

Leaving Mormonism: Impacts on Happiness

Alex Jackson

School of Counselling Psychology, City University of Seattle

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Dr. Hillary Sharpe

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Dedication

To the LBGTQ+ Mormons wondering if there is a place for you in this world- I see you, and there absolutely is. The world is lucky to have you. You are not a mistake and were made perfect as you are. Getting to know so many of you has been one of the great joys of my life, and my life is better with you in it.

And to Andy, my partner in work and life. None of this would be possible without you.

Self-Positioning Statement

Author's Reflection

I come from a prominent Mormon family on my father's side with origins back to the beginning of Mormonism in the early 1830s. John Tanner, my great-great-great-grandfather, sold nearly all his land and possessions and gave that money to Joseph Smith, the religion's founder. These proceeds, a small fortune at the time, essentially prevented the early Smith-led Mormon church from going bankrupt (Godfrey, 2017). After Smith was murdered by a mob while imprisoned in 1844, John Tanner followed Brigham Young, a leader within Smith's original church and considered the successor to Smith by Young's followers. Smith did not explicitly name a successor during his life nor outline a method of succession to the position of church president, leading to a succession crisis resulting in various independent sects of Mormonism (Arrington, 2012). Young and his church migrated west to Utah, which would become the headquarters of the largest sect of Mormonism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS church), with Young as the second president and prophet of the church (Smith being the first; Arrington, 2012). John Tanner had a son, Joseph Smith Tanner, who is my great-great grandfather, an enduring reminder of the trust and belief that my family had, and overwhelmingly still does, in Joseph Smith as a prophet of God.

John Tanner's faith in Smith and Mormonism endures through his ancestors. Almost two centuries later, most of his descendants are members of this church. John Tanner, after all, was a wealthy man and, by written accounts, discerning and wise. He willingly consecrated all he had to the church, a manifestation of his testimony of the divinity of Smith's church and his authority as a prophet. As inspiring as it is, such a story largely stifled questions about Smith or his church among John Tanner's progeny.

As a young adult, I was confronted with information about Smith and the church that was contrary to what I was taught at church. According to this long-withheld information, both entities were much different than my culture portrayed. It was not faith-affirming and, quite honestly, scary. Either I had to push away these ideas (which were firmly engrained in me by church leaders and my family) or confront them and consider that the beliefs and truths that had led me through life might be built on a fallible foundation. I ended up deconstructing my faith beliefs. I started to question the traditions of my parents and ancestors and instead made my own platform of beliefs and constructs. Ultimately, that led me out of Mormonism, having resigned my membership in the church in early 2022. In Mormonism, resigning a church membership is considered apostasy. I had heard from church leaders my entire life about the dangers and nothingness outside the church. I, and all the other members, were taught that true happiness only exists within the church, yet here I am, years after finding my truth, happier than ever.

It was a process to get here, however. There was a mourning period over the religion that was my grounding influence in life. There was, and still is, tension in my familial relationships over my decision to leave the faith. Regardless of my character as a post-Mormon (or ex-Mormon), I am still an outsider to some degree in my Mormon family. I betrayed strong cultural expectations by leaving, disputing the truth claims of the church, and questioning church leadership. By resigning my membership, for example, I gave up covenants or promises I made in the temple. These covenants include the ordinance of sealing families together for eternity, separating me from my family after death. Though this experience of leaving has undoubtedly left some psychological scars and pain in my Mormon family, I do not regret the deconstruction I have done from Mormonism and subsequent reconstruction. There is trauma from the experience though: I can understand why so many individuals faced with a faith crisis decide to stay despite

overwhelming evidence that their beliefs are contrary to fact. I have lost the support of an entire community since leaving, the community being a massive contributor to individual happiness and mental health quality (Luchesi et al., 2018).

Professional Reflection/Considerations

The millennial generation is leaving organized religion in droves (Cox & Thomson-DeVeaux, 2019). In the LDS church, an oft-repeated phrase by leaders to members considering leaving—also known as disaffiliation—is “Where will you go?” – the implication being that there is no real good place in the world except as an active, attending member of the LDS church (Ballard, 2016, p. 2). Presidents of the church, considered prophets by the members, have stated for generations that true happiness can be found only within the religion (Woodworth, 2019). However, according to Lipka (2015), 36% of Mormons leave the church by age 20, forcing those who left the religion to find happiness outside of the definition espoused by Mormonism (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Lipka, 2015). How Mormonism defines happiness is limited to their specific cultural lens and appears to exclude sources of happiness found outside of Christian-focused religions. The belief is that this true, higher level of happiness can only be found in the covenants and authority unique to Mormonism (Potter, 2019).

Counsellors need to be culturally competent enough to recognize that those from these fundamentalist, orthodox beliefs view the world from an intentionally closed perspective, limiting the world’s influences outside of the culture and religion (Golan & Fehl, 2020).

There is limited research on the connection between religious disaffiliation and mental health, with a noticeable gap in the literature when considering the overall societal shift away from organized religion (Brandley, 2020; Cox & Thomson-DeVeaux, 2019). According to Cox and Thomson-DeVeaux (2019), 37% of those aged 22 to 37 identified as religiously unaffiliated,

an 11% increase from 2007. Given this growing number of individuals leaving organized religion, particularly millennials, counsellors seeing religious or formerly religious clients must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skillsets to support these individuals during their faith transition process. Cultural competence is especially crucial in comprehending the unique challenges experienced by those leaving the LDS church and other religious traditions (Chakravarty et al., 2022; Jindra & Lee, 2021). Mental health professionals should be mindful of the potential for bias and discrimination during faith transitions, however, particularly with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) clients. Many from these orthodox religions, particularly Mormonism, have grown up in a culture that instills homophobia and transphobia, which are often internalized, leading to shame and guilt for LGBTQ+ members (Wright, 2021). Counsellors need to be aware of these challenges and to examine their own beliefs and values so as not to impose personal views or prejudices onto clients dealing with complex questions related to faith and identity (Jindra & Lee, 2021).

Understanding the timing and factors contributing to faith transitions is valuable in providing appropriate mental health care for those experiencing them. As discussed in the literature review section, personal identity, social support networks, and coping mechanisms all play an integral role in this experience (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Streib, 2021). Informed mental health professionals would benefit from an awareness of potential mental health issues that could arise as people leave their religious communities. The lack of social support, coupled with feelings of guilt or shame, can contribute to developing or exacerbating conditions such as depression or anxiety (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Counsellors engaged in best practices should be prepared to offer appropriate care and resources for clients facing these difficulties. Mental health professionals should strive to remain up-to-date on the research and developments in faith

transitions and religious disaffiliation. By staying informed on relevant literature and studies, professionals can provide their clients with the most effective and up-to-date care during these difficult times.

Ultimately, the growing trend of religious disaffiliation underscores the need for mental health professionals to be culturally competent and knowledgeable about the faith transition process across any religion (Streib, 2021; Wright, 2021). Counsellors cannot be expected to know the detailed minutiae of each culture and religion; however, they must respect and acknowledge their clients' diverse beliefs and values, including those who choose to leave organized religion. Doing so helps create a safe space where clients feel comfortable sharing their faith transition experiences and associated difficulties.

Given the potential negative repercussions for individuals who do not fit within the strict guidelines of their religious community, researchers and mental health professionals must approach such cases with compassion and an awareness of the unique ethical considerations involved. For LGBTQ+ members struggling with their faith or identity, counselling and research should be guided by principles that promote safety and minimize the risk of self-harm in this vulnerable population. As found by Riess (2021), as many as one in five Gen Z Mormons identify as LGBTQ+. Given the vulnerability of this population and the unique struggles that they face, I have incorporated a focus on LGBTQ+ experiences and issues within this paper.

Capstone Guiding Questions

The main guiding question of this capstone project revolves around how individual happiness compares after a faith transition to before, both in the short and long term. A secondary question is whether there is academic support for measurably higher happiness levels in Mormons.

Literature Review

Terminology

Before reviewing the literature and ensuring accurate discussion of this capstone topic, defining the terms and themes addressed in this paper is crucial.

Mormonism

The dominant sect of Mormonism, the LDS church, is a high-demand, orthodox religion (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Nica, 2019). As of 2018, church leadership preferred the term “LDS church” rather than “Mormon church” and individual members of the LDS church are not typically called “Mormons” anymore. I primarily use LDS in this paper, but Mormonism and LDS church can be used interchangeably as a way of respecting those who remain in the religion and those who have left (Dyer et al., 2022; Eichert, 2021). “Mormon” is still used widely within the religion and freely outside of the religion to refer to members of the LDS church; For those who leave the religion, using the term “Mormon” is largely viewed as empowering, so including that term in this paper is also important (Wright, 2021). To summarize, the LDS church is a single branch of Mormonism and, despite recent shifts away from the term, members within the LDS church have long been called Mormons (Wright, 2021). In this paper, all related terms refer to the LDS church unless otherwise specified.

The official statistics for active members of the faith are highly debated and kept confidential by the LDS (Bradshaw et al., 2022), but as of 2019, it was purported to have approximately 16 million active members (Bartholomew, 2020). This number represents a significant increase from the church’s humble beginnings when Smith first organized it in the Eastern United States in the early 19th century. The church’s growth can be attributed to several factors, including its strong commitment to missionary work and its emphasis on family values

(Bradshaw et al., 2022). The church's global reach has attracted diverse members from varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds and the church has made significant investments in technology and media, which has helped spread its message and attract new members. However, these membership statistics are hotly debated, with outside estimates of active members far less than the church-released numbers (Brandley, 2020).

Happiness

Happiness is a complex and multifaceted concept studied by philosophers, psychologists, and researchers for centuries (Steptoe, 2019). Despite the vast body of research on happiness, there is still disagreement about what exactly happiness is and how to measure it. Happiness is often considered subjective, with Ngamaba and Soni's (2018) frequently cited study preferring "subjective well-being" over the word "happiness." This subjective experience is characterized by happiness and includes pleasure, joy, or contentment. This definition emphasizes the individual's perception of happiness and suggests that happiness is a feeling or emotion experienced in the moment. Another definition of happiness is the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions (Gray et al., 2019). This definition focuses on the balance of positive and negative emotions, suggesting that happiness is a state of well-being characterized by the lack of distress and positive emotions such as joy, contentment, and satisfaction.

