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## “This Incredible Monster Was Always in the Way”: The Moral Career of a Sexual Sinner in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

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## **“This Incredible Monster Was Always in the Way”: The Moral Career of a Sexual Sinner in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints**

### **Abstract**

This article elaborates a symbolic interactionist approach to the scientific study of sexual sin. We draw on archival materials from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and explore recurring themes within the archival materials that signify and outline stages of a sexual sinners’ moral career. Our findings demonstrate how LDS leaders constructed a sinner’s moral career as characterized by (1) seeking out sinful temptation; (2) causing social and spiritual destruction; and (3) seeking and finding redemption. Further, we draw out implications for understanding the ways religious leaders conceptualize sexual sins for their followers, and the usefulness of conceptualizing various religious traditions, adaptations, and conceptualizations of sin as moral careers.

### **Keywords**

Religion, Sexualities, Content Analysis, Sin, Pornography, Mormonism

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## **“This Incredible Monster Was Always in the Way”: The Moral Career of a Sexual Sinner in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints**

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*This article elaborates a symbolic interactionist approach to the scientific study of sexual sin. We draw on archival materials from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and explore recurring themes within the archival materials that signify and outline stages of a sexual sinners' moral career. Our findings demonstrate how LDS leaders constructed a sinner's moral career as characterized by (1) seeking out sinful temptation; (2) causing social and spiritual destruction; and (3) seeking and finding redemption. Further, we draw out implications for understanding the ways religious leaders conceptualize sexual sins for their followers, and the usefulness of conceptualizing various religious traditions, adaptations, and conceptualizations of sin as moral careers. Keywords: Religion, Sexualities, Content Analysis, Sin, Pornography, Mormonism*

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Knowing that others struggle with the temptations of pornography, I feel impelled to share my story, which offers hope that this ugly sin can be overcome. (*Author Withheld*, “The Husband’s Story,” *Ensign*, 2001)

Like many other conservative Christians, the author of “The Husband’s Story” wrestles with competing sexual and religious desires. The author of “The Husband’s Story” is aware that believers who stray from institutionally and theologically defined sexual norms risk both their eternal salvation and their place in the church. As Barton (2012) notes, contemporary conservative Christianity defines sexual morality as explicitly evidenced through heterosexual marriage and is built upon a foundation of abstinence from all other forms of sexual practice. The struggle conservative Christians experience when they engage in other sexual practices unfolds as believers attempt to reconcile sinful sexual desires with their longing for Godly lives. These sexual sinners thus not only commit to curbing or eliminating sinful sexual desires and practices, but also, due to the very definition of religious tradition (Weber, 1993), seek to do so in ways that reestablish their connection to the divine *and* their eternal salvation.

Although primarily focused on homosexuality, a growing body of research focuses on some ways conservative Christians attempt to overcome sexual desires and practices denounced by their religious tradition. The implications of these studies include that believers draw heavily upon the resources provided by conservative Christian organizational (Cadge, Girouard, Olsen, & Lylerohr, 2012), institutional (Robinson & Spivey, 2007), and political (Fetner, 2008) leaders. Further, these studies reveal that believers use these resources to construct cognitive (Pitt, 2010), emotional (Erzen, 2006), narrative (Ponticelli, 1999), interpersonal (Thumma, 1991), and ideological (Wolkomir, 2006) strategies that allow them to integrate seemingly contradictory sexual and religious selves. While these studies have significantly expanded our understanding of homosexuality within conservative Christianity

and importantly revealed the interplay between leaders and followers in sexual matters, we know far less about the ways conservative Christian leaders explain sexual sin to their followers (Sumerau, Mathers, & Cragun, 2016a; Cragun & Sumerau, 2017).

How do conservative Christian leaders make sense of sexual sin within the context of their established sexual and religious traditions? Considering that religious traditions often dramatically influence social and political policy locally and globally, ascertaining the role of sexual sin in such traditions offers insights into the construction and dissemination of norms across the world. In fact, this is even more important in traditions like Mormonism where the tradition itself has a global presence and seeks to convert populations across the world to its established norms regarding sexualities and sin more broadly. As such, we utilize this case to shed light on the ways people make sense of sexual sin in a local context with an eye toward the ways such endeavors may influence broader notions of morality in the world.

