifer offered an alternate plan, according to the LDS, which was to compel humans to obey God, thereby limiting their moral agency. The two plans were voted on. The LDS believe a war in heaven ensued, where Lucifer and the spirits who voted with him, about one-third of the spirits who existed within the pre-mortal world, were cast out and denied the opportunity for embodiment.\(^{14}\)

For the LDS, this set in motion the ongoing battle between good and evil where Lucifer began his never ending attempt to sway humans away from God.\(^{15}\) In short, Latter-day Saints believe in pre- and post- existences where subjectivity, or personhood, does not change, but becomes embodied: gendered spirits fought in a pre-mortal existence to come to earth and become embodied to someday progress to become gods and goddesses in a post-mortal existence. As gods and goddesses, with their kin connected to them forever, men and women continue the process of creating spirit children. This perpetual cycle of partnering and reproduction makes post-mortal existence, or an afterlife, necessary.

The eschatological beliefs of the LDS center upon a post-mortal existence that includes three kingdoms or ‘degrees of glory,’ which are hierarchically organized.\(^{16}\) The belief in three kingdoms of glory within the post-mortal realm is a central aspect of LDS
cosmology. They are referred to as the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms. The celestial kingdom is considered to be the “highest” kingdom where the most pious will go after their death to live with Heavenly parents. The terrestrial is for those who “were good people on earth, but they did not have faith in Jesus and did not obey all of the commandments.” The telestial kingdom, considered the “lowest” kingdom, is for those who did not obey God’s commandments while living in the mortal world and who have no desire to do so.

Within the highest kingdom, the celestial kingdom, the LDS also believe that there are three degrees of glory, and exaltation is considered the highest degree of glory within the highest kingdom. Exaltation, according to Latter-day Saint belief, is the ability to eventually become gods and goddesses, which is made possible by the creation and perpetuity of spiritual offspring, which can include literal offspring and adoptive children. Future progeny follow the same process as mortals, by vast kinship networks, that are bound together forever by a covenant with God, which is made within an LDS temple. Thus, in part, one becomes a god or goddess by the adoption or creation and production of offspring. Reproduction, within a covenant marriage, is central to exaltation for Latter-day Saints.

Due to the primacy of marriage and reproduction, exaltation requires reciprocity between men and women; neither may be exalted without the other. While individuals may be saved, or attain salvation alone, to become exalted men and women, they are reliant on one another. Contrary to previous observations, men may not reach exaltation without women, and vice versa. Past LDS church President, Gordon B. Hinckley explains, “in attaining the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom, the man
cannot enter without the woman, neither can the woman enter without the man. The two are inseparable as husband and wife in eligibility for that highest degree of glory."  

Thus, exaltation is dependent upon interdependence between men and women. Interdependence must be formally recognized by participating in a marriage ceremony within a LDS temple. During this ceremony, men and women are married “for time and all eternity” or “sealed” together. The marriage covenant continues past death into the post-mortal world. Within the LDS religion, marriage in an LDS Temple is necessary in order to attain godhood.

The marriage ceremony within the LDS temple solidifies the cosmological belief in an after life because a temple marriage remains in effect past the mortal existence, if both partners live piously. Belief in the continual bonds of kinship is one of the most important theological principles within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Because the LDS believe that families can be bound together beyond the mortal world, the concept of a Mother and Father in Heaven as divine parents exemplifies the ultimate model of an ‘eternal family,’ and provides a framework, based upon individual parental duties, that undergirds the earthly family.

Within contemporary LDS culture, the Heavenly Mother is not necessarily a symbol of women’s autonomous value. Her value is derived within the realm of kinship and marriage; she is the essential female component within a system that believes that marital and parental interdependence of men and women is the only way to obtain exaltation. As Heeren, Lindsey, and Mason have observed, because of the highly distinct gender notions that Latter-day Saints claim as divinely instituted within patriarchy, Heavenly Mother appears “as a superior god for women’s specific functions,” and as such
“patriarchy and belief in a goddess go hand-in-hand in the Mormon case.” In this way, most contemporary Latter-day Saints do not look to Mother in Heaven as a model for women’s liberatory possibilities, but as a model of interdependence within a highly gendered patriarchal order that takes the possibility of family deification as its central mortal goal.

As should be clear, the concept of family, including gender notions, is critical to LDS theology. At the heart of LDS belief is the idea that men and women are radically different from one another and that they can become perfected only through their ongoing interdependence. The significance of an existence before birth and after life is important because of the gendered cosmology, or worldview, within the LDS faith. Gender remains consistent for persons before birth, during their life on earth, and in the after life.

Parental roles, framed by world views and faith, are highly distinctive and categorized along gender lines; humans are considered able to reach their greatest spiritual potential by engaging in maternal practices. The LDS I worked with consider embodied practices of maternity one way of achieving spiritual growth and maintaining religious devotion. They understand childbirth and parenting, within a nuclear family, as pedagogical processes that have the potential to train their interior into pious shapes.

