

Dissertation Research Statement

Heather J. Stone

Department of Communication

Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies

University of Utah

Committee:

Dr. Kimberley Mangun, Department of Communication, University of Utah (chair)

Dr. James A. Anderson, Department of Communication, University of Utah

Dr. Robin E. Jensen, Department of Communication, University of Utah

Dr. Natalie Stillman-Webb, Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies, University of Utah

Dr. W. Paul Reeve, Department of History, University of Utah

Young Mormon Women as Insiders/Outsiders: Exploring Tensions of Organizational Membership in Tight-Knit Communities, 1975-2000

Jean came of age in the 1980s, the era of big earrings and even bigger shoulder pads, when the perfume commercial Enjoli assured her she could “bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never, never, never let you forget you’re a man.”¹ Like other girls in her church, Jean was inducted into the Young Women (YW) organization when she turned twelve.² YW is an educational and activity program for adolescent girls who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).³ The year Jean entered this gendered Church program, second-wave feminist Sonia Johnson was excommunicated from the Church.⁴ Jean remembers leaders and parents discussing Johnson’s campaign in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Jean attributes the tremendous pressure she felt as a teenager to steer clear of jobs outside the home to the “backlash against feminism” that coalesced around Johnson. Jean had previously relished the idea of a career, expecting to be both a mother and a professional. When YW leaders told her she couldn’t work outside the home and be a good Mormon woman at the same time, a crisis of identity ensued that lasted many years. While Jean eventually found her way through this dilemma and today has a career, a family, and is a member of the Church, she confesses that she is now afraid for her own daughters. She wants to “inoculate” her eleven-year-old before the girl enters YW, protect her by telling her:

¹ All stories related to Jean and quotes from her are from an oral history interview she did with the author in South Jordan, Utah, U.S.A. on July 2, 2014. All narrators are referenced by pseudonyms of their own choosing. “Because I’m a Woman,” Enjoli perfume commercial from Charles of the Ritz Incorporated, 1978. Available on https://youtu.be/_UIktO4Pnlw (accessed October 21, 2016).

² This paper refers to the LDS Church’s membership group for adolescent girls as Young Women (YW). The organization was previously called Young Women Mutual Improvement Association (1972-1978), Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association (1929-1972), Young Ladies National Mutual Improvement Association (1880-1929), and the Young Ladies Retrenchment Association (1869-1880). “Presidents of the Young Women Organization through the Years,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2008/06/presidents-of-the-young-women-organization-through-the-years?lang=eng> (accessed October 21, 2016).

³ This paper uses *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* and its abbreviation, *LDS*, interchangeably. In keeping with the style guide published by the Church, it uses the term *Mormon* to refer to members of the Church rather than to the Church organization and treats the word *Church* as a capitalized proper noun. *Style Guide for Publications of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 36-7.

⁴ Sonia Johnson, *From Housewife to Heretic* (Albuquerque, NM: Wildfire Books, 1989).

If there is anything you hear that does not resonate to you, does not feel right . . . does not make you feel good about yourself, you are wholly free to reject that. You don't have to try and fit yourself into a role someone else has defined for you.

Jean felt pressure to conform from official sources: YW leaders and parents. However, studies of organizational identification and membership suggest that enforcement of group standards is complicated. While ideals are often established by people in power, they are maintained, interpreted, and adapted by other members of the group.⁵ For example, members accept or reject newcomers based on individual interpretations of group ideals. We accept the constraints of an organization in order to sustain affiliations with the people in that organization, and we gauge whether other members belong by their adherence to those constraints.⁶ Organizational scholars have observed that when group standards become too personally confining, group members find ways to resist.⁷ Jean resisted by deciding her patriarchal blessing—a type of written prayer believed to be directly from God to a specific individual—trumped the more generic advice she heard from those around her. Her blessing seemed to endorse a career for her, so she learned to selectively ignore input from other sources.

For this dissertation, I will use oral history and rhetorical analysis to examine group membership and individual identity among LDS young women in the American West in the late twentieth century.⁸ I plan to interview twenty-five women who relocated as Mormon teenagers to predominantly LDS

⁵ Clifton Scott and Karen Myers, "Toward an Integrative Theoretical Perspective on Organizational Membership Negotiations: Socialization, Assimilation, and the Duality of Structure," *Communication Theory* 20 (2010), 79-105. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2009.01355.x; James A. Anderson, and Elaine E. Englehardt, *The Organizational Self and Ethical Conduct: Sunlit Virtue and Shadowed Resistance* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 138-56.

⁶ Anderson and Englehardt, *Organizational Self*, 20.

⁷ Peter Fleming and Andre Spicer, "Beyond Power and Resistance: New Approaches to Organizational Politics," *Management Communication Quarterly* 21 (2008), 301-09; Todd Norton, "Situating Organizations in Politics: A Diachronic View of Control-Resistance Dialectics," *Management Communication Quarterly*, 22, (2009), 525-54; Anderson and Englehardt, *Organizational Self*, 196-200.