To this end, we examine this question through content analysis of archival materials from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, LDS Church, or Mormon). We selected this qualitative design in order to explore official teachings of the church disseminated to members both within and beyond official religious meetings. In so doing, we are able to document the dominant interpretation all members must make sense of in their pursuit of moral sexual and religious selves. As such, we analyze how LDS leaders constructed the experience of sexual sin in terms of a “moral career” (Goffman, 1961), which refers to a career composed of the progressive changes—or stages—that occur in the beliefs one has concerning one’s self, the social others one is most concerned about, and one’s behaviors. In so doing, our analysis extends religious and sexual studies by demonstrating some ways conservative Christian leaders make sense of sexual sin for their followers, and the usefulness of conceptualizing various religious experiences in terms of moral careers (see also Cragun & Sumerau, 2017). Rather than attempting to generalize our findings to other conservative Christian traditions, we thus outline stages in the moral career of a sexual sinner, which could be examined within and across religions and in relation to other types of sin (see also Becker, 1998).

In so doing, our analysis also demonstrates the importance of studies of social elites. Following Schwalbe and associates (2000), research typically focuses heavily upon the experience of subordinates operating within institutional, cultural, and historical structures (see also Blumer, 1969; Goffman 1961). While this focus provides fruitful information concerning the ways subordinates experience and interpret existing structural realities, we know far less about the ways elites shape these realities. By focusing on LDS elites, our analysis reveals some ways the meaning making of religious elites establishes the interactional patterns subordinates within said traditions navigate in their face-to-face interactions.

### **Moral Careers**

To better understand how LDS leaders make sense of sinful experience, we draw on Erving Goffman’s (1961) elaboration of the “moral career.” Following Goffman (1961), people experience stages throughout their lives wherein they interpret their selves, beliefs, behaviors, and rituals in relation to their most significant relationships. In so doing, they depend upon the institutional and ideological frameworks provided by leaders to ascertain the value of their beliefs and actions as well as the mechanisms whereby they may adopt, sustain, lose, and reclaim morally valuable selves. As a result, we may gain insights into the moral experience of individuals and groups by examining the institutional frameworks—such as stories, belief systems, customs, and traditions—that simultaneously constrain and facilitate people’s moral development (see also Goffman, 1963). To this end we must evaluate the acceptable stages of moral development outlined by institutional authorities.

Although explicitly religious topics have not typically been the focus of this approach (but see Cragun & Sumerau, 2017), research suggests that examining “moral careers” may provide significant insight into the experience of sin (Sumerau, Mathers, & Cragun, 2016b). In his classic work on marijuana use, for example, Becker (1963) found that drug users needed to pass through specific stages to separate themselves from normative society and establish their claims to subcultural membership. Similarly, Johnson and Best (2012) showed that parents of lesbian women and gay men went through stages to reestablish their parental selves and make sense of unexpected sexual conflicts (see also Mathers, Sumerau, & Ueno, 2015). Further, Adler and Adler (2007) demonstrated that self-injury—like many other forms of social deviance—had historically undergone a transformation from sinful behavior to psychological condition to socially deviant. That religious leaders spend considerable resources decrying drug abuse, alternative family forms, and the loosening of traditional “morals” (see Fetner, 2008), these studies suggest there may be much to learn from the ways these leaders construct the moral career of a sinner.

Building on these insights, our analysis demonstrates the social construction of a sexual sinner’s moral career. Before presenting our analysis, however, we contextualize the moral career of a sinner within LDS leaders’ elaboration of the moral career of a faithful Mormon. In so doing, we discuss how the moral career of a sinner represents a disruption within the ideal life course of a Mormon, which may ultimately be resolved by passing through the stages of sin and redemption. As we discuss below, the ideal Mormon career contains expectations of disruption (e.g., without falling victim to sin one cannot fully appreciate the grace of God), which suggests experiences like those of sexual—and other—sinners are necessary for the theological and institutional structure of the Church. As such, our analysis of a sexual sinner’s moral career may shed light upon the role of sin within society.

### **The Mormon Moral Career**

Like other religious traditions (see Weber, 1993), Mormon doctrine posits a specific story of the world as well as the place of human beings within and beyond the world. Within this story, Mormon doctrine explains the origins, dynamics, and eternal results of existence, and in so doing, provides a set of spiritual and social guidelines that allow followers to make sense of their experiences in relation to an eternal timeline (see also Berger, 1967). Like other “formula stories” (Loseke, 2007) or “ideal types” (Weber, 1993), Mormon doctrine provides the framework for a moral career as well as the symbolic resources necessary for regulating social life and constructing moral selves (Goffman, 1961, 1963). As a result, outlining the moral career of a sinner requires making sense of the ideal Mormon moral career.

The Mormon moral career consists of three phases, each of which corresponds to a specific stage of existence (Ludlow, 1992). In the first phase, people experience the celestial realm as disembodied spirits awaiting their lives on this earth. Literally, the children of the divine, Mormon doctrine asserts that each person is birthed from the creator parents (i.e., a heavenly father *and* mother) in the spiritual realm, and waits—although what occurs during this waiting period is unclear—for her or his mortal birth into the earthly realm. Joseph Smith Jr., the founder and individual who developed the majority of the theology of the religion, referred to the period of disembodied spiritual existence as the initial phase of Mormons’ eternal life. Further, Mormon doctrine suggests that people experience this phase in the company of their creator parents. As such, this period of spiritual existence is the first phase of the ideal Mormon moral career.