Building on the definition that includes the absence of negative emotions, happiness is often defined in the literature by a lack of it, such as in a diagnosis of major depressive disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In cases of increased rates of suicide or predictors of suicide, as explored later in this capstone project, a characteristic of individuals and populations more prone to suicide is a lack of happiness (Bridges et al., 2020; Dyer et al., 2022). As reported

throughout the literature review section of this research, nondominant cultures, particularly LGBTQ+ Mormons, have a dramatically increased risk of suicide compared to heterosexual Mormons and non-Mormon LGBTQ+ individuals (Dyer et al., 2022).

Another important aspect of happiness, particularly in the LDS church, is a long-term sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in one's life (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). The LDS church teaches that the highest level of life satisfaction comes from devout adherence and attendance within the church (Torgrimsson, 2019). Fenelon and Danielsen suggested that happiness is a permanent and stable state based on one's goals, values, and beliefs.

Regardless of the specific definition of happiness, a growing body of research suggests that certain factors are consistently related to higher happiness levels. These factors include a strong social support network, positive relationships with others, meaningful work, physical activity, and a sense of purpose or meaning in life (Yang & Ma, 2020).

Leaving a Community/Culture

Leaving a religion that serves as a supportive community is often associated with a traumatic event, as leaving the religion involves losing friendships and many familial relationships; Mormonism is similar to other orthodox faiths such as Judaism in this regard (Newfield, 2020). When referring to the term *leaving* Mormonism, or *disaffiliation*, the implication is that the member will no longer believe in the religious tenets or attend any of the meetings or religious celebrations. The former member no longer associates with the religion, and in religions like Mormonism, their departure is not hidden from other members for long (Jindra & Lee, 2021).

One of the main effects of leaving a culture is the loss of social support and community. According to a study by Batyrshina et al. (2021), those who left their cultural group often

reported feeling lonely and disconnected from their previous support network. This loss of social support can significantly impact mental health, including increased levels of depression and anxiety.

Many therapists specialize in helping individuals who are transitioning out of and leaving religious communities based on this hugely significant life change, with those seeking therapy often needing guidance in learning new strategies to cope and understanding how to have a positive self-identity without the teachings of their culture/religion of origin (Jindra & Lee, 2021). While many people who leave faith systems, including the LDS church, experience relief and increased feelings associated with happiness right after leaving, many also experience symptoms of trauma, grief, and depression (Fenelson & Danielsen, 2016; Jindra & Lee, 2021).

Another impact of leaving a culture is identity confusion and redefining one's self-concept (Batyrshina et al., 2021). As observed by Batyrshina et al. (2021), for individuals who have strongly identified with their cultural group, leaving can lead to feelings of loss and a search for new identity markers. This process can be challenging, as individuals may struggle to find a sense of belonging in a new culture or community (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Culture shock is another common effect of leaving a culture. *Culture shock* refers to the disorientation and adjustment difficulties experienced by individuals in a new cultural environment (Batyrshina et al., 2021). Culture shock can manifest in various ways, including homesickness, feelings of isolation, and difficulty adapting to new cultural norms and customs.

Leaving a culture can also lead to personal growth and increased cultural competence. As reported by Phinney and Ong (2007), individuals who leave their cultural group often report increased levels of independence, self-awareness, and an expanded sense of identity. Exposure to

new cultures can also increase cultural competence and tolerance (Kramer, 2020). These positive aspects of leaving are further discussed later in the Happiness After Mormonism section.

Religious Fundamentalism/Orthodoxy

Academic debate and research have recently focused on the rise of fundamentalism among various religious traditions. *Religious fundamentalism* is the rigid adherence to certain religious beliefs and practices, often coupled with a literal interpretation of sacred texts (Nica, 2019). Orthodox faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have long stressed adhering to traditional beliefs and practices. In these religious traditions, the role of religious authorities and scripture is paramount, with any deviation seen as a threat to both community stability and faith itself. Brandley (2020) noted that the LDS church fits this orthodoxy definition.

Hood et al. (2018) suggested that religious fundamentalism is associated with lower psychological well-being and increased levels of anxiety and depression, suggesting those within orthodox, high-demand religions may be less happy than the general public. However, the same authors mentioned that research exists on orthodoxy's positive impact, notably that religious fundamentalism can positively impact mental health, mainly by providing a sense of purpose and meaning. There are limitations to these results, however, with a gender disparity in wellness scores, with women scoring notably lower than men. Religious fundamentalism is associated with conservative political views, particularly on issues related to morality and sexuality, which affect women more than men (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Nica, 2019). This gender disparity in wellness scores within religious fundamentalist settings is further complicated when one considers the role of patriarchy in shaping such contexts; by definition, patriarchy is designed to benefit and empower men, so women scoring lower is actually expected (Torgrimsson, 2019). The influence of patriarchy is pervasive within religious fundamentalism, frequently dictating

hierarchical gender roles that constrain women and potentially contribute to their lower psychological well-being (Elam, 2006). Notable examples in Mormonism of patriarchal subservience are the practice of polygamy and the barring of women from holding the priesthood. Though the practice has been discontinued, Potter (2019) explained that polygamy valued prominent Mormon men by giving them multiple wives, often decades younger. As for the priesthood, it enables Mormons to wield influence and power, but women are still barred from having this authority as of 2023.

The patriarchal norms associated with the LDS church place women in subservient roles, potentially diminishing their sense of autonomy and self-worth (Potter, 2019). Potter (2019) stated that such models tend to devalue women's experiences and voices, potentially leading to feelings of marginalization and resultant mental health issues. Moreover, the interplay between religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, and conservative political views often creates a coercive environment for women (Potter, 2019). Patriarchal norms can influence and exacerbate conservative attitudes toward sexuality, resulting in stringent sexual restrictions and punitive attitudes toward women's bodies: bodily shame is a common theme reported by LDS women in the literature (e.g., Brandley, 2020; Bridges et al., 2020; Chakravarty et al., 2022). Such attitudes can impose psychological stress, as well as physical and social consequences for women.

Happiness in Orthodox Religions

Researchers have attempted to understand the role religion and spirituality play in an individual's happiness and satisfaction with life. Orthodox faiths, including the LDS church, share a common belief that their members have a unique, higher level of happiness compared to people outside of the faith (Nica, 2019; Potter, 2019). One of the ways in which orthodox faith groups impact happiness is through the provision of social support. According to Krause and

Wulff's (2005) findings, individuals who are actively involved in religious communities have higher levels of social support than those who are not. This social support can come from friendship, counselling, and practical assistance, all of which can contribute to feelings of happiness and well-being. Additionally, many orthodox religions offer a sense of purpose and meaning in life. This sense of purpose can come from believing in a higher power and connecting to something greater than oneself. A common sentiment in the literature is that when individuals deeply connect with their religion, giving them a sense of meaning and purpose, that connection can lead to higher happiness and well-being, which is evident in many self-report scores (e.g., Krause & Wulff, 2005; Ngamaba & Soni, 2018).

Religious practices such as prayer and meditation have also positively impacted happiness (Bartkowski et al., 2017). Bartkowski et al. (2017) reported that these practices have been found to reduce stress, increase positive emotions, and improve overall well-being. Religious rituals such as attending church services can bring community and social connectedness, contributing to happiness and well-being (Bartkowski et al., 2017; Krause & Wulff, 2005). However, not all studies have found a positive relationship between religion and happiness. Some research has suggested that religious beliefs can also lead to negative emotions and stress, particularly when individuals do not align with their religious community's beliefs and practices: Potter (2019) highlighted this occurrence in the LDS church. Ngamaba and Soni (2018) noted that the relationship between religion and happiness is complex and may vary depending on individual and situational factors. Furthermore, positive aspects of orthodoxy cannot be directly attributable to the religion itself, rather they are strongly correlated with the protective elements of culture.

Deconstructing Religion

Interest in religious deconstruction, particularly within Mormonism, has increased in recent years (Jindra & Lee, 2021). Religion is a complex and deeply rooted aspect of human culture and society, so deconstructing one's religious beliefs can be a trying experience, often leading to losing community, social support, and sense of identity (Jindra & Lee, 2021). Deconstruction is often described as a traumatic event requiring counselling and further treatment (Edwards, 2019). Deconstructing one's religious beliefs can significantly affect one's mental health and well-being, as Jindra and Lee (2021) noted. For some people, this experience may lead to guilt, shame, or existential crisis; for others, however, there may be feelings of liberation and an enhanced sense of identity and purpose.

In studies exploring why individuals deconstruct their religious views, often involuntarily, a common theme is a loss of faith or doubt in the validity of one's religious convictions (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). This doubt could be due to personal experiences, exposure to new ideas, or an urge for intellectual and spiritual growth. Some individuals may feel like their religious views no longer align with their values or sense of morality, prompting questions about faith (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Streib, 2021). Bradshaw et al. (2015) identified the LDS church's stance on LGBTQ+ issues—punishing queer members who engage in consensual relationships with others of the same sex—as a central issue for many Mormons who deconstruct.

Another common factor in the literature contributing to religious deconstruction is a sense of disillusionment with organized religion (Brandley, 2020; Streib, 2021). This may involve a negative experience with a particular religious institution or exposure to negative media portrayals of religion. Additionally, some individuals may feel that the hierarchical

structure of religious organizations and its emphasis on obedience to authority figures undermine their personal autonomy and sense of self (Potter, 2019). Many authors express concern for individuals who leave or deconstruct from the LDS church: According to Pargament and Park (2019), deconstructing or leaving one's religion can be an emotionally draining process for individuals. These individuals often experience feelings of loss, uncertainty, and self-doubt during this process, negatively impacting their mental health and well-being.