Maternity, or childbirth, is fundamental to understanding the LDS female. Bearing children within the nuclear family is one of the highest priorities for most LDS women. The primacy of the heterosexual family and a commitment to bearing multiple children has always been central for LDS church members. For the women I studied, marriage presupposes children, and the ideal family consists of a husband, wife and children, although this is far from some women’s lived reality. Regardless of marital
status, racial or ethnic background, political affiliation, educational level, age or economic circumstances, virtually every woman I worked with expressed the importance of bearing and raising children, even the self-identified feminists. Tellingly, even those women who were not married or did not have children reiterated the importance of family and children. Similarly, the men I studied, with one exception, named family and children as their highest priority. These LDS members find their greatest potential through maternal, paternal, and parental practices within an explicit patriarchal family.

Both fatherhood and motherhood are considered pedagogical processes which can train one’s mind and/or spirit, although motherhood is emphasized far more often for women than fatherhood is for men within the LDS church. For LDS women, bearing children is not what women do because it is what they are made for; bearing children is how women are transformed into devoted subjects. The goal is to transform oneself into a more pious form, through training that comes from practices of parenting. By using the body as a means of transforming the spirit and mind, these women do not consider themselves to be reduced to their anatomical essence but understand themselves as participating in a physical manifestation of their spiritual potential. 29

**Pedagogies of Maternity**

As I have stated, bearing children is a process that leads to spiritual progress, as it assists the women I worked with in meeting their spiritual potential. The actual physical act of giving birth is a principal way that LDS women embody their tradition. In part, this is how they practice their religion, by bearing and raising children devoted to Godly pursuits.
Having children fulfills a deeply held religious belief that the family is an everlasting unit, instituted prior to birth. Although a heterosexual marriage in an LDS temple, coupled with a lifetime of devoted piety, is the requirement for attaining celestial glory, the implication is that celestial glory is synonymous with progeny that will continue forever. Thus, technically, bearing children is not necessary for attaining Godhood in the next life, although it is widely understood that children are part of the process of becoming divine.\(^\text{30}\)

As should be clear, fecundity or fertility is highly influential in self-formation. These LDS women met their potential, in part, by practicing piety vis-à-vis the body. One of the ways to receive a righteous disposition is to bear children. Anna, an Arab woman in her late twenties explained this to me,

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\text{I would say having children is the most spiritual decision out all of the decisions, or at the top of religious decisions that we make. And we would pray about it if it’s right and I’ve actually had a lot of spiritual feelings about having children and the need to have children. I think religion plays a big part in it too because the whole focus of our religion is bringing children, I feel like it’s important. Bringing children to life and how rewarding it is.}
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For Anna and nearly every woman I encountered, having children is a religious act; the primary concern, even for those that had never been married and did not have children.

These women believe that women who have not had the opportunity to be mothers “in this life,” will have the “blessings” of children in the next life. This belief is comforting to those who have not been able to bear children for various reasons, whether due to the inability to find a suitable marriage partner or because of infertility. Thus, most LDS women believe that every woman has the potential for motherhood in the next life, if she is able to live piously in this one.

Arden, a 38 year old, graduate-educated Caucasian woman who has never married, did not list children or getting married as a top priority when I asked about her
goals or priorities. When I pressed her about the difficulty of being part of a church that focuses so much on family and parenthood, she insisted,

I mother in other ways. I have my nieces and nephews and I don’t feel that I’m missing out at all because I mother in other ways. I know that I’ll have the opportunity to be a mother in the next life, so I’m not worried about it.

Her top priorities were her career and working on the relationships with her extended family, her parents and siblings. However, her own future maternal possibilities also fundamentally inform how she understands herself. Arden went on to explain,

A few weeks ago you and I were talking about a sense of hope, in regards to marriage and family, and I really can’t overemphasize enough for me that that is what grounds me. I don’t have to worry about it, I don’t have to fret about it in this life, I don’t have to be driven by a desire to have a biological child or a desire to somehow feel my life is valuable because I’m attached to someone through marriage. I do not have to feel that way and that is a direct result of my understanding of the after life. I don’t know how I would be without that understanding, but it allows me to be happy with who I am and the way I am. In a way that I don’t think I could be as a member of this church if I didn’t have that hope.

Clearly Arden still holds motherhood as a valuable part of her subjectivity, but she envisions that this is a future event for her, a role that she will embody in another life.

Arden is not focused on trying to find a spouse and create a family because she feels confident that she will have that opportunity in the future. Arden’s attitude seems rare in this religious culture though. Other members of her social circle seemed overly concerned with whether she dates and if she has any prospects for marriage, although Arden indicated that these inquiries have lessened as time goes by. Most of the single women I interviewed seemed quite concerned about finding a spouse and creating a family; Arden was the exception.