The second phase of the Mormon moral career consists of one’s earthly experience. Mormon doctrine argues that disembodied spirits are brought into the earthly realm through heterosexual reproduction, and then embark upon a life-long test of their faithfulness and

commitment to the divine. During this time, Mormon doctrine requires earthly beings to maintain their spiritual purity by abstaining from all sexual conduct prior to and beyond the confines of heterosexual marriage. Further, Mormon doctrine defines heterosexual reproduction and family formation as the primary purposes of earthly existence. As such, Mormons are commanded to build families predicated upon sexual and spiritual regulation, religious service, and moral development. In so doing, Mormons who adequately manage this phase of their moral career will move on to the final phase of spiritual existence after death.

It is important to note that, like all “ideal types” (Weber, 1993) and “formula stories” (Loseke, 2007), Mormon doctrine makes room for exceptional cases within the overall moral career. When people fail to become married or produce children through no fault of their own, for example, they are still capable of living moral lives—and thus passing their earthly test—by maintaining their own spiritual and sexual purity. Similarly, Mormon doctrine asserts that people who give in to sinful tendencies or leave the Church for any number of reasons may return to their divinely inspired moral paths. Since the official Mormon moral career may not always map onto the experiences of actual believers, Mormon teachings—like the moral career of a sinner outlined in this study—provide alternative paths that make sense of disruptions in the official Mormon moral career (see also Goffman, 1963).

Following an earthly experience, Mormon doctrine asserts that believers will enter the final phase of spiritual existence. Mormons believe that specific aspects of their earthly test will be evaluated upon death. Rather than simply a pass or fail grade, however, Mormon doctrine asserts that believers will be sorted into different levels of glory or reward. These levels of glory include three distinct “kingdoms”: the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial kingdoms, listed from lowest to highest degree of glory. The Mormon quasi-equivalent to “hell” is called “outer darkness” and is not considered a degree of glory. The most faithful—those judged worthy of the Celestial Kingdom—will be allowed to maintain relationships with families and spouses throughout eternity, live in the presence of the divine, and become divine. As such, the variations in the Mormon afterlife represent the final phase of the official Mormon moral career.

In the analysis below, we examine how LDS leaders managed disruptions in the Mormon moral career. Specifically, we analyze how they constructed the moral career of a sexual sinner. In so doing, LDS leaders responded to pornographic consumption—an activity that their official moral career had no room for—by establishing a set of stages whereby believers could experience sexual sin in ways that ultimately led them back to the official Mormon moral career. As such, their construction of the moral career of a sexual sinner ultimately reinforced the official Mormon moral career, and by extension, believers’—both the sinful and the faithful—commitment to the established sexual and spiritual traditions of the faith.

## **Methods and Analysis**

Before outlining our methods, it is important to note the standpoint of the authors in relation to the study. We came to this study due first to the second author’s experience as a member of a multi-generational Mormon family who once practiced the faith before leaving it in his early twenties. His access to insider information and the data set as both a former Mormon and expert on the faith in scientific circles created the opportunity for this study. He then brought in the first author, an agnostic scholar raised in another religious tradition, and the third author, a scholar with no real connection to Mormonism who studies sexualities, to examine patterns in the teachings of the Mormon faith. Together, we looked at the data set both with the eyes of a former practitioner, and from the perspectives of two scholars without any connection

to the faith beyond the first author studying and publishing on it and other Christian traditions to date.

As part of a larger study investigating LDS leaders' constructions of sexual issues over time, we sought to better understand Mormon reactions to sexual sin. To this end, we collected archives of the LDS's General Conference talks (1897 – 2012) and its monthly publication *Ensign* (1971 – 2012). The LDS General Conference is a biannual meeting where members and others gather to receive instruction and inspiration from Church leaders. Similarly, *Ensign* is the official adult publication of the LDS Church, which generally contains faith-promoting and proselytizing guidance for members. Since LDS leaders hold editorial power over the release of all official Church documents, the combination of these materials represents a comprehensive record of official LDS teachings in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

As part of the larger project, we sought to evaluate Mormon leaders' attitudes and teachings about pornography. To this end, we utilized a word search program called *dtSearch*, which allowed us to index text files and rapidly search for specific terms. In so doing, we could identify all usages of relevant terms, such as “pornography,” “porn,” and “sexually explicit material,” and pull the documents wherein LDS leaders discussed these issues. After identifying relevant documents, we sorted out articles and speeches concerning pornography, and set these aside for analysis. This process yielded a final sample of 427 *Ensign* articles and General Conference talks (*GC*).