Deconversion/Reasons for Leaving the LDS Church

Brandley (2020) stated that there is a typical list of reasons for members leaving the LDS church. Despite the church's self-reported growth cited in its semiannual membership report, there has been a significant increase in the number of Mormons leaving the church in recent years (Brandley, 2020). One of the main reasons for Mormons leaving the church is dissatisfaction with its policies and teachings (Brandley, 2020). Some members feel that the church's stance on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, gender roles, and women's equality is out of step with contemporary society (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Many Mormons have become disillusioned with the church's history and teachings (Brandley, 2020). Some members, especially former members, have raised questions about the accuracy of the church's historical and truth claims, such as the origin of the Book of Mormon (Wright, 2021). Others have become concerned with the church's theological views on specific issues, such as the nature of God, gender roles, and race (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Potter, 2019). As cited by Jindra and Lee (2021), some Mormons have become disenchanted with the church's culture, which they see as too insular and exclusive. Members may also feel that the church places too much emphasis on conformity and obedience and not enough on individual agency and growth (Jindra, 2022; Torgimsson, 2019).

Many Mormons also cite the church's pattern of controlling what information the members access, strongly encouraging only "church-approved sources" (Brandley, 2020). Many members then feel disenchanting when encountering contradictory information that erodes that trust and faith. An example described by Runnells (2013) is the LDS church's wealth and disproportionately low charitable giving: In 2019, a whistleblower within Ensign Peak Advisors, a subsidiary of the LDS church, spoke out about the Ensign Peak Fund, the investment arm of the church. Documents released estimated the fund to be worth over \$100 billion, with money raised through tithing from members and interest earned through investment into stocks such as Apple and Google (Aprill & Mayer, 2023). The Ensign Peak Fund operates on a tax-exempt basis due to the church's religious status.

Paying a 10% tithing on all income is a requirement in the LDS church to have access to higher privileges, such as access to the temple where members can make covenants that allow them to be with their families beyond death (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Kirkegaard & Dutton, 2023). As referenced by Runnells (2013) and Brandley (2020), the LDS church gives only a small fraction of its annual tithing donations to charity; annual tithing receipts collected from members are estimated to be between 5 and 7 billion dollars. The LDS church is one of the largest landowners in the United States (Alexander, 2019; Brandley, 2020). The church's real estate holdings have been the subject of scholarly analysis and media attention (Wright, 2021). Some critics question its use of its resources, and others point out the church's role as a significant economic player in the communities where it operates (Newell & Park, 2020; Potter, 2019).

One of the main critiques of the LDS church's real estate holdings is that it uses its tax-exempt status as a religious organization to accumulate wealth and influence in a way that does not align with its charitable mission, as reported by Alexander (2019). Alexander referenced the

enormous political and financial influence the church's vast real estate portfolio had given it in Utah and other states where it operates. Alexander cited experts who suggested that the church's real estate holdings could be worth more than 250 million dollars (Alexander, 2019; Aprill & Mayer, 2023; Brandley, 2020). Brandley (2020) noted that many questioning members see this wealth as money that could be used to help those in need but is instead hoarded and invested like a business.

Deconstruction of Mormon Truth Claims (Mormon Faith Crisis)

Deconstructing learned messages and behaviour patterns is a normal and expected part of development, particularly in early adulthood (Kline et al., 2018). A Mormon faith crisis is an intense form of deconstruction and refers to a period of intense questioning and doubt about one's beliefs and practices within the LDS church. This crisis can be triggered by a variety of events, such as encountering new information that contradicts previously held beliefs, experiencing significant life events or changes, or feeling a disconnect between one's beliefs and actions, such as an ideologically liberal individual existing in a conservative religion like Mormonism (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Pargament & Park, 2019).

During a Mormon faith crisis, individuals may struggle with confusion, anger, and loss (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021). They may question long-held beliefs and practices, which can lead to conflicts with family members or friends who are deeply committed to the LDS church. As noted by Jindra and Lee (2021), navigating a Mormon faith crisis can be challenging but also a time of growth and self-discovery. For many individuals, a Mormon faith crisis is a turning point that leads to a shift in their beliefs and practices. Some may leave the church, while others may remain active members but adopt a more nuanced or personal understanding of their faith (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Torgrimsson, 2019). Some individuals may also find that the crisis

strengthens their commitment to the church, as they can reconcile their doubts and questions with their beliefs, practices, and cultural values (Brandley, 2020).

Qualitative research studies noted that a Mormon faith crisis is a personal experience, and every individual's journey is unique (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). However, similar themes emerge regarding Mormon faith crises and deconstruction (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Jindra & Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021). A common theme, particularly in qualitative studies, regarding Mormon faith transitions is experiencing cognitive dissonance with specific doctrines or doctrines taught by the religion, whether past or present (Torgrimsson, 2019). *Cognitive dissonance* is a psychological state of unease, tension, anxiety, and discomfort brought on by holding two or more seemingly opposing views. Cognitive dissonance is antithetical to happiness (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019).

In Torgrimsson's study (2019), Mormon women who identified as feminists described feeling more amounts of cognitive dissonance than conservative members. Mormon women who espoused feminist ideals reported believing in equality among genders, but their religion teaches them that men are the only gender allowed to be priesthood holders, the priesthood in Mormonism being the literal power of God used to create the universe (Potter, 2019). In the LDS church, priesthood holders in leadership callings have the final say in all decisions, putting women in a position to have to constantly yield to men's decisions. Holding these two values simultaneously caused cognitive dissonance for those within Torgrimsson's study.

Many other reasons for deconstructing Mormonism exist, and a typical example within the research is the trend of members leaving the faith due to disagreeing with the LDS church's "truth claims." As referenced by Wright (2021), the Church Educational System (CES) letter is a famous, thorough document outlining questionable truth claims of the LDS church; CES is an

organization that oversees the educational activities in the LDS church, including church-owned universities, seminaries, and institutes of religion. The CES letter was written by former LDS church member Jeremy Runnells. Originally posted on the internet in 2013, the letter outlines Runnells' concerns about the historical and scientific accuracy of Mormon teachings and his subsequent decision to leave the church (Runnells, 2013). The CES letter has become a highly debated topic within the Mormon community and beyond. It has been referenced in academic and popular publications and used as a tool for those considering deconstructing their religious beliefs (Wright, 2021). For active members of the faith—at least for those who have heard about the letter—the document has generally been vilified and is avoided and ignored.

One of the main arguments presented in the CES letter was that current historical and scientific evidence contradicts many of the claims made in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures (Wright, 2021). For example, the letter raised concerns about the lack of evidence for the descriptions of early civilizations in the Americas in the Book of Mormon (Runnells, 2013).

Runnells also questioned the accuracy of the First Vision, which many LDS church members consider a foundational event in the “restoration of the gospel” (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Runnells, 2013). The First Vision in Mormonism refers to Smith going to a grove of trees near his home in 1820 to pray about which religion was true; in the church's canonical account, God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Smith and told him none were true and that Smith was to restore the true church of Christ (Runnells, 2013). Runnells (2013) pointed out that members were not told about the existence of multiple accounts of the First Vision, all with different details depending on whom Smith relayed the story to, and the earliest version was recorded 12 years after the event. Runnells further commented on this pattern of the LDS church hiding or altering certain aspects of its history, such as the practice of polygamy, to maintain its image as a

moral and upstanding organization (Wright, 2021). This, in turn, leads to a lack of transparency and trust within the church community for those who use the CES letter as a means to deconstruct.

The CES letter has been met with mixed reactions within the LDS community (Wright, 2021). Some members have referenced the letter as a reason to question and eventually leave the church. In contrast, others see it as a misleading and inaccurate representation of LDS teachings and history. Through the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), the church has responded to the letter through official statements and publications; FAIR is an organization comprised of active, believing LDS members who find answers for difficult topics based on the idea that the LDS church is true and their scriptures are factual and historical, including the Bible (Bradley, 2019). Still, many members feel these responses have failed to address their concerns (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021). In a study of the CES letter, Wright (2021) noted that those who read the letter and had negative experiences with the LDS church were more likely to leave the church than those who had positive experiences. This discrepancy highlights the importance of considering individual experiences and emotions in religious faith and belief discussions.

Leaving the Church: Impacts on Mental Health

Research has found that leaving a religious organization can lead to feelings of loss, confusion, guilt, and depression, similar to a grieving response (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Nica, 2019). A study by Bradshaw et al. (2015) found that individuals who had left the LDS church reported feeling a sense of loss of community and identity, mainly in the short term, which was associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety. In contrast, the same study demonstrated that leaving the LDS church could positively affect mental health in the long-term.

Multiple studies have found that individuals who had left the LDS church reported increased personal growth and self-esteem (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2022; Brandley, 2020; Jindra & Lee, 2021). Jindra and Lee (2021) hypothesized that these individual differences in response to leaving had to do with the length of time since leaving the church, with those who left recently experiencing more negative feelings than those who had left the church at least a year previously.

Research has also examined the relationship between faith transitions and religious coping, showing that religious coping can play a role in the impact of faith transitions on mental health. For example, a study by Pargament and Park (2019) found that individuals who used religious coping strategies, such as turning to spirituality, experienced less psychological distress following a faith transition. Jindra and Lee (2021) demonstrated that counselling is an effective method for helping clients process their emotions about leaving Mormonism and shape a new path forward. Jindra and Lee also reported that connecting clients with peer support groups was effective in assisting clients in moving through their grief with a group of people with similar experiences.

Dominant Versus Nondominant Cultural Groups

The state of Utah is colloquially known as the Utah Bubble because of its abnormally high percentage of Mormons (Kramer, 2020). The entire state is engulfed in the overarching dominant cultural Mormon expectations and lifestyle. Most of the population are members of Mormon religious groups (Lawson & Xydias, 2020; Newell & Park, 2020; Wright, 2021). Within this cultural bubble, a predominant Mormon culture supersedes all cultural norms and groups (Kramer, 2020). Statistically alone, anyone in Utah who does not identify as Mormon is a minority in the state. This concentration has created a distinct cultural identity which some perceive as homogeneous and conservative (Potter, 2019). The LDS church has had an immense

impact on Utah's culture, economy, and politics, but the landscape is becoming more diverse with increasing non-Mormon populations such as nonreligious Christians, other religious groups, and ex-Mormons (Lawson & Xydias, 2020; Wright, 2021).

No other state, province or country in the world has such a predominant Mormon demographic, so any studies from Utah must be viewed through a cultural lens. Approximately 1.6% of the US population identifies as Mormon, whereas in Utah, 68% do (Haltinner & Sarathchandra, 2022; Lipka, 2015; Newell & Park, 2020).

