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et al.: LDS Doctrine vs. Culture

# Effects of L.D.S. Doctrine Versus L.D.S. Culture on Self-Esteem

It was hypothesized that BYU students would report a comparatively high self esteem when exposed to LDS doctrine and a lower self esteem when exposed to LDS culture. A self report survey on self esteem was administered to three groups of subjects. One group viewed a stimulus representing LDS doctrine, one viewed a stimulus representing LDS culture, and the control group viewed no stimulus. The hypothesis was supported by the results.

**F**or many people, religion is a stimulus that can greatly influence feelings of self-worth (Hill & Pargament, 2003). James and Wells (2003) explain that religiosity may have many different effects on mental health. For example, Schieman, Pudrovska and Milkie (2005) found that a sense of divine control in one's life could either positively or negatively affect one's self-esteem depending on sex and race. Religious orientation, or the way people approach their religion, can also affect mental health in various ways.

Allport (1967) categorized people as having either an extrinsic or intrinsic religious orientation. People with an extrinsic orientation found their religion to provide comfort and refuge, friendliness and entertainment, status and self-justification. On the other hand, people with an intrinsic orientation live in harmony with their religious beliefs and practice what is taught (p. 434). In other words, some people use their religion on a superficial level as a personal source of security and social stability. Others internalize their religion, put their beliefs into practice, and feel satisfied with their spiritual selves.

Different ways that people use their religion, deeply and intrinsically or more shallowly and extrinsically, affect their mental health. Maltby and Day (2000) found that people who have an extrinsic religious orientation are more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression than people who have an intrinsic religious orientation (as cited in James & Wells, 2003). Similarly, research has shown that people who have an extrinsic religious orientation also exhibit more anxiety than people who have an intrinsic religious orientation (Baker & Gorsuch, 1982).

In addition to religious orientation, religious behaviors and practices also influence mental health. Research shows that the more people attend church, the

more they report general happiness and life satisfaction (Gurin et al, 1960; McCann, 1962; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1974; Clement & Sauer, 1976; as cited in Petersen & Roy, 1985). Church attendance seems to be an expression of intrinsic religiosity because it is a way to actively participate and live one's religion. The way people pray can also affect their psychological health. Poloma and Pendelton (1991) found that people who had conversational and meditative prayers reported general well-being, while people who offered petitionary prayers, or requests to God for material things, did not report well-being. People who recited set prayers tended to experience negative feelings (p. 80-81). Conversational and meditative prayers seem to be intrinsic in nature, while petitionary and recited prayers seem to be extrinsic in nature.

Thus, people who engaged in intrinsically oriented religious activities—active participation in church worship and personal, thoughtful prayers were likely to report happiness and well-being. People whose behaviors were associated with an extrinsic religious orientation, infrequent church attendance and recited or petitionary prayers, were less likely to report happiness and well-being.

The majority of scientific studies that examine religious life demonstrate that people who sincerely practice their religion tend to have good mental health (Judd, 1999). Bergin (1983) conducted a meta-analysis which revealed that only twenty-three percent of studies indicate a negative relationship between religiosity and mental health, while forty-seven percent indicate a positive relationship. Thirty percent of studies indicate no relationship. Bergin (1983) explains that his results indicate that there are different kinds of religiosity and that these different types produce varying effects. More specifically, intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity can yield dramatically different results when studied side

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by side.

This pattern holds true for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). An examination of fifty-eight studies indicate that seventy-one percent of the scientific literature which studies mental health in the LDS culture shows a positive relationship between mental health and religiosity variables (Judd, 1999). As discussed earlier, intrinsic religiosity tends to yield positive mental health. The high percentage of studies pairing religiosity with good mental health in the LDS population may indicate that Latter-day Saints tend to be intrinsically oriented. Extrinsic religiosity tends not to be related to positive mental health. Since twenty-nine percent of studies indicated that LDS religion did not positively influence mental health, there are likely also many Latter-day Saints who may be extrinsically oriented.

There have been several studies indicating that some aspects of LDS lifestyle can be detrimental to self-esteem. Utah, with a high LDS population, leads the nation in anti-depressant use (Goodman, 2001). Adams and Clopton (1990) studied self-esteem in LDS returned missionaries. Ninety-three percent of the subjects indicated a change in self-esteem after their mission; self-esteem generally increased in males, while self-esteem in females generally decreased. The researchers hypothesized that these negative feelings in females may have come from perceived personal inadequacies. It was suggested that women blame themselves more and accept more responsibility for failure than men (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1977). Feelings of personal inadequacies or self-blame often stem from maladaptive perfectionism (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006). Research shows that parents of perfectionists tend to stress extrinsic motivations for behavior and tend to be extrinsically religious people (Sorotzkin, 1998).