Sarah, a graduate-educated Caucasian woman in her fifties, who has never married, placed her number one priority as finding a mate. Her desire for marriage and her lamentation of being single were known within the community. Although she had a stellar career, her greatest desire was to find someone to share her life with. Clearly
beyond the years of being able to reproduce her own children, Sarah still felt the import of family and was actively engaged in trying to actualize this desire. Is Sarah weak and needy? Despite a great career, she only wants to “find a man.” This is certainly one reading of her life. However, this reading forecloses interesting questions and insights about the importance of marriage and family for these LDS women. Marriage, family, and children are all ways these women (and men) meet their greatest potential, embarking upon a pedagogical process, which can potentially reconfigure one into a more pious subject. In this light, Sarah’s desire is one of religious piety, to progress personally.

The diverging commitments and explicit priorities between Arden and Sarah demonstrate the range of responses elicited within a religious system that places a high premium on heterosexual marriage and maternity. For both women, marriage and family are important, but the way they practice their commitment to family and marriage differs radically. Importantly, even for single LDS women, who do not have children, motherhood is a major representation of their subjectivity. They firmly believe that they will have children in the life to come, and thus, maternity is still a primary way they understand themselves, for it embodies a version of their spiritually fulfilled self.

For women who have had children, embodying the ancient command to “multiply and replenish” is one way of becoming pious followers within the LDS church.

Theoretical Implications

Although maternal practices are important for traditional religious women, within the field of religious studies, traditional religious women are often studied and assessed by criteria that do not take the importance of childbirth and child rearing into consideration. This has often resulted in painting women who participate in
unapologetically patriarchal religions as either oppressed or working from within the tradition to change it. Scholars within religion have noted this simple dichotomy. Ann Braude has observed that within U.S. religious history, women need to be approached less as victims or empowered actors but as “meaning-seeking actors who simultaneously shape and are shaped by both the religious systems and the material realities they inhabit.” Similarly, Saba Mahmood, a scholar of anthropology and religion, has called for feminist theoreticians working in the field of religion to find out how women have become pious or devoted and to resist simply looking for acts of resistance within these traditions. Both scholars indicate the need for traditional religious women who sustain patriarchy to be examined without quickly fitting them into a victim/empowerment scheme and to study and take seriously the practices that sustain traditional religions.

Maternity and parenthood are important to women in many religious traditions. Although the focus of my ethnography is on LDS women in the U.S., the critique of Braude and Mahmood is important in order to validate women in all traditional religious cultures. Traditional religious women, whether Muslim, fundamentalist Christian or Roman Catholic would all benefit from the effort of religious scholars to study them by criteria that are germane to their worldview, including maternal practices.

Brenda Brasher, in Godly Women, found that women in two U.S. Christian fundamentalist congregations, Bay Chapel and Mount Olive, considered childrearing within a nuclear family a partial manifestation of their religious devotion. Brasher conducted a six month ethnographic study of both congregations, including the women’s ministry groups, or enclaves, that function outside of institutional channels. By interviewing women who convert to fundamentalism, but had previously affiliated
loosely with Christianity, Brasher is able to attend to motives for women’s participation in traditional religious organizations. Brasher notes that a “sacred canopy” covers congregational life at both locations and that it includes theological ideas that are largely predicated upon gender, which “functions as a sacred partition that literally bifurcates the congregation in two, establishing parallel religious worlds,” that include a symbolic congregational world for men and a symbolic world for women.\(^\text{35}\)

Brasher also found that within the family, gender is structured around complementarities, not unlike other traditional religious cultures, and male headship is touted as the ideal. Submission is encouraged, but is usually interpreted to mean mutual submission between husbands and wives.\(^\text{36}\) Brasher points out that despite the patriarchal rhetoric within the family structure, actual behaviors are much messier and do not lend themselves to easy theorizing.\(^\text{37}\) Family is extremely important within Christian fundamentalism and while individual salvation is sought after, it is conceived within the framework of a nuclear family.\(^\text{38}\)

Contemporary Roman Catholicism, although it is in an interesting phase, still maintains a strong commitment to maternal practices.\(^\text{39}\) Despite the vast differences among members, Catholic belief highly encourages maternal practices, especially procreation. In *Sexing the Church* Aline Kalbian explains that within Roman Catholic cosmology, or worldview, God requires order and order prescribes and describes “what believers perceive as the proper state of relationship in the created universe.”\(^\text{40}\) Within this cosmic vision, gender is at the heart of Roman Catholic order.\(^\text{41}\) This happens at the individual and communal level, and is made normative through theological teachings on marriage and sexuality. In this way, sexual acts and gender derive proper meaning
through the teachings on marriage. This sense of order is based upon a complimentarity model between men and women and humans fulfill their purpose, in part, by living out their normative gender notions. Proper gender roles are designed to play out within the sacrament of marriage, and procreation is the primary purpose of marriage. In this way, Roman Catholic worldview prescribes highly distinct gendered relationships, solidified through the sacrament of marriage, and propelled through procreation, which offer the ultimate model for all of creation to God.