Dyer et al.'s (2022) study on predictors of Utah youth suicidality, found a significant statistical relationship in their regression analyses that a being an active LDS member was a protective factor against suicidal behaviour compared to those who were from other denominations or not affiliated with any religion. The authors also found a relationship between lower levels of depression in Mormon youth compared to all other religious and nonreligious groups in Utah. However, these protective factors against depression and suicidal behaviour did not extend to Utahn Mormon youth who identified as anything other than heteronormative. An important note regarding the study is that the researchers were based out of Brigham Young University (BYU), a university owned and operated by the LDS church (Dyer et al., 2022). This affiliation alone, along with the researchers identifying as members and employees of the church, lays the possibility for bias. However, in their limitations section, the authors acknowledged the church's anti-LGBTQ+ teachings and policies and described how such conditions could allow active nonheterosexual members to feel alienated, isolated, and unwelcome.

As described in earlier sections, multiple studies have demonstrated the power of cultural identity and belonging to enhance happiness and well-being. These studies suggest that cultural and religious identity can provide individuals with meaning, purpose, and social support,

ultimately leading to increased happiness and well-being. Unfortunately, Utah continues to have some of the highest rates of suicide in America (Dyer et al., 2022; McGraw et al., 2022).

Intersectionality of Socioeconomic Status, Ethnicity, Race, and Social Location in Leaving Mormonism

Numerous factors influence one's experience when considering leaving Mormonism, particularly socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, race, and social location (Alexander, 2019; Batyrshina et al., 2021). *Intersectionality* is the acknowledgment that dimensions of identity intersect to shape an individual's religious deconstruction. Torgrimsson (2019) described intersectionality as a theoretical framework that emerged from feminist scholarship and emphasizes the interconnectedness of social identities and systems of oppression. This approach acknowledges that individuals' experiences are shaped not by singular identities, but by the intersections of various social categories, which can produce unique challenges and opportunities.

In the limited literature available regarding SES and leaving the LDS church, SES seems to play a role in the decision to leave or stay in the LDS church: Those who join the faith as adults tend to be lower in SES, whereas those who leave tend to be higher (Wright, 2021). However, these findings are not strong, and leadership within the church comprises mostly high SES individuals, with low SES individuals holding far fewer leadership positions despite the church membership as a whole being a diverse mix of SES (Wright, 2021). Within the framework of intersectionality, the impact of SES is mediated by other intersecting factors and therefore complicates reasons for leaving the faith. For instance, individuals from lower SES backgrounds may face additional obstacles due to limited access to resources and information that can aid in their religious questioning and exploration of alternative beliefs (Kramer, 2020).

At the same time, individuals from higher SES backgrounds, particularly in Utah, may encounter different challenges, such as negotiating familial expectations and the potential loss of social networks within the faith community (Jindra, 2022).

Ethnicity and Race

The historical and contemporary racist teachings within the LDS church have had a significant impact on individuals considering leaving the faith (Wright, 2021). Throughout its history, the LDS church embraced discriminatory practices and doctrines, particularly towards the Black community. Until 1978, Black individuals were denied access to the priesthood and were denied entrance to Mormon temples, both of which are considered necessary for eternal salvation in the faith (Brandley, 2020; Kramer, 2020). These doctrines have no doubt influenced the church's predominantly White membership, though the demographics of church ethnicity and race have changed significantly since the 1978 priesthood ban was removed (Kramer, 2020; Lawson & Xydias, 2020). As documented by Wright (2021), these racist teachings had lasting consequences for perceptions of the LDS church among people of colour and those advocating racial equality. Furthermore, the presence of racist attitudes within Mormon scripture in the present day, such as the Book of Mormon narrative that light skin is associated with God's chosen people, has inflicted psychological and emotional distress on marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Stuart, 2019).

For many, the cognitive dissonance between one's religious beliefs and the racism inherent in certain teachings can be emotionally turbulent and may lead to disillusionment or a faith crisis, which has been documented in qualitative studies (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021). Racist attitudes and teachings also contribute to disaffiliation rates, as some individuals seek spiritual communities aligned with their values of racial equality and social justice, rejecting

the perpetuation of racist ideologies. Disaffiliation from Mormonism due to racist teachings is further complicated by social and community dynamics as described in earlier sections, with resistance from family, friends, and the broader faith community who remain committed to the institution despite its historical and current associations with racism (Chakravarty et al., 2022; Jindra & Lee, 2021). Consequently, individuals contending with the church's racist past and present frequently encounter a hostile environment and pressure to conform to prevailing beliefs and practices.

Social Location

Social location, which includes factors such as geographic location, family dynamics, and social networks, also intersects with religious disaffiliation. The geographic location of an individual, particularly in Mormonism, can influence the availability of alternative belief systems and secular communities, potentially facilitating or inhibiting the process of disaffiliation (Jindra, 2022; Kramer, 2020). Those with supportive and diverse social networks, including families less entrenched in Mormonism, often find resources and encouragement in their journey of religious transformation (Bradshaw et al., 2015).

LGBTQ+

The LDS church has faced numerous difficulties over its policy and treatment of gay members. The church has long had a reputation for its conservative views on sexuality and gender, which have caused much division both inside and outside the church (Bradshaw et al., 2022). The church stands against same-sex relationships and gay marriage, and its teachings on this matter remain largely unchanged despite changes to society's perception of LGBTQ+ rights. In 2008, the church supported California's Prop 8, which sought to define marriage as being between a man and a woman, as well as other anti-LGBTQ+ rights legislation (Bradshaw et al.,

2022; Wright, 2021). This has caused considerable tension within the church community, its members, and those within the LGBTQ+ community (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Wright, 2021). This tension has resulted in vocal Mormon member critics being excommunicated from the church, with Kate Kelly and John Dehlin being notable examples (Hill, 2017). These pressures, however, have corresponded with procedural changes that reduce exclusionary practices, though the church maintains these changes are revelations from God rather than bending to cultural pressures (Wright, 2021).

Several studies have been conducted to explore the experiences of gay members of the LDS church. One such study, conducted by Chakravarty et al. (2022), examined the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals within the LDS church. The study found that despite the church's stance on homosexuality as being against the divine plan, many gay members still felt a strong sense of connection to their faith and the church community. However, the study also found that this connection was often accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia, as well as difficulty in balancing their faith with their sexual orientation.

Another study by Bradshaw et al. (2015) explored the experiences of gay men who had left the church due to its stance on homosexuality. The study found that for many gay men, the church's stance on homosexuality created a conflict between their faith and their sexual identity, ultimately leading to their decision to leave the church. The study also found that for some gay men, the lack of support and acceptance within the church community contributed to feelings of loneliness, depression, and even thoughts of suicide.

Bradshaw et al. (2015) examined the church's official statement on homosexuality, which states that same-sex attraction is not a sin but acting on those feelings is. The study found that church leaders and members often interpret this message as a rejection of homosexuality, which

contributes to feelings of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia among gay members. Joseph and Cranney (2017) explored the experiences of gay members who had been excommunicated from the church due to their homosexuality. The study found that for many gay members, excommunication from the church was a traumatic experience that contributed to feelings of rejection, loss, and isolation. The study also found that for some gay members, excommunication from the church was a catalyst for personal growth and self-discovery, as they could explore their sexuality and spirituality in new ways beyond Mormonism.

As described above, Dyer et al. (2022) found that although religion formed a protective factor against suicide for heterosexual members, being queer and Mormon turned out to be a predictor of suicide, with the surveys indicating higher than average suicidal behaviours for LGBTQ+ respondents. These results are in line with the epidemic of suicides reported in Utah statistics for LGBTQ+ residents referenced by the study's authors.

No other academic literature, outside of Mormon-owned postsecondary institutions, supports the idea that queer individuals raised in the LDS church have protective factors or even average outcomes. Bridges et al. (2020), studied a sample of 530 lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) individuals demonstrated that LGB individuals raised in the LDS church had far worse mental health outcomes than secularly raised LGB participants, with women having worse results than men. The researchers found that resources such as LGBTQ+ community support, sexual identity support, and education were strongly correlated with higher positive mental health. Those LGB individuals raised in the church who had since disaffiliated with the religion reported significantly lower levels of internalized homophobia compared to those still active in the church. In Klundt et al.'s (2021) study, the researchers found that LGB students at BYU were more likely to experience suicidal ideation or attempt suicide than their straight peers.

Conversion Therapy

In the LDS church, doctrine and leaders explicitly teach that members of the church who are not heterosexual struggle with feelings of same-sex attraction or same-gender attraction (Eichert, 2021). Allen and Mendez (2018), in their research on hegemonic heteronormativity, noted the general disdain for the terms same-sex attraction and same-gender attraction within the queer community. As expressed by participants, these labels imply that nonheteronormative attraction is something to struggle with and overcome. This religious belief is used to justify so-called conversion therapy, a practice debunked by modern studies and overwhelmingly seen as traumatic for those exposed to the method (Higbee et al., 2022). Higbee et al. (2022) reported that those who underwent the treatment were considered survivors of the practice rather than it being therapeutic.

Conversion therapy is overwhelmingly negatively associated with happiness, with those who experienced the treatment (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) at high risk of posttraumatic stress disorder from the experience and at increased risk of attempting as well as dying by suicide (Andrade & Redondo, 2022). As described by Andrade and Redondo (2022), *conversion therapy* refers to a range of practices predicated on the misguided assumption that homosexuality and bisexuality are pathological conditions that can be cured or altered. Conversion practices are often grounded in outdated and discriminatory attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity. Conversion therapy practices vary, encompassing a range of psychological techniques, spiritual interventions, and physical procedures. Psychological techniques draw upon behaviour modification therapies, including aversion therapy, where individuals are exposed to stimuli associated with same-sex attractions and then presented with an unpleasant stimulus, such as nausea-inducing drugs, intending to create an aversive reaction

to same-sex attractions (Andrade & Redondo, 2022). Spiritual interventions may involve prayer, fasting, or religious ceremonies used in attempts to change an individual's sexual orientation (Andrade & Redondo, 2022).

