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Strains Within the Mormon Subculture

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The Mormon subculture has developed a family form which is both typical of the broader American culture and unique to itself. A major element of this family form is Mormon fertility rates. Its development is reflected clearly in historical trends.

The available data on Mormon fertility shows that during the period from the formation of the Church in 1830 to about 1870 the Mormon subculture was developing and establishing itself as a separate entity. During that period Scholnic et al. (1978) have shown that the Mormon population (particularly in frontier Utah) was a natural fertility population, i.e. one in which there were no constraints imposed on fertility. This was not typical of the general U.S. population. After 1870, with completion of the intercontinental railroad and the turning of national priorities away from the painful ravages of the Civil War, more attention was focused on the Mormon community. Between about 1870 and about 1920, there was a tendency for Mormon fertility patterns to regress toward the national mean. The trends in these two periods are shown in Figure 1.

The evidence indicates that this movement away from a natural fertility population toward a closer approximation of the national trends was the result of Mormon women who married young beginning to suppress fertility pre-menopausally as their family size approached the community norm. This appears to describe the trend which has resulted in the modern Mormon population; that is, young marriage followed by prolific fertility during the early years of marriage, then a curtailing of births at a relatively young age as family size approaches the community norm. That general norm among Mormons, though consistently higher than the U.S. figure, has remained closely parallel to it with some divergence occurring in recent years. This can be seen clearly in Figure 2.

The graph demonstrates the parallel fluctuations of the Mormon and U.S. fertility rates, with Utah and Provo-Orem added in the later years.

As the percentage difference between the Mormon and the U.S. rates demonstrates, the difference between Mormons and the overall U.S. rate has grown significantly during the past 50 years or so. In 1920 the Mormon birthrate was 37.2% higher than the U.S. rate. During the post World War II baby boom, the Mormon rate maintained itself consistently at over 50% higher. During the fertility upturn of recent years, the Mormon rate approached 100% above the U.S. rate. Thus, even though the fluctuations in rates have been roughly parallel, the Mormons have been steadily and consistently widening the gap.

Without going through the statistical analysis, let me merely suggest that this parallel fluctuation reflecting the trends in U.S. society within the Mormon subculture is repeated in many areas other than fertility. These areas include total number in household, female household heads, and illegitimate births.

So, the widely observed phenomenon of Mormon typicality mixed with Mormon peculiarity is clearly demonstrable by demographic data. It can also be shown that these differences, rather than attenuating over the years, have actually been becoming more accentuated during the past one-half century or so.

These differences help to sustain a sense of separateness and destiny among Mormons which has been noted by various observers (see especially Leoni 1979, Arrington, 1978, and O'Dea, 1955), but they are also the source of great strains within the Mormon community. It is some of these strains I would like to explore with you today.

First is a set of strains caused by a conflicted Mormon view of the gentile community. There is a pervasive and deep-seated ambivalence among Mormons in their attitudes and actions toward non-Mormons. This ambivalence is rooted in two contradictory roles into which gentiles are cast in the Mormon subculture.

During the period since World War II to the present,
the Mormons have generally been well thought of, treated with respect by the press, and, in general, have had a fairly positive image in most parts of the free world. Before that time for more than 100 years Mormons were generally viewed by gentiles as a cultish, clannish, fringe group of polygamists. Thus, the long-term collective Mormon experience with gentiles is one of conflicted feelings. On the one hand, gentiles are potential converts to be befriended, courted and brought into the fold. On the other hand, they are a threatening, sinister, evil and errant lot to be shunned and avoided. This ambivalence is a paradox which can be puzzling and confusing to Mormons and non-Mormons alike. In general Mormons tend to be outgoing, helpful, sympathetic, politically active and socially involved. But, at the same time, they can also be clannish, suspicious, withdrawn, exclusive and ethnocentric. The strain within the Mormon family and community resulting from this ambivalence is very real and can be painful. As an example, teenagers and young adults are urged to be missionary-minded and to consciously nurture friendships among non-Mormons with the hope of eventually influencing them to convert to Mormonism. But, at the same time, they are cautioned not to date non-Mormons or marry out of the fold. Local ward, stake and regional activities are generally thought of as perfect opportunities to involve non-Mormons as a way of doing missionary work, but, should a Mormon girl meet a non-member boy at one of these activities and begin to date him, her parents may be upset, since they probably encouraged her to go to the dance hoping she would meet a nice Mormon boy. There is a built-in paradox.