Clearly, there is potential for religious scholars to shed light on an array of traditional religious women by studying and validating maternal practices as part of women’s religious devotion. Although I primarily focus on LDS women within the U.S. in this essay, these findings can be extrapolated out, in a general way, to encourage scholars to take seriously the practices that influence how traditional religious women form their self-reference, or subjectivity.

**Agency and Subjectivity**

To work through the theoretical dilemmas that have been constructed and to better understand women’s piety, feminist theoreticians within religion have been refining the debate of analytical categories of agency and subjectivity. Agency manifests itself through embodiment, an activity potentially with interior components, such as thought processes that may (or may not) occur prior to enactment. Agency consists of actions that lead to the formation of a subject. Thus, subjectivity is a result of embodied knowledges and behaviors, which can contribute to self-reference. Simply put, agency informs subjectivity. Agency has become particularly important and the discussion has taken many forms. Until recently, feminist scholars have rarely questioned an underlying
premise: mainly that agency consists of acts that resist norms. Since resistance has been equated with agency, women’s acts that sustain traditional religions have not been viewed as constituting agentive behavior. Under this construct, women in traditional religions can only exhibit agency when they are rebelling against their traditions. This has resulted in a host of research that examines various ways that women resist, rebel, and subvert their traditions and has left those religious behaviors that sustain, support, and propel patriarchal religions largely unexamined.

Saba Mahmood’s work *Politics of Piety* explicitly deals with the feminist theoretical category of agency. Mahmood aims to shift the analysis of agency within religious practices from a singular focus on resistance toward culturally and religiously specific frameworks that consider both resisting and supporting religious norms as valid examples of agency. Mahmood argues that liberal and progressive politics have become naturalized within the study of gender and that due to the twin commitments of feminist theory, analysis and politics, freedom has become normative to feminism. This has occurred because liberalism has married notions of freedom with the idea that self-fulfillment comes from individual autonomy. Within this framework, as long as one can demonstrate that they are acting autonomously “even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated” as one is thought to be living out one’s “true” desires.

It is difficult to locate autonomy or freedom when one is compliant of norms, even if this is her “true” desire. As a result, within feminist theory, resistance has become valorized as a demonstration of one’s capacity to act freely and enact one’s true desires. Independence, autonomy, and freedom are not necessarily appropriate goals for women who seek out patriarchal religions and actively work to further their agenda. These goals
may run contrary to the way in which they form their subjectivity, or self-reference. Traditional religious women tend to engage in interdependent relationships, either within kinship systems, community, or religious culture. Put simply, these women often understand themselves through connection, not separation. In short, feminist theorists run the risk of projecting a desire for freedom and autonomy upon women who do not necessarily share these goals. For women participating in traditional religious cultures, this is especially problematic because most of their behaviors target supporting and upholding religious norms, not subverting them.

A similar challenge of defining agency as resistance is that feminist theory has also inadvertently obscured knowledge about the subjectivity of traditional women by determining what behaviors and practices contribute to configuring the subject. This is closely related to agency, but differs in important ways. As stated above, agency implies action, action uses the body, and the body helps form a self-reference -- part of a person’s interior (mind or spirit, depending upon the context).

The body has been traditionally devalued within scholarship and feminist theorists have been highly concerned with the denigration of the body. Because women have been typically associated with corporeality and men have been associated with mental capacities, the valorization of embodied action has become an important focal point. Much of Western metaphysics is built upon the dichotomy between mind and body. As many feminist theorists have pointed out, privileging the mind over the body, a la Descartes, has left numerous unexplored areas within a range of disciplines. Some feminist theorists claim that because of Western culture’s high premium upon the interior, women have been disadvantaged to some degree because of their historic
association with embodiment. To address the disparity between research privileging the mind and that of the body, in recent years, the body has become a fruitful area of scholarship.

Saba Mahmood’s work on embodiment is particularly useful as she shifts the analytical framework within feminist theory and religion by examining embodied actions as influential to the formation of subjectivity. Mahmood turns to the body to examine how a range of embodied religious practices form a more pious subject. Mahmood asks how the work of the body helps subjects to be formed by inhabiting and diverging from particular norms. Thus, subjectivity is formed, in part, by bodily comportments that act to train the interior in ways that sustain religious norms. Mahmood is interested in how ethical subjects transform themselves through exterior behaviors that alter their interior. By focusing on how bodily actions train the interior of the Egyptian Muslim women she worked with, she reverses the dichotomy of mind/body.

Drawing on the work of Aristotle, Mahmood asserts that while the interior of the self dictates the exterior behavior, it is the actual behavior of the body (exterior) that transforms the spirit and/or mind (interior). Mahmood draws upon Aristotle’s concept of habitus, which is the idea that excellence is achieved in morals through learned acts that are repeated until they leave an indelible print upon the character of the person. “Thus, moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviors with inward dispositions through the repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues.” Habitus differs from habits in that habits are repeated acts, whereas habitus leaves a permanent mark upon the individual and becomes part of her subjectivity.
Looking specifically at Islamic women who choose to veil, Mahmood contends that the embodied act of veiling transforms the interiority of the Egyptian women she worked with into more pious forms of their selves. The act is transformative, not the desire to act, according to Mahmood. In this analytic move, she places the body as a primary site of analysis and allows for subjectivity to be constituted by practices that sustain religious norms.