Andrade and Redondo (2022) reported that conversion therapy is ineffective, with scientific research overwhelmingly demonstrating that sexuality cannot be changed. In their literature review, though, Andrade and Redondo found a distinct difference in measures of acceptance and happiness in individuals who accepted their sexuality compared to those from cultures who negatively viewed nonheterosexual individuals. The authors identified that proposing that sexuality needs to be changed stemmed from religious teachings and ideals, but these heteronormative teachings are now cemented in countless cultures worldwide.

Further studies have assessed the efficacy of conversion therapy and its impact on individuals who undergo it. The consensus among these studies was that conversion therapy is ineffective in changing an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity (Meanley et al., 2020). Moreover, conversion therapy has been associated with numerous adverse outcomes, including depression, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and suicide (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Higbee et al., 2020). In light of the evidence, many mental health organizations, including the American Psychological Association and the World Health Organization, have issued statements condemning conversion therapy and calling for its ban (American Psychological Association, 2009; Meanley et al., 2020). Several countries, including Canada, Germany, Malta, and Taiwan, have banned conversion therapy, while others, such as the United States, have introduced legislation to regulate or prohibit the practice (Higbee, 2020).

While exact statistics do not exist, thousands of active and former Mormons are survivors of conversion therapy sponsored and run by the LDS church (Chakravarty et al., 2022). In

Mormonism, nonheterosexual relationships or sexual acts are considered one of the most severe sins a person can commit (Potter, 2019). These actions are usually dealt with through a disciplinary council resulting in excommunication or disfellowship (Potter, 2019). While conversion therapy has been discredited and rejected by major medical and psychiatric organizations, it continues to be practiced in some religious communities, including the LDS church (Dehlin et al., 2015). Dehlin et al. (2015) surveyed 1,612 individuals who underwent conversion therapy endorsed by the LDS church. The findings were similar to previous studies mentioned: Participants experienced no change in sexuality but did experience increased suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, guilt, shame, posttraumatic stress disorder, and a host of other adverse outcomes, including abuse. The consensus among modern literature is that conversion therapy is a form of abuse (e.g., Bennion et al., 2018; Bradshaw et al., 2015; Dehlin et al. 2015). Specific to Mormonism, many respondents in Dehlin et al.'s study reported failed heterosexual marriages and a loss of faith, with most ultimately leaving the church.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence, conversion therapy remains a controversial practice within the LDS church. In countless cases, church leaders have recommended forms of conversion therapy to members who struggle with same-sex attraction (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Wright, 2021). Wright (2021) explained that this occurs because the LDS church teaches that homosexual behaviour is sinful and that individuals can and should strive to change their sexual orientation through faith and repentance. Many former Mormons and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups have criticized the church for promoting conversion therapy, arguing that it is a harmful and unethical practice (Wright, 2021). Meanley et al. (2020) stated that conversion therapy perpetuates the belief that homosexuality is a mental illness and can lead to negative self-image and self-esteem.

Trauma

Throughout the literature, active and former LDS members frequently pointed to the trauma they had experienced. *Religious trauma* refers to psychological harm caused by adverse experiences within a religious context, such as dogmatic beliefs, rituals, practices, and personal interactions with spiritual leaders (Bennion et al., 2018; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). As noted by Bradshaw et al. (2022), the effects of religious trauma can be severe and long-lasting, leading to symptoms like anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, guilt, shame, and loss of faith. Studies have demonstrated that this phenomenon is widespread across various religious traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Graham et al., 2010; Klundt et al., 2021).

A critical risk factor for religious trauma is dogmatic and rigid religious beliefs, which may cause feelings of guilt or shame, particularly among those expressing religious dissent or nonconformity (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Rigid religious beliefs also increase the potential risk for physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by religious leaders or members (Wright, 2021). As outlined by Wright (2021), protective factors against religious trauma include resilience, supportive relationships, and a positive view of oneself and life. A positive outlook on self and life helps individuals cope with negative experiences caused by religious trauma more effectively; supportive relationships—particularly therapy—provide safe spaces to process these feelings (Wright, 2021).

One source of religious trauma in the LDS church is abuse, a commonly reported issue in organized religions (Bridges et al., 2020). According to a survey conducted by the Mormon Women's Forum, 51% of respondents reported some form of sexual harassment or abuse within their church (Bennion et al., 2018). Furthermore, several high-profile cases of abuse within the

church, particularly those involving prominent leaders, have brought this topic to public awareness (Klundt et al., 2021; Perreault et al., 2023). As Bennion et al. (2018) noted, multiple factors contribute to abuse within the LDS church. First, the patriarchal nature of church structures and the emphasis on male authority means women are seen as subservient and submissive to men, creating a power dynamic which abusers can easily take advantage of. The LDS church's emphasis on purity and chastity can develop a culture of shame and silence around sexual abuse issues, making it difficult for survivors to come forward and report abuse (Bennion et al., 2018). Additionally, the hierarchical structure may discourage reporting abuse outside the church as leadership may attempt to handle things internally instead.

The LDS church has taken several steps to address abuse within its ranks. In 2018, they implemented new guidelines for responding to abuse allegations, such as reporting it to civil authorities, providing counselling services to survivors, and investigating allegations (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). Training programs have been created to educate members about abuse-prevention techniques (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). Nonetheless, researchers have argued that the church still lacks transparency and accountability when dealing with allegations of abuse (Bennion et al., 2018; McGraw et al., 2022; Potter, 2019).

Mental Health

Given the qualities necessary for happiness, depression can—with limitations—indicate a lack of happiness, given a large enough sample size and accurate, equivalent criteria for diagnosis across a population (Bridges et al., 2020; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Mental health illness, a broad term used to acknowledge diagnoses within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; DSM-5-TR; American Psychiatric Association,

2022), is also generally accepted as an indicator of a lack of happiness (Ruggeri et al., 2020). The most frequently diagnosed disorders from the DSM-5-TR, anxiety and depressive disorders, are negatively correlated with happiness and qualities associated with positive mental health indicators (Wasil et al., 2021).

Fritze and Nguyen (2022), on behalf of Mental Health America, collected survey data from every state in the United States in multiple areas related to mental health. In the survey, of the 49 million participants, 599,000 were Utahns. Reinert et al. (2021) analyzed the data and used a subcategory called adults with any mental illness (AMI) encompassing people over 18 with a disorder from the DSM-5-TR diagnosed by an accredited professional. Utah finished last of the 50 states, with 26.86% of individuals meeting AMI criteria, compared to a national average of 19.86%, a statistically significant difference. The state with the lowest instance of mental illness was New Jersey, with an AMI percentage of 16.37%. For reference, 68% of Utah's population identifies as Mormon, whereas Mormons consist of 0.37% of the people of New Jersey, the lowest percentage of Mormons in any US state (Lawson & Xydias, 2020; Newell & Park, 2020).

Mental health diagnoses alone, however, may not be a reliable indicator of happiness in a population. Despite the previously stated statistics indicating higher mental health diagnoses among Utahn Mormons, other peer-reviewed research demonstrated more happiness among Mormons than nonreligious individuals (Dyer et al., 2022). However, those studies were conducted within Utah by researchers working for schools owned by the LDS church.

Suicide is a significant public health concern in the United States, and Utah is no exception. In recent years, the state has seen a substantial increase in suicide rates, which has raised the alarm among health officials, community leaders, and the general public (Bridges et

al., 2020; Dyer et al., 2022). According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), Utah consistently ranks among the states with the highest suicide rates. In 2018, the state had a suicide rate of 27.6 per 100,000, significantly higher than the national average of 14.0 per 100,000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). This trend has continued in recent years, and Utah's suicide rate remains one of the highest in the nation.

In Utah, at least 50% of youth from Grades 6 to 12 have considered or felt suicidal (Dyer et al., 2022). Utah, in particular, is seeing an extremely alarming increase in suicide rates. From 2011 to 2015, Utah saw a 136.2% increase in suicides among youth (Annor et al., 2017). The national increase, in comparison, was 24%. Any rise in suicide rates is a cause for concern, but the difference between the Utah rates and the national rate is a notable and concerning disparity. According to the reported data, the two segments of the Utah population particularly vulnerable to suicide were minors and LGBTQ+ individuals, both children and adults (Dyer et al., 2022).

Happiness Across Religions

Religion has been a central aspect of human life for centuries, serving as a source of comfort, guidance, and community for many individuals (Pargament & Park, 2019). Across various religious traditions, happiness is often considered a fundamental aspect of a fulfilling and meaningful life. Several studies have explored the connection between religion and happiness. As referenced by Pargament and Park, in older literature, more religious individuals reported higher happiness than less religious ones (2019). In these older studies, the relationship between religion and happiness was believed to be mediated by several factors, including social support, purpose in life, and positive coping strategies; religious beliefs appeared to be a weak determinant of happiness.

Ngamaba and Soni (2018) conducted a comprehensive study using data from over 40,000 participants to investigate the influence of religious affiliation on happiness and life satisfaction. They found a positive correlation between religiosity and happiness. Protestants, Buddhists, and Roman Catholics were more likely to report being satisfied and happy in life than members of other faiths. The authors stated this possibility was due to their religions promoting positive emotions like gratitude and compassion. Additionally, religious participants often reported having strong social networks, which can further contribute to happiness. Those in developed nations were more likely to report feeling happy than those who lived in countries with fewer resources, possibly due to higher economic prosperity.

Ngamaba and Soni's (2018) findings indicate that religion can be an influential source of happiness, and country-level factors may also play a part. However, their study had some limitations: a cross-sectional analysis does not allow for causal inferences and the study did not identify specific religious practices that may or may not facilitate happiness. The authors often pointed to culture and society as more significant contributors to happiness than religion. Overall, Ngamaba and Soni's study provided an insightful analysis of the relationship between religion and happiness, but the correlation was not statistically significant. Other studies, such as that by Dyer et al. (2022), contradicted these findings by demonstrating similar happiness levels across all religions within Utah, a Mormon-dominant state.

Religion can also be a source of negative emotions and stress for some individuals. For example, individuals who experience religious trauma, such as experiencing abuse or neglect within a religious community, likely experience decreased levels of happiness and well-being (Streib, 2021; Torgrimsson, 2019). Additionally, individuals who experience conflict between

their religious beliefs and sexual orientation or gender identity may experience stress and decreased happiness levels (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Bradshaw et al., 2022).

