

WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCE AS AUTHORITY: ANTENARRATIVES AND INTERACTIONAL POWER AS TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Emily January Petersen

Introduction

After presenting my research on 1970s Mormon motherhood at a national rhetoric conference in 2017, a woman in the audience (also a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) called my research “old news” and made some harsh and disparaging remarks about my analysis. I was upset by her comments, but one of my co-panelists defended me, and after the presentation, five people came up to talk with me about my research in positive terms. One master’s student wanted to know how she could do similar research.

I have been thinking about this experience for a while now, and I cannot help but contrast it with what happened when I presented an analysis of early-twentieth-century Mormon motherhood at the Mormon History Association in 2016. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (Pulitzer Prize winner, historian, Latter-day Saint, Harvard professor) attended my presentation. She had purchased some vintage prints of children and mothers at the Relief Society Bazaar, and she gifted these prints to me. She did not criticize my research, nor did she tell me that my work was too simplistic or that it had already been done. She has acted similarly toward me every time we meet (and I know she does not remember who I am; I’m another starstruck, early-career professor and

scholar who thinks of her as a celebrity). Laurel has always been kind, supportive, encouraging, and humble. There is something magical about the way she uses her power and prestige to encourage and uplift rather than tear down. Her example of positive mentoring and support is one that I hope to follow in my own academic career.

I can tell these two narratives about my experiences with other Mormon women and how they have treated me in academia. These two narratives compete with one another. The first narrative seems to be the dominant narrative. It was public, others witnessed it, and the woman speaking unkindly about my research was loud and spoke for a long time. She commanded attention during the question and answer period, and people likely remember that event. She claimed power in the moment through the convention of the situation: a question and answer session. She did not have a question, but she used the opening to take over and voice her disapproval. Perhaps this woman knew that her comments were one-dimensional and failed to acknowledge a variety of experiences and lenses, but she chose to focus in on the idea that everybody already knew what I had presented and that the narrative of the familiar within motherhood rhetorics was obvious. Perhaps she favored a particular narrative about what it means to enact motherhood identity within an LDS context, and even when presented with contradicting antenarratives from my research, she had to publicly reject those in order to make sense of her preferred narrative. She likely already knows much of what I presented, as she lived through it, but because the dominant narrative has not changed much in forty years, she felt obliged to remind us that the ideas had been around and that dominant cultural norms are difficult to budge.

The other narrative, the one that takes into account my various experiences, known only to me, and that focuses on the kind and quiet response to my research is an antenarrative, or a contrasting fragment that tells a different story about what my experience as a researcher of women's documentation and communication about

Mormon motherhood has been like. Laurel, as an experienced scholar, is probably aware of the multiple antenarratives related to Mormon women's experiences around identities of motherhood. Further, she has likely pondered the antenarrative of what it means to be an early-career scholar presenting information to a more experienced audience. It seems that she chose to take such knowledge into account before reacting to my presentation, allowing me to experience narratives and antenarratives of LDS motherhood from my perspective. Laurel used the power she already possesses, by virtue of her success, to flatten the hierarchy of scholarly smarts. She knows the conventions of academia and the posturing that sometimes happens. She chose to interact within that community differently, using her power to change the way junior scholars are sometimes treated. The grace of antenarrative fragments was not extended to me by the woman in the first scenario.

I could tell numerous narratives about my research, my church experiences, my social life, my motherhood, and my marriage. Some of these are well known to others. The antenarratives are the fragments of experience that are not widely known and that change the way I think about those parts of my life. We all have many narratives that shape us, and how we privilege, give power to, enact, and make known certain narratives can affect how we feel about those experiences and how we understand our identities. Further, we may not be aware of the antenarratives guiding the lives of others, or how well known such antenarratives are when we talk about communal identities or experiences such as motherhood. We may attempt to shut down antenarratives in public settings, especially when they do not conform to our personal experiences or the codified ideas within a community.

The institution of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also presents us with narratives and has a powerful presence in the lives of its members. The privileged master narratives of being a member of the Church have changed over the years, but they continue to affect us, especially if our personal narratives differ from the prescribed norms

and stories. Antenarratives contrast with and contradict master narratives; they are the dialectic to narrative, and for any grand or sanctioned narrative, there are numerous local antenarratives waiting to be voiced and to unravel the narrative into numerous threads.¹ Paying attention to antenarratives can capture the authenticity of the LDS experience, especially for women: we may adhere to, learn, reject, or help to define dominant narratives, but when it comes to living that prescribed narrative, we often splinter the overarching story of what it means to be a Mormon woman into tiny fragments based on individuality. Perhaps our antenarratives fit with other women; perhaps they do not. Either way, antenarrative is one way of understanding many unique stories and the possibility of claiming individual power through storytelling and communication in any situation.

We must highlight and seek out the antenarrative to challenge what Audre Lorde has called “the mythical norm,” or narratives that harm us and others by leading us to believe that we are too different.² Understanding the many ways in which power works allows us to claim experiences as authority, to maneuver within and around institutional norms, and ultimately to create change where we need it. Those who are marginalized may actually know more about power than those who think they possess it. Alison Wylie posits, “those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their

1. David M. Boje, “The Antenarrative Turn in Narrative Studies,” in *Communicative Practices in Workplaces and the Professions: Cultural Perspectives on the Regulation of Discourse and Organizations*, edited by Mark Zachry and Charlotte Thralls (Amityville, N.Y.: Baywood, 2007), 225.

2. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

experience.”³ Such experiences and knowledges are found in the antenarratives, or the hidden stories of experience waiting to be voiced. Women in the LDS Church and culture understand their experiences differently than how identities are presented to us over the pulpit. We are privileged with the knowledge we gain through experience. Such experiences give us authority over our own lives and identities.

This article overviews various theories of power, establishing that power is ultimately interactional, malleable, and claimable (demonstrated with short examples). I then present examples of antenarratives that highlight the ways in which LDS women have claimed power and resisted dominant narratives historically. These antenarratives, and others waiting to be told, have the ability to rewrite our stories. We can reject the narratives created for us and replace them with our own.

Power as Interactional

Many people think of power as the ability to control a situation, with the belief that power can be possessed or controlled. The person in charge has the power, right? This is what I call hierarchical power, and according to French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, women exercise this type of power fully “only on condition that they leave the appearance of power, that is, its official manifestation, to the men.”⁴ Women and others without sanctioned authority may use this kind of power to gain favor with those in charge. They maintain the status quo for personal gain, and hierarchical organizations use such power to rationalize their authority without question.⁵ This includes dominant narratives,

3. Alison Wylie, “Why Standpoint Matters,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 339.

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 41.

5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 35–36.

systems, rules, and norms that influence the community of the institution. Such power impacts those who do not hold positions of power within the institution and may regulate the way people interact within the institution and outside of it. The social privileges of the institution maintain the hierarchy, and the dominant group will decide the “entitlement, sanction, power, immunity, and advantage or right granted” to those within the system.⁶ Overall, hierarchical power “works to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless. . . . Together, patterns of power and powerlessness can keep issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, and interests from being recognized.”⁷ This power is disciplinary, and institutions will “refer individuals from one disciplinary authority to another.”⁸ It keeps members of an institution under control.

Power can also be mediated and social, meaning that “people who appear marginal or whom history has rendered invisible may be performing activities of crucial importance for the group as a whole.”⁹ This highlights the importance of including antenarratives as powerful contradictions to the prescribed norms and histories of a community. We can understand that women, usually left out of hierarchical decision-making and dominant narratives, can and do influence institutions. That influence may not be recognized by the institution itself, but it

6. Linda L. Black and David Stone, “Expanding the Definition of Privilege: The Concept of Social Privilege,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 33, no. 4 (2005): 243.

7. John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), vii.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 226–27.

9. Kathryn A. Neeley, “Woman as Mediatrix: Women as Writers on Science and Technology in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 35, no. 4 (1992): 210.

nevertheless occurs and can be recovered and reworked into the narrative. Antenarratives become part of the story when they are visible.

This leads to the more nuanced version of power that I embrace as a scholar: the idea that power is transitional, fluid, negotiated, and claimable. According to communication scholar Barbara Schneider, power is always interactional, and “[s]ocial settings are never settled once and for all; they are constantly shifting, constantly accomplished in social interaction. Even when the conventions of an organization seem settled.”¹⁰ Those who do not necessarily have power bestowed on them from hierarchal authority can find ways to maneuver within and around institutional constraints and claim power for themselves.

The following section overviews five characteristics of interactional power. Each one is followed with an example within the context of the Church.

1. *“People in organizations use the interactional and interpretive conventions available to them to construct . . . the power relations of the organization.”*¹¹

One of the conventions or genres of Church is giving talks. It happens in sacrament meeting, at general conference, and in devotionals. Using a Brigham Young University–Idaho devotional in 2014, Julie Willis changed the way we think about asking questions as a church. She used the genre of a speech or “talk” to reframe the rhetoric around questioning. She noted that “[a]sking questions is part of our religious heritage,” that questions “can be sources of intellectual stimulation and light,” and that “questions are not forbidden and can be embraced with

10. Barbara Schneider, “Power as Interactional Accomplishment: An Ethnomethodological Perspective on the Regulation of Communicative Practice in Organizations,” in *Communicative Practices in Workplaces and the Professions: Cultural Perspectives on the Regulation of Discourse and Organizations*, edited by Mark Zachry and Charlotte Thralls (Amityville, N.Y.: Baywood, 2007), 187.

11. *Ibid.*

faith.”¹² Her ability to use both language and interpretive conventions to reconstruct the way we think about questioning, a word that often had a negative connotation in LDS parlance before 2014, shifted the power dynamics of what it means to doubt and what it means to be inquisitive as a Church member.

2. “[T]he social realities of organizational settings are constructed through language use and social interaction among setting participants.”¹³

The Relief Society was started by a group of women in Nauvoo as a sewing circle, eventually expanding their efforts to form a ladies’ society.¹⁴ They first took steps to initiate the social interaction for women, and then Joseph Smith made it an official part of the Church organization. The Relief Society would not exist without the initiative of these women who used language and women’s work to create an official social group. The purpose of the first meeting, sewing, is an antenarrative detail to the larger story of the Relief Society, and women’s work in general is usually an antenarrative to the work men do within an organization. These women were able to create a women’s organization that still exists because of their willingness to engage with and make visible those antenarrative experiences as important to the work of the larger organization.

Further, other antenarratives complicate our understanding of the Relief Society’s history and foundation. As we know, the Relief Society disbanded after Nauvoo and did not have public approval from

12. Julie Willis, “Gaining Light through Questioning” (devotional, Brigham Young University–Idaho, Rexburg, Idaho, July 1, 2014, available at <http://www.byui.edu/devotionals/julie-willis>).

13. Schneider, “Power as Interactional Accomplishment,” 188.

14. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 26.