During our initial examinations, we found that LDS leaders often offered testimonies of pornographic consumption in their speeches and publications. These testimonies generally consisted of either LDS leaders telling stories about people who wrestled with pornography, or *Ensign* issues containing anonymous articles where people explained how they managed pornography. Noticing the frequency of these types of speeches and publications, we went back through the data and separated out the “testimonies” for further analysis. This process yielded a final sample of 35 pornography testimonies offered in the last 30 years (34 concerning men's pornographic use and 1 about women's use). LDS leaders occasionally—though not nearly as frequently—offered similar testimonies concerning homosexual, adulterous, pre-marital sexual, and masturbatory experience, which followed the same stages we outline below. As such, pornographic testimonies may represent a catch-all interpretation of sexual sin for LDS leaders, which allows us to outline the moral career of sexual sinners engaged in a variety of practices. While it is beyond our capability to either verify or falsify the claims made in these testimonies, we treat them as “formula stories” (Loseke, 2007) LDS leaders disseminated to explain pornographic experience to their followers, and in so doing, we examine what meanings of sin may be gleaned from these statements.

Drawing on elements of “grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006), we thus examined each of the testimonies for recurring patterns and compared them to one another in search of similarities and differences. We selected this approach because there was no way to know or hypothesize ahead of time what the contents of such teachings might be in the publications. As we are the first to attempt this type of analysis with this specific content, we sought to build insights from the ground up via careful reading, discussion, and reflection on the meanings embedded within these documents read by many Mormons throughout the world. As such, we searched through the documents, closely reading and constantly comparing the contents throughout, looking at the varied emergent patterns of instruction presented in the cases and stories. This process allowed us to ascertain and compare the specific teachings within the articles that could be found between and across the varied articles over time.

To this end, the analysis followed an inductive manner (Schwalbe et al., 2000). First, we read through each of the documents in full taking notes and comparing interpretations. Then, we went back through pulling quotes that were representative of the whole and comparing these to each other. We then went through the entire data set a third time from start

to finish comparing the initial codes to what we found on the third round. With these things completed, we began sorting each theme into categories and narrowing down the themes into only those that were most common throughout the data set. This led to far more quote examples in the text that could fit in an article, but we utilized the most illustrative cases for the article itself. This back and forth comparison revealed a series of steps or stages from sinful initiation to spiritual redemption.

Following Charmaz (2006), we then compared this series to existing narratives captured in secular and religious literatures. We further examined the discussions of sin and morality in varied religious and secular literatures and noted that none of them captured the ways people experienced sin and salvation over time, but rather focused more on what these terms meant. As such, we organized the presentation of the data in relation to the series of stages or moral career revealed by examining and comparing the steps whereby people went from ideal to sinner to salvation according to the contents of the articles approved by the leadership. As a result, we created categories to capture each phase of the process, and the following presentation is outlined in this manner. As such, we outline the moral career of a sexual sinner as (1) seeking out sinful temptation; (2) causing social and spiritual destruction; and (3) seeking and finding redemption.

### **The Moral Career of a Sexual Sinner**

LDS leaders came to construct a moral career for sexual sinners because of the perceived conflicts their established sexual traditions faced. They interpreted pornographic influence in society as a source of especially dangerous temptation for their followers. As the following excerpt from a testimony published in *Ensign* reveals, LDS leaders were aware of how prevalent pornographic—and other sexual—influences were in the world:

We talked for almost two hours, and I realized then that this type of struggle was not mine alone—it is a growing problem among some members of the Church as pornography becomes more widespread, accessible, and culturally acceptable (Author Withheld, “The Husband’s Story,” *Ensign*, 2001).

Echoing this sentiment, the following excerpt demonstrates the ways such influence could impact the lives of other people who interacted with pornographic users:

My worst Mother’s Day was more than five years ago. That was when I told my husband, that I could not bear his addiction to pornography any longer, that it was as if he had a mistress in the house (Author Withheld, “The Wife’s Story,” *Ensign*, 2001).

In fact, as the following excerpt from 1972 makes clear, LDS leaders had long been deeply concerned about pornography: “In every store where books are sold suitable for children, close by are racks of magazines and pocketbooks, many of which are filthy and crying out with lurid covers” (Author Withheld, “Our Readers Write,” *Ensign*, 1972). Seeking to combat these sexual concerns and provide followers with guidelines for managing sexual sin, LDS leaders constructed a moral career for sexual sinners that could lead followers through sexual sin and into the glory of redemption.