Happiness After Mormonism

Research is uncovering the experiences of individuals who have left the LDS church, exploring how this has affected their overall well-being. Case studies noted by Wright (2021) discovered that many LDS church members reported feeling relieved and happier after breaking away from the religion. One comment suggested this sensation was due to freedom from what was perceived as oppressive religious rules and teachings. Furthermore, many others surveyed reported decreased guilt, shame, and anxiety after leaving the congregation, improving their overall well-being.

Jindra and Lee (2021) conducted a study to gain insight into the experiences of individuals who left the LDS church and how social support played a role during their transition process. Their study revealed that individuals with supportive networks of family, friends, and a former Mormon community were more likely to report higher levels of happiness and well-being after leaving the religion than those without those supports. Those who felt isolated and disconnected from a supportive network were more likely to experience negative emotions such as sadness, anger, and disillusionment. Dehlin et al. (2015) employed a mixed methodology to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who left the LDS church. The study revealed that many participants felt relieved and content after leaving the religion, as they could explore their identity and live more authentically. Unfortunately, many also experienced sadness, anger, and betrayal after realizing their religious beliefs did not align with their values and experiences.

In the following sections, I outline the implications of this literature review for counselling psychology as a profession, counselling practice, research, and ethical

considerations. Finally, I detail how engaging in this research and writing process has impacted me personally.

Implications for Counselling

Of all the segments of the Mormon population, LGBTQ+ members are by far the most vulnerable (Klundt et al., 2021). Due to the urgent nature of saving lives among LGBTQ+ Mormons, much of this section is focused on this population and available measures to best protect and help them.

Counselling LGBTQ+ Mormons

Counselling LGBTQ+ Mormons can be a sensitive process due to the unique intersection of their religious and sexual identities; the progression of the counselling relationship will likely address conflict arising between their religious and sexual identities (Klundt et al., 2021). Klundt et al. (2021) reported that many queer Mormons experience significant internal conflict as they navigate these two identities. Therapeutic rapport in such a scenario will benefit from a nonjudgmental and empathetic standpoint, assisting the client on their unique journey towards self-acceptance. Bradshaw et al. (2022) indicated that many current and former Mormons believe homosexuality is a sin; a counsellor arguing this religious belief, particularly early in the process, could cause a fracture in the therapeutic relationship and irreparably impact progress (Jindra & Lee, 2021). At some point, though, psychoeducation regarding better outcomes for queer Mormons working on accepting their sexuality would likely be beneficial, particularly for clients who feel alone and doubt that there is a path outside of orthodox Mormonism (Bridges et al., 2020).

Informed counsellors are likely aware of the potentially detrimental effects religious-based stigma and discrimination can have on the mental health of LGBTQ+ Mormons' and those

from other orthodox religions (Sue & Sue, 2016). Bradshaw et al. (2015) established that experiencing religious-based stigma and discrimination can lead to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation than in those who do not have those experiences. Thus, counsellors would demonstrate cultural competence by being equipped with genuine support, validation, and affirmation when queer Mormons navigate their religious identities alongside sexual identities. That being said, encouraging a client who is struggling with their sexuality in a religious context to live authentically too early could be dangerous (Bridges et al., 2020).

Queer Mormons face a real threat, as identified in the literature review, of being alienated and unwelcome in their families by coming out (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2015, 2022; Potter, 2019). Many LGBTQ+ Mormons maintain their faith in the religion despite the systemic denial of relationships outside of heterosexuality. As with any segment of the population, counselling queer Mormons requires a nuanced and compassionate approach that recognizes the unique challenges and resources available to those individuals. Bridges et al. (2020) identified that current LGBTQ+ members and those disaffiliated have better outcomes when given sexual identity support, sexual identity affirmation, community support, and education.

Resources and Supports

This section is not an exhaustive list of resources but a guide from the literature review to help practitioners connect their clients to helpful supports specific to their situation.

Jindra and Lee (2021) indicated that an essential aspect of counselling questioning or former Mormons is providing access to resources and support systems. Multiple studies in the literature review demonstrated that those with access to supportive religious communities, mental health services, affirming friends, and supportive family members report better mental health outcomes and higher levels of self-esteem than those without those supports (e.g., Jindra

and Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021). Counsellors can be essential in connecting queer Mormons with these resources and creating a nurturing, welcoming atmosphere that instills hope, a vital part of any psychotherapy. As documented at length by Wright (2021), leaving the LDS church is a challenging and complicated process involving a drawn-out deconstruction of personal values, beliefs, and social networks. Mormons who leave the church often experience various difficulties, such as loss of community, family conflict and identity reconstruction. At the same time, many also go through periods of grief, confusion, guilt, anger, and isolation. Given these difficulties, Wright argued that accessing support systems is essential for successfully navigating this transition.

Many commonly reported forms of support are cited in the literature directly from people who have left the LDS church. Readily accessible to most people, support can be found in online forums and social media groups, such as the ex-Mormon subreddit on Reddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon>), Mormon Stories Podcast Community on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/mormonstories>), and Mormon Spectrum (<https://www.mormonspectrum.org/post-ex>). These groups offer individuals an outlet to share their stories, ask questions, communicate with people going through a similar process, and find emotional support (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021). In-person support groups, such as those offered by Thrive and others linked on the Mormon Spectrum website, offer meetings and events for those leaving the church. As described in Wright's (2021) research, these gatherings typically aim to foster new social connections while providing practical resources for life outside of church boundaries. Furthermore, numerous books, podcasts, and websites offer insight and support for those leaving the LDS church.

Existing support systems offer invaluable resources for those leaving the LDS church; however, in an ideal world, family, friends, and community members would recognize the difficulties experienced by these individuals and extend empathy, understanding, and comfort during this transition period (Nica, 2019). Within the current dogma and paradigm of the church, this type of support from active church members happens but is not an expected outcome (Wright, 2021); the LDS church teaches that it is a place for everyone and that members leaving the religion is cause for mourning, a sentiment recently repeated publicly to all church members by the church's current president and prophet, Russell M. Nelson (Nelson, 2022).

Effectiveness of Support Systems

While research into the effectiveness of specific support systems is limited, some studies suggest that accessing support is associated with improved mental health and well-being for those leaving the church (Joseph & Cranney, 2017). For instance, Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) found that participants who reported higher levels of support experienced smoother transitions and better overall mental health outcomes. Furthermore, those in these supportive networks often reported a greater sense of belonging, increased self-esteem, and enhanced coping skills (Bradshaw et al., 2015).

Some studies have compared the relative effectiveness of different forms of support and the importance of different types of support throughout the transition of leaving Mormonism. Wright (2021) noted that online forums and social media groups could benefit individuals early in their transition as they provide anonymity and immediate access to a community of people with similar experiences. That same research demonstrated that in-person support groups appeared to be more effective than online groups at helping individuals create new social networks and overcome practical difficulties. However, further research is necessary to

comprehend better the long-term outcomes for those who use these services to identify potential areas for improvement in service provision.

Leaving Religious Fundamentalism: Common Roadblocks and Steps Forward

As cited in the literature review, Nica (2019) investigated the experiences of individuals leaving religious fundamentalist groups, including Mormonism, focusing on rebuilding social support systems and relationships pertaining to well-being. Nica's research has several key points that any practitioner helping with a faith transition could benefit from understanding. To begin, Nica described the psychological and emotional difficulties experienced by individuals leaving religious fundamentalist groups, such as feelings of loneliness, loss of identity, and having to adjust to a new view of the world, having been removed from their previous base.

Particularly relevant to exiting Mormons, Nica (2019) then emphasized the significance of social support in promoting overall well-being and successful reintegration of former religious fundamentalists back into society, noting that it is an essential aspect of healing. The different forms of social support identified by Nica apply to orthodox Mormons; these supports can assist individuals who have left, such as emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance as well as companionship. Nica assessed factors that might contribute to rebuilding social support networks, including an individual's educational level, SES, and access to local resources and support networks. Nica explicitly addressed the significance of mental health professionals in aiding former religious fundamentalists in creating meaningful connections and support systems, suggesting that interventions designed to foster these meaningful connections could substantially affect their overall well-being. Nica also discussed potential obstacles to rebuilding social support networks, such as stigma, discrimination, and negative stereotypes associated with leaving religious fundamentalist groups. Counsellors working with individuals leaving

Mormonism would benefit from understanding and incorporating these findings from Nica's research.

Counselling Interventions and Frameworks

Counsellors specializing in religious transitions can offer therapeutic support for those experiencing the emotional difficulties associated with leaving the LDS church, and the academic literature repeatedly demonstrates the positive effects of therapy with a licensed counsellor (Racine et al., 2020; Streib, 2021). Counselling and treatment were most successful when provided by mental health professionals who specialize in, or at least are familiar with, religious transitions, as they can address the unique emotional difficulties experienced by those leaving orthodox religions. Those professionals experienced in the field can, genuinely and expertly, help normalize expected experiences that are new, uncomfortable, and often frightening and distressing to the client.

For example, a counsellor experienced in faith transitions could help reassure a client concerned about the length of their journey. Wright (2021) noted that former Mormons' faith transitions could last anywhere from several months to several years depending on factors such as conviction or intensity of prior commitment to the church, level of involvement within the community, and the specific reasons for leaving the church. They found that those who served church missions (an expectation of all young adult Mormon men), held leadership positions, or had strong social networks in the church experienced longer and more challenging transitions. Jindra (2022) found that the length of faith transition experience varied among former members. Some reported a rapid and relatively easy transition, while others experienced an extended and painful one. Furthermore, researchers identified that reasons for leaving the church tended to affect how long and complex the transition would be; those who left due to doctrinal or historical

disagreements typically had longer transitions, while those leaving due to social or personal reasons had shorter experiences with less difficulty (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Wright, 2021).

Another strategy is providing psychoeducation to clients about the process of leaving a religious community. Counsellors can assist clients in understanding that the difficulties they face are typical given their circumstances and that there are solutions and future improvements. Nica (2019) stated that encouraging acceptance and self-compassion among clients as they navigate this transition is effective in recovery. Ultimately, the consensus from the literature is that counselling enables former Mormon clients to explore their values and identity outside the church, giving rise to an inner sense of purpose and significance in their lives.