Brigham Young until 1868.¹⁵ Yet, “[p]ublished accounts tell of the brief existence of local women’s organizations, formed in Utah wards in the 1850s . . . , [and] there was a profusion of women’s meetings at Winter Quarters in the spring of 1847 and again in the Salt Lake Valley from the fall of 1847 to the first months of 1848. Small groups of women met in private homes where they encouraged and blessed each other, often exercising such spiritual gifts as speaking in tongues.”¹⁶ The women, through their chosen social interactions, created a space for women to gather and speak outside of institutional approval. The antenarratives carried by women about the Relief Society meant that it got reorganized when it became defunct. From the small sewing circle that changed the larger organization, “the Relief Society operated cooperative stores, spun and wove silk fabric (including hatching the silkworms from eggs and feeding them on mulberry leaves that they gathered by hand), gleaned the fields to save grain for bad times, and trained as midwives and doctors.”¹⁷

3. “[P]articipants themselves orient to the context and design their interaction.”¹⁸

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich told of a time when she and her husband redesigned their traditional gender roles. She had grown up Mormon in Idaho with the assumption “that I would get married and have children.”¹⁹ However, when she was writing her dissertation early in

15. Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 86.

16. Richard L. Jensen, “Forgotten Relief Societies, 1844–67,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 1 (1983): 106.

17. Claudia L. Bushman, “Should Mormon Women Speak Out? Thoughts on Our Place in the World,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 1 (2008): 179.

18. Schneider, “Power as Interactional Accomplishment,” 189.

19. James N. Kimball and Kent Miles, *Mormon Women: Portraits & Conversations* (Salt Lake City: Handcart Books, 2009), 91.

the morning and then taking a break to get her children off to school, she “would just be a crab. It would be like murder to come down and get their lunches ready and get them out the door. By then I was shot and I couldn’t go back to writing.”²⁰ She and her husband then designed their own interaction, based on her antenarrative experience of being grumpy. She shared her reality with him, and they worked out a plan, that “Gael was perfectly capable of making breakfast and getting them out to school.”²¹ They had oriented their marriage toward the gender roles expected of them by the Church and society. When it did not work, they made adjustments based on their antenarrative experiences of what it means to be married parents.

4. “[T]he deafening silence that meets many organizational decisions must also be seen as an interactional accomplishment.”²²

Chieko Okazaki is well known as first counselor in the Relief Society general presidency from 1990 to 1997 and as a speaker who broached difficult topics, such as sexual abuse, balancing work and family, blended families, homosexuality, and racism.²³ She remembers feeling as if she could not mention her questions about the gospel and racism when she lived in Utah as a young married woman. However, when she moved to Denver, she saw that people spoke more openly, so she did too. She remembered, “People always used to ask me, whenever I gave a talk, ‘How is it that you are able to do that?’ I said, ‘Well, it is the truth, isn’t it?’ ‘But how did you get away with doing that?’ I said, ‘I’m

20. Ibid., 97.

21. Ibid.

22. Schneider, “Power as Interactional Accomplishment,” 194.

23. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Beloved Mormon Women’s Leader Chieko Okazaki Dies,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 5, 2011, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=52320992&itype=cmsid>.

not getting away with anything. I'm just saying what I think."²⁴ Her experience demonstrates that the antenarratives in her speeches often were familiar to those who listened. Yet the people who admired her ability to speak out did not do so themselves. Their silence prevented more antenarratives from being voiced. Her bravery demonstrates the importance of speaking up and sharing antenarrative stories as a way of transforming conversations about difficult topics.

*5. Power cannot be possessed, but it can be "accomplished through access to interactional resources that allow one to have one's reality claims accepted."*²⁵

When we engage in the previous four ways of claiming power by voicing our antenarratives, we have more power and can change the institution and the culture, like Julie Willis, the Nauvoo Relief Society, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and Chieko Okazaki. That said, interactional power for women tends to occur in a bit of a cycle within institutional settings, with a variety of outcomes depending on the person.²⁶ Women can first learn the conventions of an organization and decide to accept it. This constitutes agency but not a claim of power. Next, women who are dissatisfied with the master narrative of a community can resist expectations and slowly reform their personal situations.²⁷ Along the way, they may end up changing the organization in ways that ripple outward, but this sort of interactional power does not necessarily benefit others.

24. Gregory A. Prince, "'There Is Always a Struggle': An Interview with Chieko N. Okazaki," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 1 (2012): 118.

25. Schneider, "Power as Interactional Accomplishment," 196.

26. Emily January Petersen, "'The 'Reasonably Bright Girls': Accessing Agency in the Technical Communication Workplace through Interactional Power,'" *Technical Communication Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2019): 21–38.

27. Emily January Petersen, "Articulating Value Amid Persistent Misconceptions about Technical and Professional Communication in the Workplace," *Technical Communication* 64, no. 3 (2017): 210–22.

Further, women within organizations may reject the organization completely. They may decide that asking for adjustments is not worth it; they might prefer to experience their lives without institutional participation or oversight. Additionally, women may enact power for themselves *and* choose to become an advocate or activist within their organization or outside of it.²⁸ They might start petitions, hold protests, write dossiers, speak with leaders, or file legal claims. These are active ways of engaging with power and often result in transforming the lives of many people.