I find Mahmood’s rendering of subjectivity helpful because it suggests that a range of embodied behaviors instruct the way that subjects come to be formed, or how their interior is shaped. However, I depart from Mahmood on an important point. While Mahmood implies that the interior (mind and/or spirit) and exterior (body) are in a mutual relationship, her principal focus is on how the women she worked with utilize the body to transform their interiors into more pious subjects. Like the women Mahmood studied, the women I worked with are engaged in a belief system that strongly emphasizes bodily experiences as necessary for attaining piety, but that also strongly emphasizes spiritual experiences as having the potential to alter behavior (bodily acts). While it may seem like a small difference, it would be a monumental point of departure for the LDS women I worked with. For them, both the body and the spirit have the potential to be engaged in a reciprocal pedagogical process that informs their subjectivity.

For example, the women I studied demonstrate how the interior desire to be a mother influences the choice that is made (in most cases) to bear a child. However, the physical act of birthing and raising children can leave an indelible mark upon the self. The interior and exterior are mutually dependent upon one another, in a reciprocal, non-hierarchical fashion. Both the interior and exterior simultaneously influence each
other and encourage the formation of the subject. These women believe that the spirit and the body are engaged in a mutually dependent relationship.

As stated above, the reciprocal relationship between the body and spirit within the LDS religion has its doctrinal roots within the belief in a pre-mortal life where spirits fought a ‘war in heaven’ to be able to enjoy material human experience.\(^{57}\) As such, the spirit could not progress without a material form. The mutuality between spirit and body is also apparent in the LDS belief that after death, humans will have an opportunity to have their ‘spirits’ reunited with their bodies, if they live piously.\(^ {58}\) Corporeality is paramount; spirits struggled for it pre-mortally, they cannot progress to deification without it, and their spirits will be re-embodied in the post-mortal existence.

With the dual emphasis on the spirit and body within LDS traditional culture, the daily acts of subjects, their exteriority, influences the status of mind and/or spirit, their interiority. When one reads their scriptures daily, they are able to develop their spirit into a stronger form that will thus enable them to direct the body. In this way, body and spirit act reciprocally, reinforcing one another. To act unfaithfully, vis-à-vis the body—for example, to engage in sexually impure behavior—damages the spirit and thus the ‘weakened’ spirit is unable to facilitate the body to act piously. But the spirit can be strengthened, by praying, reading scriptures, and attending church, to train the body to obey other commands, such as sexual purity. Thus, maintaining sexually purity assists the body in maintaining its integrity, which in turn shapes interiority. The body is invested in integrity so that the spirit can be maximized and the spirit is concerned with converting the body into its ‘best’ self. They are dependent upon one another for Latter-day Saints. The following ethnographic vignettes demonstrate how maternal practices contribute to
subject formation for the LDS women I worked with, and have the potential to contribute to their piety.

*Agency & Fertility*

While maternity is the embodied act that trains the interior, the mind and/or spirit also influences the body. The women I interviewed have a range of beliefs, which their actions support and diverge from. To attribute this gap to hypocrisy or subversion would be a simplification. Rather, these women are dedicated to a lifetime of bettering themselves and are highly concerned with working towards developing a consistent commitment to their religious beliefs. More than anything, these women desire to be pious. Although they believe that bearing and nurturing children is their highest calling, there does not seem to be a doctrinal or cultural “magic number” of children that one has to bear to be considered pious, although bearing only one child did not seem like a viable option for any of them.

On average, the women had 3.4 children. Birth control was used by virtually every woman I interviewed, both to space children and to prevent them, either at the beginning of their marriage or after they had bore their desired number of children.\(^{59}\) Permanent forms of birth control such as tubal ligation and vasectomies were also fairly common among these particular LDS women and men. One of the most surprising findings was that only 13% of the men wanted more children than their wives did. Conversely, 87% of the women either wanted the same number or more children than their husbands wanted. Although giving birth is important for the women, many have put considerable thought into their ability to provide emotional, physical, and material resources for the children they bear. Here, agency mediates between one’s interior
(desires) and exterior (physical) actions and beliefs, and accounts for various behaviors the women employed, and thus, the various subjectivities. Let me illustrate with one vignette.

Karen, a Caucasian, college graduate and stay-at-home mother of four in her early thirties, explains how she and her husband have dealt with her desire for additional children:

Once I started having kids, I was like okay, four is probably the most I can do, being pregnant, etc. Once we got to three I think Kent was ready to be done. But I [thought] ‘I’m having the kids.’ So, I’m like you know what, either I’ve got to have the baby now or years down the road I’m going to want to have another baby... so I said, ‘we have to do it now.’ I finally talked him into it, I got pregnant, and up until recently, I feel like he has been punishing me ever since, you know. So, that was a tough one, but I think he will eventually see the light and get over it.