## Seeking Out Sinful Temptation

Similar to traditional religious narratives concerning sin and salvation (see Weber, 1993), LDS leaders characterized the origin of sinners' moral careers as a turn from grace. Specifically, they relied upon theological distinctions between moral and immoral practice to suggest that sexual sinners sought out unholy temptations. Echoing the notion that all people are inherently manifestations of God's creation, they suggested that sexual sins drew people away from their divine purpose. As a result, the first stage of the moral career of a sexual sinner involved succumbing to the temptations of this world, and in so doing, stepping away from the ideal trajectory of Mormon experience (see also Berger, 1967).

LDS leaders suggested that followers could embark upon a sinful career by seeking out sexual temptations that arose in the context of normal adolescent development. As one anonymous testimony noted, this type of temptation often came from becoming "curious about the opposite sex" while failing to take seriously the "cautions" God provided (Author Withheld, "The Husband's Story," *Ensign*, 2001). Expanding on this idea, the "husband" continued:

While attending college, for example, my roommates and I took in a few of the abundant R-rated movies available in local theaters as well as inappropriate programs on cable television. As priesthood holders, we felt guilty when we failed to live up to our standards—but we didn't change our behavior. I was moving reel upon reel and frame upon frame down the broad path to destruction.

Despite "feeling guilty," believers could begin their journey of sexual sin with small missteps. This quality, the ever presence of sinful temptation, offers the origin path of a moral career of sexual sin. Believers must stand guard at all times for temptation, or they will fall into the dangers of sin that surround their daily interactions with the world.

LDS portraits of this stage in the sexual sinners' moral career generally involved interpretations of youthful indiscretions that led to sinful behavior. The following excerpt from an *Ensign* testimony offers an illustrative case:

As an avid reader, I came across inappropriate stories even at a young age. The feelings these materials elicited caused me to desire more. I began to seek out opportunities to look at inappropriate pictures to imagine new fantasies. As time passed, I found opportunities to view more explicit pictures. I also discovered that many respectable-looking books and magazines contained inappropriate materials. Even though I knew it was wrong, I still sought them out (Author Withheld, "Being Clean Again," *Ensign*, 1996).

Like religious college students who "know" pornography is sinful even though they continue to use it (see Nelson, Padilla-Walker, & Carroll, 2010), testimonies like this suggested that the smallest slip in moral fortitude could lead to a sinful lifestyle. Like the slippery-slope notions mobilized by the Religious Right (Fetner, 2008), Mormon testimonies suggested youthful indiscretions—no matter how small—could be the first steps in a career of sexual sin.

Expanding on these interpretations, LDS leaders and anonymous testifiers suggested that sexual indiscretions at any age could lead to long-term sexual immorality. The following excerpt from a speech by M. Russell Ballard (later published in *Ensign*) provides a typical example:

It all started the day I picked up a pornographic magazine in the barbershop. It was the first time in my life I had ever seen anything like that, and it intrigued

me. I wanted to see more and more. And then I wanted to see things that were progressively more explicit. And then it wasn't enough to just look at pictures—I wanted to actually participate in some of the activities I was looking at. Eventually I was untrue to my wife and my family, and unfaithful to covenants I had made with my Heavenly Father in His holy house (“When Shall These Things Be,” *Ensign*, 1996).

Similar to the stories about youthful indiscretions, testimonies like this defined sexual curiosity as a tool of evil. Believers had to be careful at all times because even one slip, one indiscretion, could ultimately lead them down a path of sexual sin.

Throughout these efforts, LDS leaders created an explanatory framework (see Berger, 1967; Weber, 1993) for sexual sin. Followers seeking to make sense of their own sexual sins, for example, could scan their biographies for evidence of the moment when they left the official Mormon path and began their sinful career (see also Goffman, 1961). Similarly, believers seeking to forestall sexual sin could watch for the signs that LDS leaders suggested would lead them astray. In so doing, they could actively work to defend themselves and their loved ones against these dangers. Importantly, Mormon leaders did not depict sexual sinners as victims, but as active agents who chose a path of sin. This reflects the heavy emphasis on free will in Mormon theology. It places responsibility for action on the individual and, as is shown below, requires the individual to take responsibility for restoring the self to God's path (Wolkomir, 2006).

### Causing Social and Spiritual Destruction

Although every experience requires some point of origin, people generally interpret careers in relation to trials, tasks, and other obstacles that must be overcome in order to move toward their final destination (see, e.g., Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961; Hughes, 1984). Following Campbell (1949), moral tales especially rely upon a series of conflicts the primary character must face in order to prove worthy of glory (see also Weber, 1993). Mental patients (Goffman, 1961), for example, must wrestle with institutionalized notions of “normalcy” before they are capable of emerging as “cured” and “capable.” Similarly, LDS leaders suggested that followers who sought out sexual sin would encounter a series of struggles wherein they caused emotional and spiritual destruction before they would be ready to seek salvation. We would thus conceptualize this phase of destruction as the second stage of the sexual sinner's moral career.