A constant characteristic of power is that it cannot be possessed. “Understanding power as constructed in interaction also allows us to see why it is that power can slip away so easily. If . . . we understand it as an interactional accomplishment, we can see that it can never be accomplished once and for all.”²⁹ This leaves room for constant maneuvering and reclaiming of power when faced with difficult situations. Such negotiations represent why recognizing and sharing antenarratives is crucial; they highlight the power women claim for themselves through stories that must be told and documented. “Language is a means of policy negotiation and of social transformation,”³⁰ and if we can highlight the antenarratives of many lives, we layer our voices and make “a far more powerful case.”³¹

28. Emily January Petersen, “Female Practitioners’ Advocacy and Activism: Using Technical Communication for Social Justice Goals,” in *Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication: Scholarly and Pedagogical Perspectives*, edited by Godwin Y. Agboka and Natalia Matveeva (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3–22.

29. Schneider, “Power as Interactional Accomplishment,” 196.

30. Carolyn D. Rude, “Introduction to the Special Issue on Business and Technical Communication in the Public Sphere: Learning to Have Impact,” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 22, no. 3 (2008): 267.

31. Kenneth J. Gergen, “Writing and Relationship in Academic Culture,” in *Communicative Practices in Workplaces and the Professions: Cultural Perspectives on the Regulation of Discourse and Organizations*, edited by Mark Zachry and Charlotte Thralls (Amityville, N.Y.: Baywood, 2007), 124.

Power structures are shaped by narratives, and narrative is a way of making meaning and constructing one's self.³² Because stories are told to persuade and to appeal to an audience, narratives serve to orient the distribution of power.³³ Antenarratives, on the other hand, can serve to disrupt dominant narratives and prevailing norms of power. Those in charge are not the only storytellers in an institution, and official master narratives are not always representative of individual experience and practice. One of the biggest "barriers that constrain women's ability to make full contributions" may be the visibility and acceptance of master narratives.³⁴ We must pay attention to the antenarratives, which highlight the stories of individuals and present the various and diverse ways in which identities and power are at work within cultures.

Antenarrative Fragments from LDS History

Antenarrative work is the work of recovery, and it allows those without voice or power to reemerge, thereby shifting the way we think about current and historical events, identities, and variations in culture. My own research on LDS women's history has revealed many interesting antenarratives, some of which may be familiar and others that might be new and challenging to dominant narratives. I overview some fragments from that research here as examples of seeking out the antenarrative and reclaiming narratives that empower various identities and ideologies that are typically marginalized. Certainly, these examples are not exhaustive, but instead they function as a way of highlighting the

32. Jane Perkins and Nancy Blyler, "Introduction: Taking a Narrative Turn in Professional Communication," in *Narrative and Professional Communication*, edited by Jane M. Perkins and Nancy Blyler (Stamford, Ct.: Ablex, 1999), 5.

33. *Ibid.*, 3.

34. Linda LaDuc and Amanda Goldrick-Jones, "The Critical Eye, the Gendered Lens, and 'Situated' Insights: Feminist Contributions to Professional Communication," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1994): 250.

possibilities within antenarrative (especially those that disrupt power structures) and how we can seek out stories to complement the many ways in which women experience and enact LDS identity.

Antenarrative 1: Scenes from the Life of Virginia Hanson

In late 1940, Nellie Virginia Hanson (1907–1978), a young Mormon woman who lived all of her life in northern Utah, sought advice from the most important and influential women of her day. She wrote to them as part of a Utah State University project. Hanson was raised as a member of the Church, known to promote marriage and family for women. Although active socially according to her diaries, Hanson never married and spent her life as the proverbial spinster librarian of Cache County.

Hanson recorded her life meticulously and prolifically. The Utah State University library archives hold twelve of her diaries, files of her creative writing, and newspaper clippings highlighting her work in the community. In her files are a set of seven letters dated from late 1940 to early 1941 from Clare Boothe Luce (US ambassador), Margaret Sanger (birth control activist), Edna Ferber (Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist), Katharine Cornell (stage actress), Malvina Hoffman (sculptor), Elise Furer Musser (politician and social worker), and Eleanor Roosevelt (First Lady and diplomat). These women are representative of the many talents and pursuits of famous and public women in the 1930s and early 40s. They replied to Hanson's request for information, and in writing to these women, Hanson seemed to be searching for role models, as in 1939 she was taking college and library classes without a clear idea of what her future held. In an April 12, 1939 diary entry, Hanson wrote, "Good library class. Kirkpatrick suggested being librarian. Should I?"³⁵

35. Virginia Hanson, diary entry, Apr. 12, 1939, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

The letters Hanson wrote to and received from these prominent women highlight some of the gendered difficulties of Hanson's life. In the 1930s, attitudes toward single female schoolteachers (which Hanson was for a time) often followed maternalist rhetoric, which claimed that "[w]omen's employment as teachers—that is, when women occupied themselves with instructing other people's children, whether in a home or in a school—was imagined as continuous with and related to the primary work of mothering." This reinforced the "ideology of maternal vocationalism . . . that what women teachers do 'comes naturally' and, like mothering, is an extension of the self and not work."³⁶ These ideas were accompanied by the fact that "single women educators and activists were targets of the campaign against spinsters, an implicitly anti-lesbian movement rooted in sexology. . . . Anti-spinsters vilified single women teachers as narrow-minded, sexually 'thwarted' and even predatory."³⁷ While I have not uncovered any evidence of lesbianism being a factor in Hanson's experiences, she may still have suffered from or been aware of such vilification.

From Hanson's diaries, we learn that teaching was not necessarily the love of her life. On November 10, 1933, she wrote, "What a day at school! I'm becoming more of a shrew than Katherine" in reference to the film version of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.³⁸ On March 13, 1935, she wrote, "Spring here all day I discovered when school was out and I was on parole from prison."³⁹ She was not especially fond of

36. Heather Julien, "School Novels, Women's Work, and Maternal Vocationalism," *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 2 (2007): 118.