Conferring with his wife, Kent, a Caucasian, graduate-educated professional in his early thirties explained:

I haven’t been able to be there for her as much as, because even though I said ‘okay,’ well let’s do it...I just was not...anytime something would happen, I’d just be thinking yeah... ‘I wouldn’t be dealing with all this stress if’...I just can’t...I can’t give you anything else. I’m at my limit.

Kent goes onto explain that his principal concern with having additional children was the ability to care for them financially and emotionally. While Karen felt strongly about bearing another child, Kent deferred to her because ultimately, “Karen’s feeling was ‘this is my body...’ that was the only argument that I was actually able to listen to.” Both Kent and Karen negotiated about the size of their family, and eventually Karen employed agency to uphold a cultural norm of having slightly larger than average families. She desired children and sought to materialize that desire. Conversely, her embodied fecundity brought both her and her husband an additional child, and an opportunity to continue the pedagogical process through the act of birth and parenting. Kent was also changed by this act. Although he feels pushed to his emotional limits, his transformation
may not be towards his potential self; that remains to be determined by how they each negotiate parenting and the other complexities of their lives. Although Kent exemplifies the majority of men that I worked with, whom generally want fewer children than their wives, some men want more children than their spouses want.

Lynn, a Chinese convert in her late twenties with a graduate level education explained,

We – I wanted four before we got married, I thought it would be so fun…and he wanted two before we got married. But now it is completely reversed and he wants four but I want two, so then we compromised on three. I still want to see if I can do two before I could do a third one, so three will be the maximum children to have, two will be the minimum.

In an interview with her husband, Barry, he shared this view with Lynn and explained that Lynn would have the final say on the number of children they would have. When I asked him how they decided on the number of children to have, he responded, “she decided.” He elaborates, “Now, I kind of want three; I wanted four before. She’s all, ‘well two,’ and so we tried to compromise at three. She says after the second one she doesn’t know if she can have a third.” This vignette demonstrates a few important ethnographic insights. Lynn uses agency to mediate between different levels of fecundity. Second, Lynn and Barry’s ideal family size has shifted throughout their marriage, and may continue to do so. Agency continues to moderate between these different fecund behaviors and strands of subjectivity derived from these behaviors will continue to shift, as they are formed and reformed throughout this process of creating and parenting within their family.

Allen, a Caucasian thirty-six year old with a college degree, stated that deciding on the number of children to have entailed “some negotiation with my wife” because she wanted two children and he wanted three or four. Allen explained that his wife was concerned with her age and career and that these factored into her decision to have fewer
children. Most of the LDS interviewed justified their desire for smaller families by speaking about the need for emotional, physical, spiritual and financial ‘health.’ I never actually encountered a woman who said that she wanted fewer children due to her career aspirations. Allen was the only man that explicitly stated that his wife took her career into consideration when they decided on the number of children to have. For almost every other person, putting off or curtailing the number of children for a woman’s career would be unacceptable within the church’s culture, despite the number of women who were employed outside of the home. Instead, women talk about not being able to “handle” a lot of children and the emotional and financial pressures, of raising “good” children.

These vignettes demonstrate how agency negotiates the number of children, or the level of fecundity, that these LDS women and men engage in. Pious fecundity, while crucial to spiritual progression of these women and men, is ultimately mediated by their agency, a simultaneous engagement between self, kin and community, whether the community is religious, social, or cultural.

Once a child is born into an LDS family, the pedagogical process becomes ongoing, as agentive parental practices transform the interior of mothers and fathers. Parenting, the ongoing daily responsibilities of both motherhood and fatherhood also influences subjectivity, with the potential to transform them into varying shapes of piety. Raising children is an intensive, all-consuming pedagogical opportunity that took considerably different forms.

**Pedagogies of Parenthood**

Parenting, and specifically mothering, is an important aspect of subjectivity for these LDS women. Many of them talked about how much they had changed as a result of
bearing and raising children. Some expressed that they had learned more from raising children than they could have ever learned without the experience. Thus, bearing children followed by the daily acts of parenting is a pedagogical, learning tool that promotes transformation. Some women, although they loved their children, were transformed by the daily acts of mothering, but did not feel that this was an improvement; they were isolated, lonely, and overwhelmed. Other women seemed to relish in their role. The women’s lives and experiences are quite complex.