Some Latter-day Saints struggle with issues of perfectionism, feeling the need to be perfect in their school work, perfect in their relationships, and perfect physically (Richards, Owen & Stein, 1993). A perceived need to be perfect physically can affect not only self-esteem, but can also affect body image, or attitudes and feelings about one's body. Carroll (1999) found that while male LDS college students had a more positive body image than their non-LDS counterparts, LDS females' body image was no greater than their non-LDS counterparts. Carroll (1999) suggests that there is greater cultural pressure on women when it comes to body image

than there is for their male counterparts. Carroll (1999) seems to imply that LDS males intrinsically apply this LDS doctrine about body image while LDS females are more likely to be extrinsically influenced by another source. We predicted that whether people intrinsically live LDS doctrine, or are mostly influenced by LDS culture and extrinsically live their religion will affect their self-esteem. We hypothesized that BYU students who experienced the intrinsic LDS doctrine stimulus would report higher self-esteem than BYU students who viewed the extrinsic LDS culture stimulus. We also hypothesized that female BYU students who experienced the extrinsic LDS culture stimulus would report lower self-esteem than male BYU students who experienced the same stimulus. We wanted to evaluate the different influences that LDS doctrine from LDS Church authorities and perceived LDS doctrine in LDS culture have on self-esteem within BYU students.

## Method

The subjects for this study included 53 undergraduate students from Brigham Young University. They were male and female volunteers who were 18 years old and older. There were 30 females and 23 males who participated in the study. Nine participants were in the LDS doctrine stimulus group, 16 were in the LDS culture stimulus group, and 28 were in the no stimulus group. Informed consent was obtained. After debriefing, participants were given treats or extra credit as a reward for participation.

We exposed a group of subjects to stimuli representing an intrinsic religious orientation, or LDS doctrine. We then exposed a second group to a stimulus representing extrinsic religious orientation, or LDS culture. The LDS culture stimulus group viewed a series of video clips from LDS pop-culture movies including the LDS version of *Pride and Prejudice* (2003) and *The RM* (2003). Following the video clips they filled out a survey regarding self-esteem. The LDS doctrine stimulus group viewed a video of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Gordon B. Hinckley, giving a speech entitled *Each a Better Person* from the October 2002 General Conference of the Church and filled out the same survey. The third group had no video stimulus and only filled out the survey. The sex variable

had 2 levels (male, female).

After viewing the stimuli, subjects reported their self-esteem by filling out a survey. Our instrument was a survey with several demographic questions including sex, age, marital status, religious affiliation, and length of time the participant's family have been members of the LDS church. The rest of the survey asked questions involving religious activity, self-esteem, and body image. These questions were based on a Likert Scale and were self-reported. The following is a list of questions used to measure self-esteem.

- How are you feeling now?
- How do you typically feel?
- How secure do you feel with your family relationships?
- Do you usually get along with the people you live with? (roommates, spouse, family)
- Are you satisfied with your dating life?
- Are you satisfied with your weight?
- Are you satisfied with your height?
- Are you satisfied overall with your body?
- Do you ever have thoughts about switching your eating habits to something that may be unhealthy for your body? (ex: extreme dieting, eating disorders?)
  - Do you feel as though you have to be perfect in order to be worthy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?
  - Are you content with the grades you receive in school?
  - Do you feel like you have a good balance of school, work, social life, church, and family?
  - Do you often leave your extracurricular activities (sports, dance, music, performances, etc.) content with the way you performed?
  - Do you feel like you can be forgiven for your mistakes?
  - Do you feel worthy to partake of the sacrament each Sunday?
  - Do you feel as though God really listens to you as an individual?
  - Do you or did you feel pressure to get married?
  - Do you feel that if you were more attractive you would be happier?
  - Do you feel pressure to have many children?
  - How much do you feel that you are a child of God who is worthy of His love and blessings?
  - How difficult is it for you to view other individuals as children of God?

- When you go out, do you feel confident about your appearance?
- Do you worry about the size of clothing that you purchase?
- Do you feel comfortable eating like you typically would when out on a date or with new people?
- Are you satisfied with the amount of exercise that you do?
- Do you feel satisfied with your spiritual self?
- When you pray do you really feel like you are personally speaking with God and that He is listening?

All questions were weighted similarly when scored. Each question ranged from one to five points, with one showing that the subject portrayed the highest level and five portraying the lowest level of self-esteem. The following questions were reverse scored:

- Do you ever have thoughts about switching your eating habits to something that may be unhealthy for your body? (ex: extreme dieting, eating disorders?)
- Do you feel as though you have to be perfect in order to be worthy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?
- Do you or did you feel pressure to get married?
- Do you feel that if you were more attractive you would be happier?
- Do you feel pressure to have many children?
- Do you worry about the size of clothing that you purchase?