37. Julien, "School Novels," 121.

38. Virginia Hanson, diary entry, Nov. 10, 1933, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

39. Virginia Hanson, diary entry, Mar. 13, 1935, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

her teaching job, although I suspect (based on the tone of her diaries) that some of these comments were good-natured humor. As Hanson grew older and realized that she would be employed for the rest of her life, she sought more education in order to be a librarian.

In a February 9, 1945 letter to a Mr. Stephens, who asked her to fill out a questionnaire about her teaching experiences, Hanson responded:

Perhaps I should start off by saying that the reason I stopped teaching school was to avoid having to fill out the kind of questionnaires you are now inflicting. . . . I taught for fifteen years in the state of Utah, and often in a state of rebellion. I liked teaching as teaching, was fond of my students, appreciated the new associations and experiences in various towns, but felt that I couldn't afford to do it as a pastime, at such shamefully low wages. I liked the teachers with whom I worked, but I was often distressed at the low mentality and lack of efficiency in many of the people who had positions of authority. While I was a principal, I met others of a similar position in the county, and thought that on the whole I had never met finer men, with higher ideals. But here and there are stupid, stubborn, hen-pecked men who are drunk with power. Five days a week they are able to lord it over their female underlings, and I for one, did not intend to leap at the crack of a whip in the hands of someone with even less intelligence than I possess. I went back to school, was handed a certificate proving that I could add a B.S. after my signature, and expected to get a promised position with more prestige and increased wages. The superintendent failed to keep his word. So I was happy to be offered a job in a library, which had long been a secret ambition. Here I can meet and assist children, and also enjoy the stimulating association of alert adults. I feel that I can do as much good here as I can in a schoolroom and am not treated like an ignorant serf.⁴⁰

As her letter reveals, she was witty and a bit angry about her teaching experiences; she highlighted the gender inequality associated with

40. Virginia Hanson, letter to Mr. Stephens, Feb. 9, 1945, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

being a female teacher and the freedom she found through more education and the profession of librarian. Because of her ambition and her keen awareness of gender inequality in the workplace of the school system, Hanson did more for herself than sit and take it.

Hanson's wit in these situations makes her diaries entertaining. Her 1933 diary begins: "If what we're doing when the new year begins is indicative of a year's activities, I shall lie in a hospital bed and read murder mysteries all of 1933."⁴¹ Hanson's appendix had been removed, and when the hospital offered her scalloped cabbage the next day for dinner, she called it the "world's champion nausea promoter."⁴² Later that year, on February 10, she reported a conversation with a doctor after having some blisters lacerated: "He says to keep off my feet. Good advice for the unemployed."⁴³ In addition, Hanson's archival files contain lists of riddles, party games, and magazine photos with sarcastic captions typed on them by Hanson, much in the style of today's *Catalog Living* satire blog.⁴⁴ Among Hanson's other letters are a series of exchanges with an eager suitor, whom she had never met and had no interest in seeing. She responded to his request for a date by claiming that she was ugly and "devoid of matrimonial inclinations."⁴⁵

41. Virginia Hanson, diary entry, Jan. 1, 1933, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

42. Virginia Hanson, diary entry, Jan. 2, 1933, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

43. Virginia Hanson, diary entry, Feb. 10, 1933, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

44. See *Catalog Living* (website), <http://catalogliving.net/>.

45. Virginia Hanson, letter to Stanley A. Reynolds, Mar. 21, 1946, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

Hanson admired Clare Boothe Luce and Margaret Sanger. Boothe Luce's letter to Hanson is one of the shortest in the collection, but it contains one of the best pieces of advice. Boothe Luce said, of the biographies she had enclosed with the letter, that "I haven't the time to tell you which of the things said in these pieces are true and which are untrue. It doesn't matter anyhow—a person is what she is no matter what myth grows about her."⁴⁶ This line echoes the independence that Hanson may have seen in Boothe Luce from afar. While Boothe Luce lived a public life and may have been scrutinized for some of her choices (like divorces and extramarital affairs), it seems that Boothe Luce still knew who she was and had learned to ignore what the media must have said about her. She passed this on to Hanson, reminding her that it does not matter what others say and that independence is important. She rejected dominant, visible narratives and chose to focus on what she knew was true about her identity from antenarrative experiences.

In Hanson's letter to Sanger written as a play, she characterized herself as "Vociferous Virginia" who says, in response to "Apathetic Alice's" question of why Hanson would write to Sanger: "Because I have just read her autobiography, and am filled with admiration for Mrs. Sanger's spirit and courage and accomplishments. She is my idea of a wonderful woman crusader."⁴⁷ Hanson admired Sanger because of her willingness to oppose overriding cultural messages. Although Hanson had no obvious need for birth control, she still valued what Sanger offered to women. Hanson's letters and diaries are not explicit about her feminism, but her attitudes and writings suggest that she noticed and despised the inequalities between men and women and that she,

46. Clare Boothe Luce, letter to Virginia Hanson, Nov. 26, 1940, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

47. Virginia Hanson, "A Dilemma," letter to Margaret Sanger, date unknown, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

like Sanger, believed “that women’s liberation must include the ability for women to fully control their own destiny.”⁴⁸