Counselling Modalities

Several types of therapy have been found effective in supporting individuals transitioning away from orthodox religions. Fundamental therapeutic approaches include cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), narrative therapy, culturally sensitive counselling, existential therapy, solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), and psychodynamic therapy; all have been reported as being effective in the literature (Brandley, 2020; Bridges et al., 2020; Jindra, 2022). Three common approaches are explored here: CBT, ACT, and SFBT

CBT has effectively addressed the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural challenges that individuals may face when leaving orthodox religious communities (Rosmarin et al., 2019). As reported in the Rosmarin et al. (2019) study, CBT assists clients in identifying and challenging maladaptive thoughts and beliefs while fostering adaptive coping strategies.

ACT is another therapeutic approach that has shown promise in helping individuals navigate the complexities of leaving their religious communities (Wright et al., 2021). ACT

emphasizes the development of psychological flexibility, allowing clients to accept their thoughts and feelings while committing to values-based actions (Hayes & Pierson, 2005).

SFBT may have a place in working with clients deconstructing their religion, but it should be implemented cautiously (Yakup, 2019). SFBT emphasizes clients' strengths and resources, focusing on generating solutions to their problems rather than exploring the underlying causes (Yakup, 2019). Although SFBT has proven effective in treating various mental health issues, it may not be the most suitable therapy for deconstructing religion. Potential limitations arise with SFBT's focus on present and future events, because it may not adequately address the deep-rooted psychological and emotional struggles that often accompany questioning one's religious beliefs. Deconstructing one's religion usually entails dealing with complex guilt, loss, and identity confusion, necessitating a more in-depth exploration of past experiences and beliefs to promote healing and growth (Jindra, 2022).

The short duration of SFBT may not give clients enough time to process the complexity associated with deconstructing religious beliefs. Disentangling from an intensely held belief system can be time-consuming and emotionally draining (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Thus, a longer, supportive therapeutic relationship may be necessary to promote healing and personal growth. Last, SFBT's emphasis on quickly identifying and implementing solutions may inadvertently minimize the complexity and significance of clients' existential and spiritual concerns during religious deconstruction (Yakup, 2019). In contrast, other therapeutic approaches, such as CBT or ACT, may provide a more nuanced understanding of clients' struggles and offer a more comprehensive framework for addressing the existential and spiritual dimensions of their experiences (Jindra & Lee, 2021; Joseph & Cranney, 2017).

Cultural competence is essential in working with those addressing religious topics, particularly those born into religious orthodoxy or fundamentalism; cultural competency is considered mandatory by most regulatory psychological bodies (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019; Klundt et al., 2021). Incorporating cultural sensitivity and awareness is valuable when working with individuals transitioning from orthodox religions, as it recognizes and works with each client's unique cultural and religious background (Graham et al., 2010). This approach involves understanding the client's worldview, respecting their beliefs and values, and integrating these elements into the therapeutic process. Realistically, these values would be incorporated by any competent counsellor into any therapeutic framework. However, they are vital when working with former Mormons struggling with their departure from the church.

Ethical Implications

Previous sections in this capstone have addressed the importance of professional ethics, but a brief summary here is intended to benefit practitioners working with Mormon clients or any members of an orthodox religion. Of particular focus are informed consent, anonymity, privacy, potential biases, and impacts experienced by former and current church members. Recent research into the effects of religious affiliation and disaffiliation on happiness and well-being has gained significant traction, as demonstrated in the literature review section. While understanding these effects is essential, ethical considerations should also be taken into account when conducting such a study, something each paper analyzed took considerable effort to do. Furthermore, when counsellors incorporate findings from this research, they must implement this knowledge with the highest ethical standards (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019).

Informed consent is a cornerstone ethical principle in any research involving human participants, and it is necessary for building and maintaining trust in the counselling relationship

(American Psychological Association, 2017). Just as the participants in each of the studies outlined in the literature review received comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits and their rights as participants, counsellors have an ethical requirement to inform their clients about the counselling process, the client's rights, and importantly, the client's right to withdraw consent at any time (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2017). Properly explaining informed consent and addressing power differentials is particularly important when working with clients leaving or considering leaving the LDS church. As referenced through numerous articles in the literature review, many Mormons leaving the church have developed a natural distrust of authority figures and potential power differentials, a common theme in patriarchal, orthodox religions (e.g., Bennion et al., 2018; Bridges et al., 2020). Addressing power differentials is further discussed in the Bias section below.

Anonymity and privacy are fundamental for protecting participants' identities and maintaining trust in the counselling process (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019), and protecting them is a requirement of all major governing bodies of psychology. A common theme in the literature review was the lack of privacy often found in the Mormon culture. As referenced by Bradshaw et al. (2015), many former members, including LGBTQ+ Mormons, were subjected to disciplinary hearings by the church due to reports from other members to church leaders. From that perspective, many clients who have left Mormonism may be hesitant or even unfamiliar with the concept of privacy in conversation. Counsellors of Mormon or former Mormon clients must guarantee that participants' information and content discussed in the session will not be revealed to anyone barring certain exceptions such as the potential for self-harm, harm to others, or legal subpoenas (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019).

Bias

Counsellors must be mindful of potential biases that could influence their dynamic with the client. Countertransference will almost certainly occur for counsellors who have left orthodox religion or, specifically, the LDS church (Jindra, 2022). This countertransference is not limited to those counsellors who have had personal experiences with faith traditions, with bias coming from personal beliefs, cultural background, or preconceived notions about Mormonism and its members. Such judgments against any client may be unfair and harm the counselling relationship if not addressed correctly. As referenced by Wright (2021), many former LDS church members desire a unique identity and want to be recognized for their own beliefs, not those of the church. This cultural sensitivity is essential when working with those who have left, and a way to minimize these potential biases is through reflexivity (Jindra, 2022). For example, some former members might like to joke about Mormonism, creating a shared connection. This reflexivity and connection are created through the therapeutic alliance and done so by understanding the unique needs of each client, core skills of a competent counsellor (Watt et al., 2019).

In contrast, for others, a joking comment about their religion could be hugely insensitive and possibly invoke a trauma response, negatively impacting the counselling relationship (Bradshaw et al., 2015). The counsellor must monitor their perspectives and assumptions throughout the process. For former Mormon counsellors working with clients leaving the LDS church, ethically consulting with another trusted counsellor would be a good measure of self-care and likely benefit the client (Jindra & Lee, 2021).

Happiness research can profoundly affect both former and current members of the church (Jindra, 2022; Jindra & Lee, 2021). Counsellors must use proper judgment and develop a good

understanding of the client before psychoeducation regarding findings about happiness in Mormons versus those outside the church. Depending on the client's experiences, findings may offer validation or cause distress depending on their unique context. Professionals must be sensitive to individual emotional reactions to mitigate emotional trauma during counselling, which is intended to be a healing environment. As referenced by Jindra (2022), the counsellor should proceed at the speed with which the client is comfortable when discussing topics in Mormonism. Prematurely addressing concepts such as doctrinal beliefs before the client is ready could cause a fracture in the relationship.

People leave Mormonism for varied reasons, and that variation is significant for counsellors with the shared experience of exiting an orthodox religion. Although it may seem beneficial to approach Mormons leaving the religion from a perspective of expert knowledge, each client is unique and in different stages of their faith journey. Many Mormons leave because they take issue with the church's conservative views on sexuality and LGBTQ+ relations (Potter, 2019). In contrast, others go primarily over doctrinal concerns, and countless others leave because of gender equality (Wright, 2021). Prematurely jumping into concepts such as doctrinal beliefs before the client is ready could cause a fracture in the relationship.

Furthermore, counsellors should be mindful of the power dynamics within a therapeutic relationship and strive to empower clients to make their own decisions about faith and identity. For the counsellor, it is crucial to note that this experience may be foreign and unique for many former Mormons familiar with a patriarchal system. Members are taught to obey authority figures, particularly men. Many have likely had experiences with church leaders, such as bishops or stake presidents, who give advice and commands to members in the guise of counselling (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Those who come to therapy with a licensed professional may be

unfamiliar with an environment of true acceptance and autonomy placed on the client. In such a scenario, the counsellor must ease the client into this new dynamic.

Counselling LGBTQ+ Church Members

Mental health professionals must consider specific ethical considerations when counselling queer Mormons. Many of these members struggle with their sexual identity and have difficulty accepting that they are not heterosexual (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Joseph & Cranney, 2017). The LDS church has taught and continues to teach that relationships with members of the same sex is an egregious sin (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). The intersectionality of sexual orientation and religious identity poses unique challenges, and practitioners must balance the needs of their clients within the context of their cultural and religious beliefs. A well-meaning counsellor encouraging a gay Mormon client to live authentically may be demonstrating a lack of cultural awareness and the repercussions that often come with coming out in a strict Mormon family and culture. As shown by Joseph and Cranney (2017), LGB members frequently reported losing familial relationships and support from the LDS church.

The queer Mormon population represents an intersection of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and adhere to the beliefs and practices of the LDS church (Klunt et al., 2021). Mental health professionals who provide counselling services to this population must navigate a complex set of ethical considerations as they attempt to support their clients' mental well-being while respecting their desire to adhere to their religious beliefs. As with any client, counsellors must provide informed consent, ensuring that clients understand the nature of the counselling process, potential risks, and benefits (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019). As referenced in the literature, for queer Mormons, internal conflicts within the client related to sexual orientation,

gender identity, and religious beliefs will inevitably come up (Bradshaw et al., 2015), demonstrating that addressing potential risks of counselling when giving informed consent is necessary.

While practitioners benefit from cultural competence and knowledge about the specific challenges faced by queer Mormons, including potential discrimination and mental health disparities (Jindra, 2022), they would also benefit from a basic understanding of doctrinal teachings and cultural practices of the LDS church to provide culturally competent counselling (Klundt et al., 2021). This includes understanding the impact of religious beliefs on clients' experiences, such as how they may internalize negative messages about their sexual orientation or gender identity. By doing so, counsellors demonstrate respect for clients' autonomy and right to self-determination rather than the counsellor instilling their own goals and beliefs on the client (Wright, 2021).