LDS leaders emphasized ways that pornographic users destroyed their own lives through sin. The following excerpt from the only female testimony offers a typical example:

Whether I admitted it to myself or not, I was addicted to pornographic literature. Almost every day I set aside worthy activities so that I could spend hours reading or fantasizing about what I had read. The more I did so, the easier it became (Author Withheld, “Addicted to Romance Novels,” *Ensign*, 2003).

Such cases emphasized the detrimental nature of sexual sin, and the loss of spiritual control accompanying such endeavors. Emphasizing both the “double life” believers would experience, and the accumulation of other sinful behaviors believers could expect, testimonies like these suggested the second phase of the sinner's moral career consisted of people plunging deeper and deeper into sin.

Echoing studies revealing the emotional struggles of gay and lesbian people (Wolkomir, 2006), LDS leaders also suggested that sexual sin carried with it

detrimental feelings of despair, guilt, shame, and fear. The following excerpt from “The Husband’s Story” (Author Withheld, *Ensign*, 2001) offers a typical example of such costs:

I loathed myself. My soul and body were at war, and I was the main casualty, along with my wonderful wife and children. I truly wanted to be righteous and love the Lord, but this incredible monster was always in the way.

Other testimonies suggested the ultimate cost of pornography involved feelings of shame and fear that arose in response to the uncontrollable desire sexual sinners would feel for more stimulation. As the following excerpt suggests, these tendencies could lead believers to literally bring garbage into their lives:

Though I did not spend money on pornography, I found it surprising how much material I could find by leafing through books in stores or spotting pornographic magazines in the apartment dumpster when I took out the trash. I knew that the adversary was working to ensnare me because as my desires increased, it seemed that opportunities to view such materials came more and more (Author Withheld, “Being Clean Again,” *Ensign*, 1996).

As these illustrations reveal, the second stage of the sinner’s moral career involved the experience of uncontrollable sexual desires, the experience of negative emotions concerning one’s self and spiritual life, and the development of self-hatred. Considering the emphasis placed on sexual regulation as well as positive emotions, like love and caring, in Mormonism (see, e.g., Cragun & Phillips, 2012), sexual sinners would thus experience an emotional and spiritual existence utterly removed from the official Mormon moral career.

LDS leaders also characterized this stage as a period of destruction for the people closest to pornographic users. As the following excerpt notes, the emotional damage sinners do to themselves may make them less likely to seek help:

When my wife began to realize the extent of my problem and confronted me, I angrily denied her accusations. But inside, I knew I needed help—I just didn’t know where to turn. Prayer felt hypocritical. How could the Lord love me when I did all these bad things? Or so I thought. My wife pleaded with me to see a counselor with her, but I was too embarrassed to admit these failings to anyone (Author Withheld, “The Husband’s Story,” *Ensign*, 2001).

Echoing the cycles of addiction evidenced by the narratives of alcoholics (see Denzin 1987), testimonies suggested sinners would attempt to rationalize their behaviors, and respond to confrontation in a fearful or “sheepish” fashion. The emotional damage caused by sexual sin would thus make recovery difficult to begin, much less accomplish.

At other times, LDS leaders emphasized the emotional struggles and spiritual destruction sexual sin could cause for the people who cared for pornography users. Specifying the destructive force loved ones would encounter, Gordon B. Hinckley shared a woman’s story:

I was stunned, hurt, felt betrayed and violated. I could not promise him forgiveness at that moment but pleaded for time. I was able to review my married life and how pornography had put a stranglehold on our marriage from early on. We had only been married a couple of months when he brought home

a magazine. I locked him out of the car because I was so hurt and angry (“A Tragic Evil among Us,” *Ensign*, 2004).

Similar to the wives of conservative Christian men in Ex-gay programs (see Wolkomir, 2006), testimonies like these revealed that sexual sin would destroy and devastate the people who loved pornographic users and create significant conflict for marriages. Considering the elevated place marriage holds in Mormonism (see Ludlow, 1992), these testimonies defined the second stage as a series of behaviors that could crack the foundation of Mormonism.

LDS leaders thus constructed the second stage of the sexual sinner’s moral career in relation to emotional, social, and spiritual destruction. In so doing, they argued that sexual sin would become an ever-increasing force in the lives of believers that possessed the power to remove their spirituality, positive emotions, and loved ones. Further, they only spoke of difficulties that would occur during this period of a sexual sinner’s life, and in so doing, completely removed any potential benefits that could lead people to participate in sexual sin. As such, they used anonymous testimonies to construct a representation of sinful experience that both dissuaded followers from initial sexual forays and encouraged sinners to seek ways to return to the officially sanctioned moral career (see also Goffman, 1961).