Sanger wrote back, with the longest letter in Hanson’s collection. In it, on Birth Control Federation of America letterhead, she explained why she did not write back in time for Hanson’s school project but made up for it in three paragraphs of advice and a poem. The tone is serious, and the letter promotes the same rhetoric Sanger used publicly to advance her cause. But it also focuses on independence and encourages Hanson, and other young women, to be such. Sanger wrote, “Try to think straight and think things through yourselves. Do not try always to conform—always to follow the herd. It is not easy to be a pioneer in any field, but there is no greater joy than to fight for a great cause in which one believes heart and soul.”⁴⁹ This certainly advocates independence and bravery, two qualities Sanger had in abundance. She encouraged Hanson to embrace this independence to be pioneers for women. Given the elaborate thank you card and drawing Hanson sent back to Sanger, I feel confident in surmising that Hanson appreciated the letter. It certainly does what Hanson was seeking: gives advice on how to be a strong woman. It also highlights the way that Sanger promoted antenarratives about women’s identities and rejected master narratives about gender roles.

The antenarrative fragments of Virginia Hanson’s life, a story that has not been included in any official history and one that has no clear narrative arc, are valuable in multiple ways. Her experiences give us an idea of how women from the past dealt with difficult ideologies and circumstances. We can see how a single woman nearly one hundred

48. Wesley C. Buerkle, “From Women’s Liberation to Their Obligation: The Tensions Between Sexuality and Maternity in Early Birth Control Rhetoric,” *Women and Language* 31, no. 1 (2008): 28.

49. Margaret Sanger, letter to Virginia Hanson, Jan. 3, 1941, Virginia Hanson Papers, 1920–1978, Merrill-Cazier Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

years ago handled her life and thrived despite misconceptions and expectations from her community. It is a piece of a larger story, one that complicates narratives about Mormon women's thoughts, roles, lives, and identities.

Antenarrative 2: Organizing Motherhood in the Early Twentieth Century

Following a Mothers' Congress held in June and July of 1898 in Salt Lake City, former *Woman's Exponent* (1872–1914) editor Louisa Lula Greene Richards (1849–1944) wrote of her enthusiasm for organizing motherhood: “We mothers sometimes have much to grieve over in our children that might be avoided, if every household would form itself into a ‘Mutual Improvement Association,’ for the purpose of home education.”⁵⁰ Her call resulted in a flurry of columns titled at first “Relief Society Mothers’ Class,” and then—when other branches began sending their curricula to the newspaper—standardized to “Mothers’ Work.” These columns represent the larger influence of the Progressive movement, which “specifically implied advances in the application of science to everyday life.”⁵¹ Women of the era were concerned with domestic science, sanitation, health, and the proper training of children.

Relief Societies all over Utah and other outlying settlements organized what their children should be taught and sent the curricula to the *Woman's Exponent* for sharing. These outlined curricula were published over a seven-year period (roughly 1903–1909), serving as a way for each ward or branch to report and share ideas about mothering values in the workplace of the home. In essence, the Relief Society was organizing motherhood as an educative movement for women to streamline and disseminate how to practice being a mother. Mothers’ Work columns are significant because the information was generated by a community

50. Lula L. Greene Richards, “We Mothers,” *Woman's Exponent* 29, nos. 8–9, Sept. 15 and Oct. 1, 1900, 27.

51. Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 159.

of women as user-experts. While a hallmark of “scientific motherhood” that women “needed to follow the directions of experts,”⁵² the Relief Society columns depended on the expertise of everyday mothering experience and practice from within the community. Cooperation is a key component of the way the curricula was enacted, and while many curricula in the *Exponent* have names attached to them, most of them are titled only by stake. Such documentation was a group endeavor, and while it occurred under the umbrella of the local Relief Society organizations, it included various women giving lectures and participating in discussion.

Similar to contemporary LDS parenting and republican motherhood in the late eighteenth century,⁵³ the overall goal in these curricula was to create good LDS members and good citizens. The women did this by encouraging activity within the Church community and programs. However, some interesting ideas emerge that may be surprising to those engaged in twenty-first-century parenting. First, the idea of broad motherhood and its connection to the larger world is a common theme. Nellie Little, president of the Utah Mothers Congress, said, “The true mother will consider the welfare, not only of her own child alone, but will be interested in improving the condition of all children in her locality.”⁵⁴ Moreover, the Snowflake Stake wrote, “Have we a special duty towards the naughty and disagreeable child and its mother in our neighborhood?”⁵⁵ This rhetorical question likely created lively

52. Rima D. Apple, “Constructing Mothers: Scientific Motherhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Social History of Medicine* 8, no. 2 (1995): 162.

53. Ed Ayers, Brian Balogh, and Peter Onuf, “Mommy Dearest: A History of American Motherhood (Rebroadcast),” *Backstory* (podcast), episode 21, May 9, 2014, <https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/mommy-dearest/>.