When the questions had "Yes" or "No" answers, a one reflected high self-esteem and a five reflected low self-esteem. The dependent variable was the sum of the 28 relevant Likert-scale questions on the survey that the participants filled out. The following questions were excluded from the analysis because they did not address self-esteem.

- Do you feel like you get enough sleep on average?
- How active are you in Church Sunday activities?
- How active are you in weekly church activities? (Family Home Evening, temple attendance, etc.)
- How consistently have you attended church activities throughout your life?
- On average, how much time do you spend getting ready in the mornings? (i.e. picking out clothing, personal grooming, etc.)

- Did you receive your Eagle Scout or Young Womanhood Recognition Award?
- Do you feel like you deserved it?
- Do you feel like you have good/healthy eating habits?
- Do you consider what other people think of you when making decisions?
- Do you consider what God thinks of you when making decisions?
- Do you feel comfortable asking for/giving priesthood blessings?
- Do you feel that you fulfill/magnify your calling as a home/visiting teacher?

$p=0.001$ ) indicating that subjects who viewed the LDS culture stimulus appeared to report lower self-esteem than those who viewed the LDS doctrine stimulus. The control group reported higher self-esteem than the LDS culture group, but reported lower self-esteem than the LDS doctrine group. This indicates that each of the video stimuli did have an effect. (See Figure 1.)

The Sex Main Effect was non-significant ( $F(1,47)=2.858$ ;  $p=0.098$ ) Stimulus x Sex Interaction ( $F(2,47)=2.041$ ;  $p=0.141$ ) was also non-significant. Thus, the sex of the participants did not affect the relationship of reported self-esteem across the three conditions.

## Results

Data was analyzed using an ANOVA with two grouping factors: Stimulus (None, Culture, Doctrine) and Sex (Male, Female). The dependent variable was the sum of the scores for the 28 relevant questions on the participants' questionnaires. The Alpha level was set at 0.05.

There was a Stimulus Main Effect ( $F(2,47)=8.866$ ;

## Discussion

We hypothesized that BYU students who experienced the intrinsic LDS doctrine stimulus would report higher self-esteem than BYU students who viewed the extrinsic LDS culture stimulus. Our results indicated a Stimulus Main Effect in which the LDS doctrine group reported significantly higher self-esteem than the LDS culture group. Therefore, the results supported our hypothesis. We also hypothesized that female BYU stu-

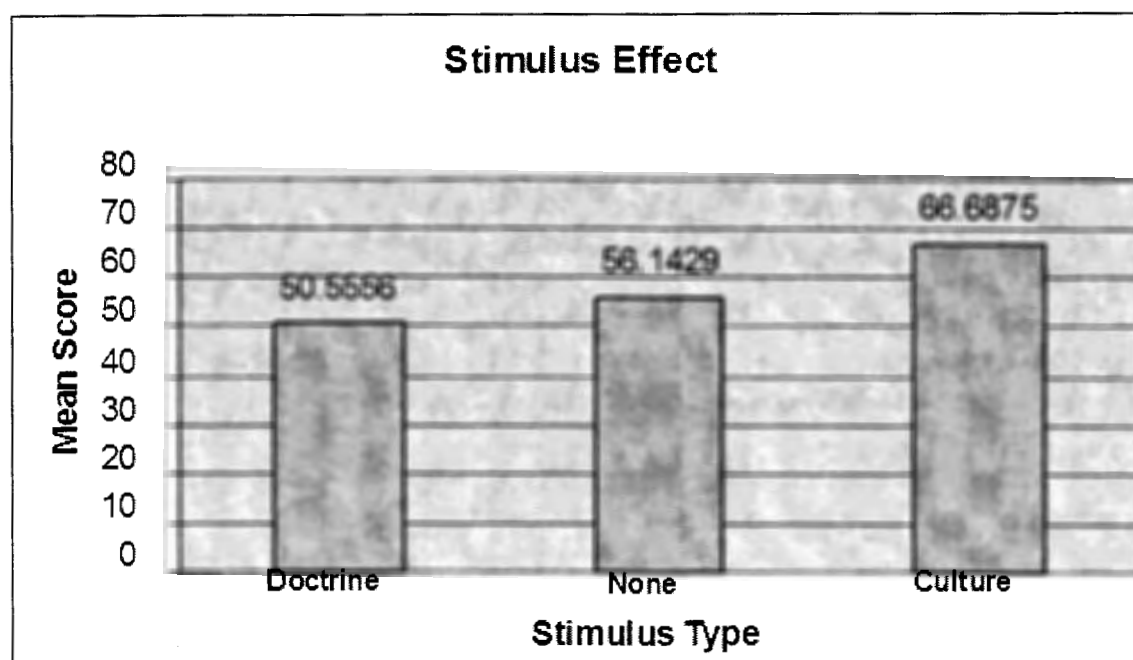


Figure. 1 The mean scores for each stimulus. Lower numbers indicate a higher level of self-esteem

dents who experienced the extrinsic LDS culture stimulus would report lower self-esteem than male BYU students who experienced the same stimulus. While there was a trend ( $p=.098$ ) (have authors state what direction this was), there was no statistically significant difference between self-reported self-esteem in males and females in any of the stimulus groups .