For many counsellors, especially in 2023, working with a client who feels pressure and expectation to choose celibacy or avoid relationships with genders to which they are attracted will likely prove taxing. For queer Mormons who want to stay in the faith, the teachings and expectations are clear: individuals who experience "same-sex attraction" may enter a heteronormative marriage or remain celibate for life (Bridges et al., 2020; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). However damaging such a goal may be to the individual in the eyes of the counsellor, the job of a competent, culturally competent therapist is to work within the framework of the client's religious beliefs, even if they may conflict with the practitioner's values or beliefs. It is important to avoid imposing personal biases or attempting to change clients' religious beliefs or affiliations, as this would be an unethical use of countertransference (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019). However, for the counsellor aware of the mental health

struggles that dominate the LGBTQ+ community in Mormonism, these conflicts of countertransference are understandable; LGBTQ+ Mormons are dying at rates higher than any other LGBTQ+ group in the country, a public health emergency in the state of Utah (Bridges et al., 2020; Dyer et al., 2022; Joseph & Cranney, 2017). The counsellor in this situation needs to remain aware of these potential conflicts and seek consultation or supervision when necessary.

When a vulnerable client such as an LGBTQ+ Mormon comes for help, the data demonstrates how crucial it is for the mental health professional to maintain a genuinely open and nonjudgmental stance (Jindra & Lee, 2021). This nonjudgmental space involves creating a safe and supportive therapeutic environment where clients can discuss their experiences and concerns without fear of judgment or rejection. As cited in Bradshaw et al. (2015), some former Mormons who identify as LGBTQ+ found this nonjudgmental space to be a new, appreciated concept they did not find in Mormonism, allowing the client to imagine a path outside their religion. Even in the case of informed counsellors in LGBTQ+ and Mormonism, counsellors must avoid making assumptions about clients' beliefs or experiences and actively seek to understand their unique perspectives through the client's lens (Wright, 2021).

Like any other client, LGBTQ+ Mormons will likely benefit from affirmative and inclusive support that acknowledges and validates their experiences by normalizing and validating their feelings, emphasizing strengths and resilience, and supporting them in exploring their values and goals (Bridges et al., 2020). When working with queer Mormon clients, counsellors would benefit from being willing to adapt evidence-based interventions to be more culturally sensitive and relevant, which could involve incorporating elements of clients' religious beliefs and cultural context into the therapeutic process. For example, counsellors might use spiritual practices, such as prayer or scripture study, to support clients in their healing journey

while also identifying potential conflicts between their religious beliefs and sexual or gender identity if the counsellor feels addressing so is appropriate (Pargament & Park, 2019).

A commonly reported obstacle among LGBTQ+ Mormons, both active in the religion and those who have left, are systemic challenges they face within their religious community, such as discrimination, exclusion, and a lack of understanding or support, codified for generations in the doctrine (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Dehlin et al., 2015). Where appropriate, and following the client's goals, a counsellor can work with clients to develop strategies for addressing these systemic issues, such as advocating for change within their religious community, connecting with supportive networks, or exploring alternative religious affiliations that may be more affirming of their LGBTQ+ identity.

Future Research

A step forward in understanding happiness after leaving Mormonism is establishing a precise definition of happiness, at least for use in research. As demonstrated in the Dyer et al. (2022) article, the researchers from BYU surmised that Mormons were happier than other demographics in Utah despite high rates of depression and suicide in Mormons. Concluding a general sense of happiness in a culture struggling with depression and suicide seems counterintuitive and is the primary reason for the need for a more specific measure of happiness in further studies. Furthermore, these conclusions argue for the need for research from neutral organizations unaffiliated with the LDS church.

Happiness may be an abstract concept that is objectively difficult to define or quantify, but numerous markers represent an absence of happiness, such as depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019). Pressures exist in the Mormon culture to

report happiness, so compared to self-report questionnaires, these objective markers may provide higher validity and reliability.

Many articles, notably Jindra and Lee's 2021 research, identified factors contributing to happiness after leaving Mormonism. Commonly cited contributors to happiness after leaving included a sense of newfound freedom, increased autonomy and personal agency, and feelings of community and belonging in non-Mormon communities. Most of these findings were found in qualitative studies, which may or may not be a limitation. In the future, quantitative studies replicated with larger samples of participants with more diverse backgrounds could be beneficial in garnering additional support in the scientific community. Furthermore, other potential factors contributing to happiness that deserve further research include social support networks, self-efficacy levels, and coping strategies. Again, Nica's (2019) comprehensive study on orthodox deconstruction stressed the need for further investigation into the complex process of reconstructing social support networks and relationships for those leaving religious fundamentalist groups and developing effective interventions and resources to facilitate their successful reintegration into society.

Another essential next step is to investigate the potential effects of leaving Mormonism on individual well-being. While some individuals experience relief after leaving (Wright, 2021), others struggle with feelings of loss, grief, and social isolation (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Balanced research would explore potentially negative and positive outcomes; this could include comparing the well-being of those who have left versus those who stayed and exploring experiences for those who have left and then returned to the church. Individuals leaving Mormonism face difficulties unique to orthodox religions that can negatively affect their mental health and well-being. Mormons have been taught that leaving is a grievous, eternal sin; for those who leave, this

programming and indoctrination can lead to guilt or shame (Wright, 2021). Furthermore, future research would benefit from identifying specifically which segments of the Mormon population are leaving in greater numbers, helping to further understand how SES, ethnicity, race, social location, and sexuality influence leaving the LDS church.

For many members of the LDS church, leaving can be a time for faith deconstruction and identity reconstruction that can present psychological and social difficulties (Jindra & Lee, 2021). Counsellors benefit from an awareness of the unique challenges experienced by those leaving Mormonism and specific strategies to support them. A particular challenge counsellors would benefit from understanding is that a Mormon leaving the religion will likely cause strain in relationships with family members or friends who remain active members (Klundt et al., 2021). Multiple articles suggested that traditional evidence-based counselling approaches are effective in working with those leaving Mormonism, such as strengths-based approaches emphasizing personal agency and resilience (e.g., Jindra, 2022). Counsellors can work with clients to identify their resources and strengths, then devise coping strategies based on these assets.

Conclusion

Exiting a religious community can be an emotionally charged and complex process with short-term and long-term repercussions for an individual's mental health and well-being (Nica, 2019). As demonstrated throughout the literature review, deconstructing one's religious identity can be a profoundly challenging and life-altering event, often leading to a wide range of emotions experienced over a relatively short period. However, the overwhelming majority of the data demonstrate that the general public has similar happiness rates to Mormonism, and for those who leave Mormonism, happiness and satisfaction are found after their departure (Wright, 2021).

Personal Reflection on Literature Review

Poring through the existing research has invited continual reflection on my journey navigating Mormonism. Reading about the struggles of those who have left triggered empathy and often memories of negative experiences within the church, but seeing common themes in the literature similar to my experiences provided validation for the complex emotions and experiences I encountered. Born and raised in the Mormon faith, then leaving the religion at 30 and resigning at 32, this research has validated my reasons for leaving and shed light on the shared experiences of those who have embarked on a similar path. I ultimately left the religion for various reasons, including the LDS church's stance on LGBTQ+ rights, false truth claims, patriarchy, sexism, sexual shame, and information control. The research overwhelmingly demonstrated that I was not alone, and most others who left had similar reasons; these shared concerns and issues strengthened my confidence in moving on from Mormonism, liberating me from the confines of a faith that did not align with my values.

Likely the most pivotal, eye-opening findings in reviewing the literature were the repeated documentation of dramatically increased mental health problems and suicide rates among LGBTQ+ church members. Though I have experienced some challenges faced by questioning and exiting Mormonism, I have done so as a White-passing, heterosexual, educated male, the demographic most accepted and likely to succeed in Mormonism. Seeing the data highlighting the immense harm the religion has had on LGBTQ+ individuals reinforced my decision to leave the Mormon faith. I am even more motivated now to speak up for these vulnerable populations within the church and stop this epidemic of self-hatred and suicide. The research, outside of Mormon-owned schools, repeatedly demonstrated better outcomes for LGBTQ+ people after leaving the religion, far different than the Mormon narrative that everyone

finds more happiness within the faith. I intend to use this data to empower others to embrace happiness on their terms and work towards healing from the Mormon doctrinal teachings that encourage sexual shame.

Furthermore, the research findings have deepened my sensitivity and empathy toward the unique obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Mormonism. The data regarding mental health diagnoses and suicide rates among LGBTQ+ members of the church have illuminated the urgency for acceptance, support, and advocacy for this marginalized group. While I was already an ally and an advocate, I now want to do more to help LGBTQ+ individuals, Mormon or not. We need a more inclusive and compassionate society, and I can do more to help. The area where I live, Calgary, has a relatively high Mormon population but few targeted supports for those who have left. I plan to help by offering group counselling for post-Mormons or questioning Mormons, ideally minimizing as many barriers as possible so that all who want to attend can attend.

The validation and understanding I gained through this research have further helped me overcome any lingering doubts or guilt associated with my departure from the Mormon faith. It has given me the confidence to embrace my own beliefs and values, free from the fear of judgment or condemnation. This newfound freedom has allowed me to live an authentic life and pursue my unique path to happiness, which is precisely what I hope to be able to help my clients do. Furthermore, I have gained new insights into the factors contributing to my decision to leave Mormonism. Multiple studies revealed the detrimental effects of false truth claims, the perpetuation of patriarchy, the burden of sexual shame, and the control exerted over information sources. This research has reinforced that my departure from the church was rooted in valid

concerns and an honest search for truth and personal fulfillment rather than simply not having enough faith or wanting to “sin.”

Cognitive dissonance was a regular part of my life for decades, something I thought was normal. For years, I fought internally the issues I had with specific Mormon doctrine. The literature highlighted the effects of false truth claims, which, as it turns out, consistently led to cognitive dissonance and a loss of trust in the institution. Furthermore, I no longer need to feel guilty for being a part of a system that perpetuates patriarchal structures, limiting the agency and equality of its members. This self-growth will undoubtedly be crucial in my work with clients to help them find the way that works best for them and feels authentic.

The research has altered how I engage with the world and paved the way for new ways of being. My exit has allowed me to explore and shape my identity on my terms, fostering a genuine sense of authenticity and fulfillment. No more am I constrained by the church’s control.

I am happier now than when I was in the religion. How encouraging it is to see that the literature indicates my outcome is quite common.

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