54. Nellie Little, “The Mothers’ Congress,” *Woman’s Exponent* 29, no. 1, June 1, 1900, 7.

55. Amanda Peterson, Emma L. Smith, and Elsie O. Flake, “Mother’s Work: Snowflake Stake,” *Woman’s Exponent* 33, no. 7, Jan. 1905, 51.

discussions within that local Relief Society. Given that other curricula stress the importance of extending Mothers' Work to all children and to the larger world, the answer to that question was likely supposed to be "yes." One reason for this broader focus stemmed from the idea that being "moral caretakers of the family [meant] that they were also responsible for the morality of the wider community."⁵⁶

Most eloquently, Ida Smoot Dusenberry (1873–1955) detailed her vision of broad motherhood at the third annual Utah Mothers' Congress held on May 18, 1900 in Salt Lake City. She said,

Then there is but one kind of service that will answer the present needs of the human family and that is service for all the world. How are the mothers and women to assist in this struggle for a broader field of action if they are not awakened to the necessity of co-operation . . . What we want is mothers not alone in a physical sense, for this attribute we hold in common with the lower animals—but intellectual, broad-minded, spiritual, social mothers—mothers who are willing to meet bravely the world and battle with its difficulties . . . These are the kind of women we must have, but the kind we will never get until the women of the century are fully awakened to the importance of organization and co-operation. We must have broader-minded mothers. . . . We must, as mothers, mingle with the world; for it is the only way to develop that love for humanity which is character building.⁵⁷

Her speech highlights the public roles LDS women often played in the late nineteenth century, and she connected those roles to the duties of motherhood. She is promoting a vision of women as more than just mothers, as women who are educated, engaged in the community, and hardworking for the good of all, not just their own children. Similar admonitions for public work occur in the *Improvement Era* and

56. Amy Hoyt and Sara M. Patterson, "Mormon Masculinity: Changing Gender Expectations in the Era of Transition from Polygamy to Monogamy, 1890–1920," *Gender & History* 23, no. 1 (2011): 77.

57. Ida Smoot Dusenberry, "The Mothers' Congress," *Woman's Exponent* 29, no. 1, June 1, 1900, 7–8.

Ensign magazines: “articles published prior to the 1940s include explicit instruction for women to participate in the public sphere—to participate in formal education, to engage in wage labor, and to participate in politics.”⁵⁸ Unfortunately, there is a decline in the rhetoric of broad motherhood in the Mothers’ Work curricula over time.

Second, the women involved in writing and speaking about motherhood were not unaware of gendered tensions. E. E. Shepherd addressed the double standard of parenting and expectations for boys and girls: “How often we hear parents say, ‘Oh my boy is sowing his wild oats, he will come out all right.’ How would you like to have your daughters sow wild oats? A boy who sows his wild oats is never the equal of the pure young girl joined with him in marriage. What can we as Mothers’ Congress do to destroy this false standard?”⁵⁹ Ten years later at the general Relief Society meeting, future Relief Society general president Amy Brown Lyman said, “this Church had always taught equal purity in men and women a fact to which the world was but just awakening.”⁶⁰ These women were aware of the contradictory messages about gender taught to children and wished to address it from a parenting perspective. They saw that “[w]omen were often charged with carrying the moral responsibilities of society.”⁶¹

These antenarratives—of promoting broad community-minded motherhood and calling out unequal ideas about gender and responsibility—give us a greater sense of the multiple attitudes, layers, and expectations surrounding motherhood. It is easiest to characterize historical communities as having coalesced around one idea about a

58. Laura Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897–1999,” *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 1 (2002): 100.

59. E. E. Shepherd, “The Mothers’ Congress,” *Woman’s Exponent* 29, nos. 2–3, June 15 and July 1, 1900, 15.

60. Amy Brown Lyman, “General Relief Society Conference: Afternoon Session,” *Woman’s Exponent* 39, no. 1, June 1910, 7.

61. Hoyt and Patterson, “Mormon Masculinity,” 83.

certain topic, like motherhood, or to point to history as a way of maintaining the status quo for women. These narratives show us the dialogic, antenarrative conversations that were occurring then and that influence and inform the way we think about gender roles now.

Antenarrative 3: Rhetorics of Womanhood in the 1970s

One of the most visible antenarrative outlets in contrast to official narratives from the *Ensign* is the *Exponent II* magazine, which was started by feminist Mormon women in Boston in 1974. It takes its name from the *Woman's Exponent* (a newspaper run solely by Mormon women in Salt Lake City, Utah, from 1872 to 1914), which none of the Boston women knew about until they found old copies of it in a library. They decided to restart it as a way to give Mormon women their own place for sharing their voices, as the *Relief Society Magazine*, which had replaced the *Woman's Exponent* and had been controlled by Church headquarters, had been canceled at the January 1971 inception of the *Ensign*, meant as a magazine for all members.

In the 1970s, there are clear antenarratives that challenge power structures' ideas about women. These antenarratives from the *Exponent II* promoted difference and community support, while including voices that were unsure or ambivalent about social changes for women. While not necessarily in conflict with the *Ensign*, the rhetorics of the *Exponent II* were nuanced and took into account different forms of womanhood as additive to the culture rather than threatening. Patricia Rasmussen Eaton-Gadsby summed it up: "all mothers are different. And different does not mean second best or inferior."⁶²

The personal story of Elizabeth Hammond, a doctor and working mother, was included in an early issue of *Exponent II* as an example of a different way of mothering. She described her parenting as a

62. Patricia Rasmussen Eaton-Gadsby, "On Being a Stepmother," *Exponent II* 2, no. 1 (1975): 9.

negotiation for both her and her husband in terms of childcare, “but neither of them has felt that quitting their jobs would solve any problems. However, they have decided that family life is their top priority.”⁶³ From this nuanced account of Hammond’s experiences, female readers saw a role model of what a Mormon working mother might look like. It is clear that family life is the ultimate good within the Mormon context, but Hammond expressed her frustration over the fact that in Church lessons “working women are either ignored . . . or used as bad examples.”⁶⁴ She explained how this hurt her and prompted her to rely on her personal relationship with God. The rhetoric of this article suggests that she was following Church counsel and guidance in terms of seeking personal confirmation for her decisions while pointing out problematic judgment from others. Her story is an antenarrative to the ones we often hear about mothers and work, especially in the context of this article’s printing, during the second-wave feminist movement. Continuing the antenarrative, Carolyn W. Zaugg suggested that the rhetoric of sacrifice for children and husbands creates guilt and ambivalence. She wrote, “Our exciting responsibility as mothers is to bring our individual interests with us to our homes, instead of leaving them behind in our lives before the marriage altar.”⁶⁵ Another woman shared the valuable advice she had received: “Remember, unused talent is the most crippling of all diseases.”⁶⁶ These women recognized the importance of women having identities for themselves as they occupy other roles.