### **Seeking and Finding Redemption**

Similar to many other religious traditions (see Berger, 1967; Durkheim, 1912; Weber, 1993), Mormon teachings emphasize salvation and the eternal capacity of God’s love (see Ludlow, 1992). As a result, LDS leaders could not simply define sexual sins without also creating a path whereby sinners could return to God. To this end, they constructed the final stage of the sexual sinner’s moral career in terms of redemption. Specifically, they explained that sexual sin could be overcome by taking responsibility for one’s sinful behavior.

LDS leaders suggested that sexual sinners generally left their immoral behaviors following major moments when their existing behaviors became explicitly problematic (see also Goffman, 1961). As the following excerpt reveals, these turning points often relied upon the efforts of romantic partners and the power of negative emotions to change behavior:

When my wife told me she knew I had been surfing on forbidden sites, it unleashed in me an unbearable humiliation. Ironically, this very moment, when I thought I should have been most afraid of the Lord’s wrath, proved to be the catalyst, which led me to finally quit running from Him (Author Withheld, “The Husband’s Story,” *Ensign*, 2001).

Alongside these personal revelations, witness testimonies, like the following excerpt from “The Wife’s Story” (Author Withheld, *Ensign*, 2001), explained the importance of God and the Church for helping families reach turning points of their own concerning husband’s and father’s sexual sins:

I felt particularly angry at Jim, his family, the Church, and even the Lord. I vividly remember the place on the road where I suddenly felt the Spirit of the Lord acknowledge that I was indeed facing an extremely difficult problem. But then came an added message: Pushing away the Lord and the Church would not give me the hope and direction I needed. The Lord could help.

Whether focused on the experiences of sexual sinners or the people in their lives, all these testimonies stressed the importance of reaching a turning point where sexual sin was no longer appealing and taking personal responsibility for engaging in sinful behavior.

LDS leaders also emphasized rehabilitative strategies sexual sinners could engage in to reclaim their moral lives. Whereas many different strategies emerged in the testimonies, they all focused on taking concrete steps—no matter how large or small—to eradicate sin. As the following excerpt suggests, this involved discarding sinful materials from their homes:

I became aware that I had to do my part. I threw away any inappropriate books and studied uplifting Church material, particularly the scriptures. I prayed, fasted, attended the temple, and prayed some more (Author Withheld, “Addicted to Romance Novels,” *Ensign*, 2003).

Echoing these sentiments as well as widespread conservative Christian beliefs concerning the power of prayer (see Sharp, 2010), testimonies stressed using prayer and scriptures in place of pornography.

While sinners could engage in these strategies alone, testimonies, such as the following excerpt, often pointed out the importance of recognizing the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives:

Anyone who has needed eyeglasses knows the feeling of wonder and awe that comes from wearing the correct prescription. Instead of seeing masses of green, one sees trees with individual leaves. Instead of vague blurs for faces, figures on a stage have real human features. Wearing a new pair of eyeglasses is the best analogy I can think of to explain how the Holy Ghost affected me after my confession and as I put into practice the counsel of the bishop. I felt as if I were truly seeing the effects of the Spirit for the first time in a long time (Author Withheld, “Being Clean Again,” *Ensign*, 1996).

Similar to sexual conversion therapies (see, e.g., Ponticelli, 1999; Robinson & Spivey, 2007), LDS leaders argued that rehabilitation strategies and spiritual powers would cleanse sexual sinners who sought to leave their immoral desires behind. Although these types of rehabilitative strategies have yet to be shown to work (see Erzen, 2006), LDS leaders argued for the redemptive potential of sexual regulation for (fallen) followers.

In fact, they devoted considerable space in order to share the success stories of previous sexual sinners who had—thanks to their own efforts and the help of God and the church—been saved from sin. Interestingly, our sample revealed *zero* examples of sinners who did not reach redemption. Like the following excerpt, they closed every testimony by sharing a success story:

Several years have passed since that fateful night in my car. I still have daily challenges and feel the natural anguish of imperfection. Now, however, these are the normal feelings of human frailty rather than the despair resulting from self-imposed addiction. I am still burdened by occasional random impressions that were seared into my mind over the years, but now I cast them out (Author Withheld, “The Husband’s Story,” *Ensign*, 2001).

Further, LDS leaders who shared testimonies during speeches generally closed their speeches with calls for redemption. These moments presented a potential victory at the end of a moral career of sexual sin that followers could hang onto in their difficult moments.