Judd (1999) and Bergin (1983) showed that religion tends to positively affect self-esteem. Our results shed greater light on their findings by differentiating between the influences of religious doctrine and religious culture. We found that subjects exposed to the intrinsic LDS doctrine stimulus reported higher self-esteem and self-image than the control and extrinsic LDS culture groups.

There are several important elements of LDS doctrine that address positive self-esteem. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that individuals are sons and daughters of a Heavenly Father who loves them unconditionally. The LDS Church has made an important doctrinal statement regarding body image which has effects on self-esteem: “[God] knows your hopes and dreams, including your fears and frustrations....Be more accepting of yourselves, including your body shape and style” (Holland, 2005). These teachings encourage people to look more positively at themselves. It is not surprising then that exposure to LDS doctrine yielded higher self-reported self-esteem.

Feeling positive influences from a culture is often conditional upon living in a socially acceptable manner. LDS cultural pressure seems to place much emphasis on perfection in physical, mental, and spiritual matters. This perfectionism, as discussed by Rice, Leever, Christopher, and Porter (2006) is detrimental to self-esteem. Finding that the LDS cultural stimulus yielded lower self-esteem confirms our hypothesis.

Carroll (1999) suggested that females may be more easily influenced by extrinsic sources such as culture than men. Based on Carroll’s research, we hypothesized that women would be more influenced by the LDS culture stimulus than men. Our findings did not support Carroll’s theory nor did they support our hypothesis because the difference between reported self-esteem in males and females was non-significant.

Males and females were influenced similarly by the LDS culture stimulus. One possibility for this result may be that low self-esteem in females is more publicly visible while low self-esteem in males is kept

more private and personal. We formed our hypothesis under the assumption that females receive more LDS cultural pressure, especially in the area of beauty and marriage. However, we neglected to fully take into account that males often receive pressure to marry and provide for a family after returning from two years of church missionary service. Our survey seemed to accurately measure cultural pressure that both males and females experience even though our hypothesis did not correctly estimate cultural pressure on males. After further consideration we consider our hypothesis to be incorrect and our results to accurately depict what occurs in life.

There are potential confounds to our research. We did not control the time of day that data was collected. The LDS culture stimulus data was collected at the end of a night class. After a long school day participants may have been anxious to leave, and therefore, not focused on the survey. The control group data was collected on a Sunday after a church gathering. This may have influenced their self-esteem in some way based on the subject matter discussed that day. The LDS doctrine data was collected on a school day around noon. Also, the LDS doctrine and LDS culture groups may have been influenced by the fact that they were receiving extra credit for the study. Students receiving extra credit may not be motivated to be thorough in their responses as evidenced by students hurriedly filling out the survey so that they could leave.

The study had additional limitations. Having only 53 participants in the study was the biggest limitation. More participants would have increased external validity by making the sample more representative of the population . This is especially true in the LDS doctrine group which had only 9 participants total and just 2 female participants. Also, the instrument could have provided more information by including questions that evaluated religious aspects affecting males’ self-esteem on the self-report survey. Questions could have addressed missionary service or the ability and pressure to provide for a family. Finally, we cannot prove that the questions we asked actually evaluate self-esteem. Self-esteem is a social construct—it exists because people agree that it exists and is, therefore, subjective. Though we consider our questions to be good measures of self-esteem, people with different concepts of self-esteem may not find the questions we asked on our survey to be good measures.



Very little research has been done comparing religious doctrine and influences of religious culture. This study has implications for future research because it is a beginning step towards understanding the different influences that doctrine and culture can have on people. An awareness of the difference between doctrine and culture and the different effects that these influences have on people's self-esteem and self-image can help individuals to limit negative contributions to culture that they sometimes make.

After studying BYU students we became curious as to how people of other ages would react to the stimuli. Future research could study teenagers involved in the LDS Young Men and Young Women's programs and older individuals with established families. These different groups would be interesting to study because society often views teenagers as more impressionable and influenced by culture, while older, more mature people with established families may be less pressured by extrinsic cultural influences than college students. Also, BYU students may not accurately represent LDS college students as a whole. Therefore, it would be interesting to study college-aged LDS Church members outside of Provo, Utah, where BYU is located. Similarly, it would be worthwhile to study LDS church members in other countries to see if the same LDS culture exists in other places.

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