Furthermore, the rhetoric of sisterhood in the magazine attempted to be inclusive. While the *Ensign* focused on one type of motherhood (which can be characterized as white, American, and middle-class),

63. Judith R. Dushku, “A Working Mother,” *Exponent II* 1, no. 3 (1974): 3.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Carolyn W. Zaugg, “A Mother’s Day Talk,” *Exponent II* 2, no. 4 (1976): 16.

66. Mary L. Bradford, “In Process,” *Exponent II* 6, no. 1 (1979): 5.

the *Exponent II* highlighted women from differing circumstances and from around the world, including the Ivory Coast, Finland, France, and Nepal. Another feature article was dedicated to interviews with older women, framed with the idea that “we are rich in mature women who have made solid contributions to Church, community, and country.”⁶⁷ Moreover, an article dedicated to black women and the priesthood concluded, “As a renewed sisterhood grows up around these black women, it will help bind all Mormon sisters together.”⁶⁸ This may not be a perfect discussion of race and the Church, but it reflects the focus on sisterhood and inclusivity that characterizes the rhetorics of the *Exponent II*. Articles were also dedicated to depression, infertility, and foster parenting. The *Exponent II* tempered rigid identity expectations with the knowledge that everybody deserves love and acceptance, even if they do not necessarily fit the prescribed norms of the community.

At the end of each 1970s issue, the “Sisters Speak” section, in which readers shared their opinions and stories, allowed for a multiplicity of voices and experiences that created wide-ranging discussions of what it meant to be a Mormon woman. The magazine embodied the idea that female knowledge and experience is valuable and authoritative, recognizing that those who are not typically in power have valuable knowledge, perhaps more authentic and better knowledge than those at the top. There is no need for a hierarchy to share information with subordinates on the subject of motherhood. The women participating in the community of *Exponent II* were sharing laterally with each other as a way of creating sisterhood and connection based on actual experience. The rhetoric of sisterhood recognizes that they, the women of the community, are the experts.

The magazine’s antenarrative attempts to counter dominant narratives in 1970s Mormonism made it clear that “there must be innumerable

67. “Conversations with Senior Women,” *Exponent II* 3, no. 1 (1976): 4.

68. Chris Rigby Arrington, “Blacks, Priesthood and Sisterhood,” *Exponent II* 5, no. 1 (1978): 4.

ways a woman can fulfill her 'purpose' here,"⁶⁹ affirming that women's identities are flexible and varied. The magazine engaged with its readers intersectionally and ultimately promoted sisterhood through an ethic of care. Not only can we benefit from these versions of womanhood from the 1970s, but we can appreciate the entire purpose of the *Exponent II* magazine, which is to seek out, publish, and share antenarratives in service of women. Further, the antenarratives of the *Exponent II* magazine challenge power structures. In engaging in interactional power through antenarratives, the women who published *Exponent II* risked censure but also contributed to shifts in individual lives. Some four thousand women subscribed to *Exponent II* in the 1970s, meaning that its reach was small and definitely on the margins, making it an antenarrative to the dominant messages of the time published in the *Ensign*.

Conclusion

These fragmented voices and stories represent antenarratives of women's experiences from specific contexts and time periods. They are meant to demonstrate how antenarratives and interactional power through language and action can operate when we tell stories that represent lived experience and therefore authority. We all have antenarratives to speak. We can share them from our everyday experiences. We can dig them up from our family histories. We can listen to what others are telling us about their experiences and acknowledge difference as normal. We need to "identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference."⁷⁰

While institutions wield official power and control dominant narratives, antenarrative fragments available to us through historical archives, our personal lives, and through connections on social media

69. *Ibid.*, 17.

70. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 123.

can shift power dynamics and reclaim space for different experiences and stories. When women speak up and share their stories, making visible antenarratives based on personal experience and individual nuance, the power available to them can shift, allowing for multiplicity and dialogue that strengthens communities, creates connections, and disrupts master narratives, ultimately freeing all of us for authentic engagement within the group that represents who we are, how we live, what we have to say, and the agency we were born to enact. That said, I do not present these sample antenarrative fragments and the theories of interactional power as perfect solutions to women's lack of power within institutions. I do not even present them as a solution but instead as one of many ways to act. Antenarrative and interactional power give us ways to engage and language for engaging.

EMILY JANUARY PETERSEN {januarypetersen@gmail.com} is an assistant professor in the English department at Weber State University, where she teaches technical communication, literature, critical theory, and rhetoric courses. She is the director of the professional and technical writing program and has published some sixteen peer-reviewed research articles. She has received many awards, including an honorable mention for outstanding dissertation from the CCCC and a Presidential Excellence in Teaching award. Her research focuses on professional identities from a feminist perspective, examining how women document their work technologically, historically, professionally, and extra-institutionally. She has conducted research in the United States, Botswana, India, and South Africa and worked as a research specialist for *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*. She is currently working on a memoir about growing up in the Church with a gay father.