Most of the women had children, and the majority of them genuinely seemed to enjoy many aspects of this job. However, every one of them either expressed or demonstrated frustration or exasperation as they struggled through the daily tasks of raising children. For many of them, these feelings were disrupted by moments of joy and satisfaction, bringing feelings associated with practicing parenting into balance. For others, the frustration outweighed these moments and they struggled to make it through the day-to-day tasks of parenting. But none of the women discounted the import of bearing and raising children. Rather, they highly valued their children and accepted the struggles as part of the mortal natal experience. Notably, several of these women worked full-time and their level of satisfaction or frustration was not radically different from the women who stayed at home and raised children full-time. Instead, the added pressure of having an outside career brought a complication to their lives that did not alleviate the pressures of parenting. Regardless of the employment status of these mothers, each embarked upon daily embodied acts of parenting that left an impression upon their interior—they were changed by the repeated tasks of parenting.
If “the space of ritual is one among a number of sites where the self comes to acquire and give expression to its proper form,” then everyday acts of parenting are an avenue that these women and men I studied use to transform themselves, with the goal of becoming more pious. What are their daily rituals within the realm of parenting? They included feeding, dressing, transporting, listening, disciplining, teaching, praying, and loving. Everyday rituals also include teaching their children to pray, read the scriptures and training them to be “good people,” “followers of Christ,” to “know God,” and to be “good citizens.”

Some of the women were divorced and were raising their children without a partner to bear some of the daily responsibilities. For them, motherhood was exhausting and scary. The burden of raising children without someone to offer help was intense, as was the financial responsibility. One woman seemed very overwhelmed by her newly single status. As a mother of two young children, she had always had a full-time career. After her divorce she had a very difficult time finding time and energy to be the sole provider and sole parent. She almost never socialized outside of her family, except on the rare occasion that her ex-husband took the children overnight. Since her divorce was ongoing throughout my research, I saw her go through an array of emotions and responses to her changing status. She loved her children but she seriously doubted her ability to provide everything for them adequately. She indicated that she felt a large sense of support from her fellow congregants. This particular sentiment was not shared by all of the single women I interviewed; it varied depending upon the ward and their bishop. In this sense, single mothering was indeed transformative but not necessarily positive.
Parenting takes on many forms, but overall, it is a process that is pedagogical and transformative. Regardless of how they employed their agency to mediate between different parental practices, raising children is a religious command that has the potential to transform oneself into a more pious form.

Conclusion

Maternal practices within the LDS religious culture offer an interesting framework for examining how agency informs subjectivity and how corporeal acts are considered transformative to one’s interior. Daily maternal acts, particularly parenting, are considered significant within the LDS culture, as they are embodied religious practices that have the potential to transform one’s interiority into a more devout form.

Feminist theory has drawn upon the body as a valid site of research and theorization, in part to elevate the status of the body, thereby displacing the harmful binary Western metaphysics has constructed. While this has proven analytically stimulating, feminist theorists must be attuned to the tendency to discount communities whose privileging of the body may not look exactly “feminist.” If the body is valorized within a community, is a woman’s use of her body for reproduction detrimental to her subjectivity, or is it a reiteration of the import of the body? If the body is valorized, isn’t women’s own chosen use of their differing bodies a concrete way of reinforcing this valorization? Can Western feminist theorists claim that the body should be a privileged site of inquiry and then disavow the use of the body if it is for reproductive purposes within an unapologetic patriarchal religion? Does valorizing the maternal body necessarily mean limiting women’s activities only to bearing children? How can scholars
study these women without imposing upon them an ideology that runs contrary to their entire religious culture?

One challenge between Western feminist theory and the LDS women in this study is that their valorization of maternal practices seems to maintain gender essentialism or setting in concrete women’s unchanging role as mothers at the expense of other options. Many feminist theorists are reluctant to encourage any practice that remotely supports placing limitations upon women. In this way, some Western feminist theorists shy away from issues of motherhood, as it is perceived to reduce women to their most essential or significant characteristic, their wombs.

The category of essentialism depends upon the fixity or stability of essences. Gender essentialism, the theory that women have a fundamental nature, including a primary role of reproduction, is highly contested within current Western feminist theory, which has resulted in a knee-jerk opposite reaction. The reigning theory within Western feminist theory proposes that subjects are constructed and fluid. Thus, the essence of gender essentialism is stability.

The claim that these LDS women engage in strict gender essentialism is called into question when the stability that is central to essentialism is disrupted by the deployment of agency, which results in a multitude of subject positions. Using agency to engage in various parental practices, which can potentially alter one into a more pious form of the self, is another way that the practices of these women are not captured by an essentialist framework. Additionally, the claim that a focus on reproduction foreclosures women’s other options discounts how some women engage in chronological role proliferation, or take on different roles at different times in their lives. Agency, differing
parental practices, and a proliferation of roles each rely on the ability to shift and change, to be fluid and flexible. In this way, these LDS women inhabit multiple subject positions throughout a lifetime that are anything but stable, even though they collectively valorize maternity.