⁸ Young women ages twelve to nineteen are included in this study. Twelve is when girls join the YW organization, and twenty seems to be an adulthood checkpoint for Mormon women. While forty-five percent of Mormon women marry by the age of nineteen, more than seventy-four percent are married by twenty-one. Stephen J. Bahr, "Social Characteristics," *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, digital edition (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2001), http://eom.byu.edu/index.php?title=Social_Characteristics&oldid=2821 (accessed October 21, 2016).

communities between 1975 and 2000.⁹ I am specifically wondering how members of tight-knit religious communities reacted when newcomers entered the group, and how newcomers navigated these situations. I chose this time period because 1) Stable language and behavior markers were communicated to young LDS women in all locations via centralized curriculum materials; 2) Membership growth during this time came primarily from regions far away from the Church headquarters in Utah, which may have exacerbated social tensions.¹⁰ I am ending the study in 2000 because several Church actions near this time suggest a dilution of centralized messaging to young women had begun as the Church responded to technological innovation and the more egalitarian information access brought about by Internet technologies.¹¹ Also, requiring narrators to be at least twenty-four when they tell their stories ensures that I will be able to study adult memories of youth rather than present-day adolescent experience.

Oral history interviews can recover the recent pasts of people, such as LDS young women, who are not represented in community power structures and who may not think their stories are important.¹² Approaching oral history rhetorically allows me to consider how these women construct their stories as adults and what their rhetorical choices might suggest about their present-day lives. Examining both the stories told and the storytelling process may add richness to the findings for historians, rhetoricians, and the women who choose to speak with me. With its emphasis on rhetoric and memory, this project brings a less-common perspective to the study of past life. It also brings an underutilized primary source to rhetoricians. Debra Hawhee observes that new topics, sources, and subjects challenge or “hack” existing

⁹ To qualify for the study, women need to have moved from any community where Mormons comprise a minority to any community where Mormons comprise a majority. Because of Church membership demographics at the time, most narrators will probably have moved from somewhere in the United States to somewhere in Utah. Because of the *gathering to Zion* narrative common in Mormon discourse and the existence of Church-owned colleges in the American West, it has been easy to locate women who fit this demographic. Eighty-seven women have approached me wanting to tell their story, and I expect many more when I post formal recruitment calls in venues with a connection to current and former Mormons. See Methodology section for more detail.

¹⁰ *Deseret Morning News 2004 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Deseret News, 2004), 574-9.

¹¹ To clarify, I will exclude women from the study who relocated to Mormon communities after 2000. For more detail on Church actions at this time, see the Background and Context section of this paper.

¹² Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, Judith Wittner, “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 15 (1987, Spring): 112.

rhetorical theories and practices, both in the sense of destroying them and repurposing them.¹³ Rhetorical oral history has potential for disruption because when a narrator speaks to a researcher, together they create a rhetorical event with one layer in the past and one in the present. This duality may challenge binary perceptions we have about our scholarship. For example, we may not be able to neatly classify oral history work as either contemporary or historical. This project will demonstrate to communication scholars what a fertile space for research oral history can be and it will use communication theories to interpret history in ways that may not have been considered by historians and the public.

This research is similar to other coming-of-age historical studies in that it begins with broad life experiences of a single group rather than with a specific theoretical frame;¹⁴ however, no study in American religious history has yet explored the experiences of LDS adolescents, even though the LDS religion has had significant influence in the American West and is considered to be the largest and most enduring American-born religion.¹⁵ Using LDS young women as a case study may illuminate aspects of religious belonging and help us better understand how social interaction affects religious identity. It may help us understand how strong local instantiations of religion complicate religious belonging, especially for newcomers. This dissertation could fill a gap in women's religious history. Many women in contemporary society question the value of organized religion as they engage with issues of power, equality, and agency. This dissertation may provide historical context for that discussion by asking adult women to reach back to their youth and examine the relationships, memberships, and allegiances they once had. As these women transport their experiences to the present-day through the rhetorical process of

¹³ Debra Hawhee, "The New Hackers: Historiography through Disconnection," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 15, no. 1 (2012): 119-25.

¹⁴ For example, see Melissa Rose Klapper, "A Fair Portion of the World's Knowledge": Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920 (dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2001).

¹⁵ "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (accessed October 21, 2016). See also Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Shipps argues that Mormonism is an entirely new religious tradition, not a denominational form of Christianity, and as such, is important to the academic study of religion.

oral history, narrators and scholars may learn more about what religious women stand to gain and lose when they agree to organize.

This project is part of a larger research trajectory that examines the communication strategies people use when personal identity conflicts with social expectations in membership groups such as congregations, work teams, and classrooms. As a society, we seem to be abandoning familiar organizational frameworks, perhaps due to an unwillingness to accept the static definitions of identity that group membership often requires. The fastest-growing religious category in America is *unaffiliated*.¹⁶ Workers change companies every five years.¹⁷ Half of college students drop out.¹⁸ My research considers the role discourse plays in a world that seems to value relationships but increasingly rejects formal organization as the way to establish and sustain those relationships.

¹⁶ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center.

¹⁷ Anya Kamanetz, “The Four-Year Career,” *Fast Company*, January 12, 2012, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1802731/four-year-career> (accessed October 21, 2106).

¹⁸ “Table 326.10: Digest of Education Statistics,” National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_326.10.asp (accessed October 21, 2016); Doug Shapiro, Afet Dunder, Phoebe Khasiala Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, and Autumn T. Harrell, *Completing College: A State-Level View of Student Attainment Rates* Signature Report No. 8a (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, February 2015).