Importantly, these success stories echo similar tales told by the Ex-gay movement over the past few decades (see Erzen, 2006), which ultimately begs the question as to how many of

them are—as so many Ex-gay success stories were—premature or false? As noted above, it is beyond our capabilities to answer this question, but it is quite striking that *every* testimony ended with redemption, and that these success stories mirrored those offered by other traditions. It is possible that LDS leaders only select successful stories that may be used as symbolic confirmation of the promise and power of their religion and/or God.

### Conclusions

Like many other religious leaders (see, for example, Cadge et al., 2012; Fetner, 2008; Robinson & Spivey, 2007), LDS authorities appear to have been intimately familiar with shifting sexual norms and values over the last 40 years. Rather than only issuing broad condemnations, however, they sought to incorporate emerging sexual sins into their existing traditions. To this end, they constructed a moral career for sexual sinners that defined immorality as a temporary disruption in the Mormon moral career, which could be overcome with the Church's help. Specifically, they used anonymous testimonies to outline stages of sinful experience that included seeking out sexual temptation, causing social and spiritual destruction, and seeking and finding redemption. In so doing, their efforts ultimately provided sexual sinners with a path back to the faith *and* gave faithful followers a multitude of reasons to avoid sexual sin at all costs.

These findings extend previous research into religion and sexuality by demonstrating some ways religious leaders make room for emerging sexual controversies within their existing traditions. Whereas researchers have shown, for example, that local religious leaders work to reconcile sexual issues in their personal lives and for their followers (Cadge et al., 2012), that religious leaders mobilize political opposition to perceived sexual immoralities (Fetner, 2008), and that denominational officials vigorously debate shifting concerns about sexual morality (Moon, 2004), our analysis reveals that they also create templates or “formula stories” (Loseke, 2007) that provide followers with guidelines for making “moral” sense of sexual controversy. Further, previous research has shown that religious sexual minorities draw upon personal (Pitt, 2010), cultural (Sumerau, 2012), and institutional (Thumma, 1991) interpretations of sexual morality to fashion credible moral selves, but has generally left the social construction of these personal, cultural, and institutional resources unexplored (but see Loseke and Cavendish (2001) for an example of such meaning making among subordinates). In the case of Mormonism, we found that LDS leaders actively worked to provide a trajectory whereby others could interpret sexual sin. Our findings suggest there may be much to learn from the ways religious leaders conceptualize sexual sin and deliver these moral frameworks to their followers.

These findings also extend previous treatments of religious experience by drawing our attention to some ways religious meaning systems may change in relation to societal shifts. Whereas researchers have suggested that religious institutions continuously adjust in order to maintain relevance to both mainstream society (e.g., potential converts) and members of their specific tradition (e.g., current followers; see Cragun & Nielson, 2009), the mechanisms whereby religious leaders accomplish these “adjustments” remain virtually unknown. Our analysis begins to specify some of these mechanisms by revealing some ways religious leaders adjust existing “sacred meanings” in relation to sexual concerns. LDS leaders adjusted their religious stories to incorporate pornography. They constructed a moral career of sexual sin that aligned with their official (e.g., expected and ideal) version of Mormon experience, and ultimately encouraged sinners to seek redemption. In so doing, they created a loophole within their meaning system to make room for sexual sin while maintaining their staunch opposition to pornography. Our findings suggest that examining the moral careers of sinners may shed light upon ways religious authorities adjust meaning systems to remain relevant to *both* mainstream society and their followers (see also Sumerau, Mathers, & Cragun, 2016a).

To this end, our findings also suggest that the moral career of sexual sinners, as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1969), can shed light on past, present, and future religious manifestations. In fact, previous research provides a glimpse at some ways the moral careers of sexual sinners are constructed across many religious traditions. Research examining the Ex-gay movement, for example, suggests that organizational and movement leaders provide their guidelines for undoing sinful desires (see for example, Erzen, 2006; Ponticelli, 1999; Wolkomir, 2006). Similarly, research investigating sexual and religious identity-integration among religious sexual minorities suggests they generally accomplish this process by both becoming involved in an affirming religious organization and working to revise their existing notions of sexual sin (see, e.g., McQueeney, 2009; Sumerau, 2012; Thumma, 1991).

Finally, the case of Mormon moral careers may not be identically reflected in other religions. Nor is sexual sin the only type of conduct constructed as sinful in religions, which raises the question as to whether other types of religious sin (e.g., swearing, lying, consuming certain types of food, etc.) are similarly constructed by religious leaders. Future studies may uncover important variations in the moral careers of sinners constructed and promoted by different religious traditions (see also Becker, 1998), and these variations may help us better understand the different ways that sin is constructed within and between various religions.

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