These LDS women point towards a need for Western feminist theory to re-examine what is blurred when scholars use essentialism to discount other life style forms and to explore ways of rethinking how the philosophical category of essentialism is conceptualized when factoring in agency. Hopefully, Western feminist theory will engage itself in a serious critique of the phobias surrounding gender essentialism to remain ‘radically open’ to women whose practices do not fit neatly within the analytical categories and political commitments of Western feminist theory.
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is often called the LDS church or the Mormon church and its members are referred to as LDS or Latter-day Saints.


4 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,40-1-3474-2,00.html](http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,40-1-3474-2,00.html).


9 Brooks, 241, 254.

10 The LDS do not use ‘eternal’ in the classic sense of timelessness but use the term to denote a sense of infinity. See Sterling M. McMurrin *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965).

11 McMurrin, 13. Sterling McMurrin has noted that few ideas are as important to Latter-day Saints as that of ‘eternal progression.’

12 Ibid., 64. Although early members of the LDS church seemed to believe that Eve was to blame for the fall and that God cursed her and all women because of her actions, current LDS beliefs about Eve often portray her in a positive light, as a hero who issued in mortality. See James E. Faust, “What It Means to Be a Daughter of God,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1999), 100. Also, Jolene Edmunds Rockwood “The Redemption of Eve” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).


15 L. Tom Perry, “‘Give Heed unto the Word of the Lord,’” *Ensign* (June 2000): 22.

16 Ibid.


19 Mormons make a distinction between salvation and exaltation. Salvation is possible through living a pious life but exaltation is granted by living a type of ‘higher law.’ Only exaltation offers the potential to become divine. Jan Shipps has noted that within the LDS theology, individuals may be saved but families are exalted as units. See Jan Shipps, *Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

20 See Jennifer Busquait, “Reproducing Patriarchy and Erasing Feminism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 17, no. 2, (Fall, 2001): 5-37. Busquait makes the claim that men may be exalted without women, which I have found no evidence for.

21 Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1991): 97. Hinckley was not the President of the church at this time but was in the First Presidency, the highest authoritative body within the LDS church.

22 Although the LDS identify as monotheistic because they worship one God, they do believe that pre-mortal spirits are created by a Heavenly Father who has a female partner, Heavenly Mother. John Heeren, Donald B. Lindsey and Marylee Mason, “The Mormon Concept of Mother in Heaven: A Sociological Account of Its Origins and Development,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 23, no. 4 (Dec., 1984): 396-411; 399.
This is particularly troubling for LDS and Mormon feminists because Heavenly Father is worshipped autonomously, despite the model of parent and family member that the term “father” implies. In other words, although He is the Father (in a partnership with a Mother) He is worshiped separately and thus His independent worth is implied at the same time His partnership with a Mother is emphasized.


There are exceptions to this, of course, and some LDS women, including LDS feminists, do look to Heavenly Mother as a symbol of women’s potential for empowerment. See Carol Lynn Pearson, ‘Healing the Motherless House’; Linda Wilcox, ‘The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven’; See also Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990).


Physically bearing children is not the only way that the women I worked with conceived of fulfilling their eternal potential as mothers. Adoption was a viable option for some women and theologically, the LDS church believes that if children are adopted they can still be “sealed” with their adoptive families in the temple, thus creating the eternal bond that is necessary for a timeless family.


Ibid., 4-5.

Ibid., 130-131.

Ibid., 133.

Brasher, 129

Mary Jo Weaver, “‘Who Are the Conservative Catholics?’” in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, eds. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1-14. Within North America, congregations are comprised of both members who long for a return to the pre-Vatican II days, and members who anxiously wait for women to receive the priesthood, as well as a host of congregants who do not fit neatly into either camp.

Aline H. Kalbian, *Sexing the Church* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 7. Kalbian’s main focus is on metaphor and imagery and she explicitly attempts to read contemporary Roman Catholic texts with an eye for ruptures that allow for women’s empowerment. Kalbian believes that the metaphor used to explain the Catholic Church’s relationship to Christ lends itself to a disruption in the complimentary gender scheme that is prescribed between men and women, because the church is sexed female and is considered united with Christ in marriage.

Ibid., 141.

Ibid., 20.

Other scholars have made the argument that feminism includes both analysis and politics but Mahmood is unique in linking the twin commitment to the tendency to define agency strictly in terms of resistance. For other scholars who have written on the dual role of feminist theory see Diane Fuss, Judith Butler, Marilyn Strathern and Wendy Brown.


This does not mean that they devalue having free time and making choices within their lives, but overall, the choices they make engage others.


Within religious studies, see R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004).

Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.


Ibid., 136.

Mahmood distinguishes between Aristotle’s concept of habitus and Pierre Bourdieu’s reinterpretation of Aristotle’s work and finds value in the pedagogical emphasis that Aristotle places upon bodily forms. Additionally, she finds Aristotle’s notion of habitus leaves room for different ways in which the habitus can be employed and is not contingent upon a collective function, as Bourdieu’s concept of habitus seems to be. Ibid., 138-139.


This differs from earlier work that found that LDS use birth control to space children but not to prevent them. Heaton, et al. “Are Mormon Families”