In one sense this paradox reflects a direct conflict between the Church and the family, at least to the extent that the Church goal is to proselyte and spread the gospel, and the family goal is to manage and control the processes of mate selection. But this view, as you will all recognize, is too narrow. Mormon families and individuals tend to internalize the goal to spread the gospel, and the Church is clearly interested in managing the mate selection process to insure that Mormons marry Mormons and has made that goal explicit in a number of ways. These two conflicting goals represent a very real institutional, family and individual dilemma which is the cause of genuine and significant strain at all three of these levels, but particularly in the context of the family where the mate selection process tends to focus.

I remember as a young man hearing a non-member tell of having made a date with a Mormon girl for the high school Prom, and then showing up on the appointed night only to be informed by the girl's father that she was going with another boy because she did not date non-Mormons. Now that causes me some cognitive dissonance. This was obviously a clumsy, inept way of handling a delicate situation. As an idealistic, young returned missionary, I was inclined not to believe this story, convincing myself that it was obviously a sinister distortion diabolically calculated to make the Church look bad. I hope a few years of age and experience has made me wiser and not just more jaded, but I believe it now. I can imagine the machinations that went on in that home to arrive at the course of action which was ultimately taken.

"But, Daddy, I'm not going to marry the guy, he's just a friend."

"You marry who you date. I won't have a daughter of

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Provo-Orem
Mormons
Utah
U.S.
ambivalent attitude toward gentiles causes a push-pull situation which focuses directly on the family. This two-edged sword of doing missionary work among the gentiles while remaining loyal and serving the individual needs within the Mormon family and community constitutes a very real double bind which no Mormon can entirely escape. It is a pervasive, underlying cause of tension which must be managed and dealt with within each family as the instances arise. It is parents who fight these little daily battles, manage the decision-making process, and engineer the sometimes agonizing compromises which must be made, and Mormon parents do so under the awesome pressure of knowing that, “No other success can compensate for failure in the home.” (McKay, 1964)

There are several issues related to this central ambivalence of Mormons toward gentiles. First, Mormonism constitutes a divinely instituted restoration of ancient pure Christianity. A clear implication of this stance is that other Christian churches are not divinely instituted. This stance, of course, does not ingratiate Mormons to non-Mormons.

Within the Mormon community itself, this has resulted in the development of a world view which is another major source of strain and anguish for some Mormons.

This subconsciously scripted world view implies that Mormons should be more righteous, happier, more inclined to honesty and integrity, more successful and, in general, superior to non-Mormons. The paired assumptions, of course, are that gentiles are more decadent, less happy, less inclined to honesty and integrity, less successful and, in general, inferior to Mormons. On the one hand this suggests an arrogant ethnocentricity which fights against the friendly, outgoing missionary spirit. On the other hand, it sets some Mormons up for painful disillusionment. Our world view suggests that our way of life is God-inspired and thus constitutes in its purity the best of all possible worlds. Any good person of integrity and personal honesty, we like to tell ourselves, will convert to Mormonism once he sees how superior it is as a way of life.

This superiority stance applies strain on Mormons from two different angles. First, we tend to feel we must live our lives as an example of Mormon superiority. This tends to place an enormous burden on the shoulders of many Mormons. When these Mormons see non-members who are not impressed that their Mormon way of life is superior, they feel like failures.

“What am I doing wrong?” they ask themselves. “I know gospel living is superior, so I just must not be measuring up.”

As an example, I had a woman tell me a while back about a convention she attended with her husband who was a salesman. While her husband and the other men were in their meetings, the wives had a wonderful time shopping, sightseeing and restaurant hopping—all but my client. When the others ordered drinks, she ordered 7-Up. When they laughed uproariously over little off-color comments, she tried to maintain some dignity, but without much success. When the others spent money frivolously, she would prudently refrain. On Sunday, she went to church among strangers and spent most of the day alone while the other women enjoyed themselves.

Most Mormons go through this type of experience from time to time, but it gets filtered, tempered and re-interpreted for use in fast and testimony meeting or elsewhere in Mormon lore so that it always ends with the defeat of evil and the triumph of righteousness. The stories as they get retold result in someone getting interested in the gospel, or in the heroine getting new insight into how truly shallow and miserable these people really are, and a new understanding of the happiness the gospel brings, or by resisting temptation and sticking to righteous principles, a terrible disaster will be averted.

It was almost in tears of humiliation and guilt that the wife cited above confessed to me that in reality those other women seemed to really have their lives together, and had a wonderful time, while she was never so miserable in all her life. The fact that they were happy and she was miserable in that situation translated to her as personal failure, both because she was unhappy and because as a missionary she was a total failure.

The second strain caused by the Mormon world view of superiority is that many Mormons look around within their own ranks and see the same problems that are
It has been explicitly stated and often reinforced in the focus on women and ignore the fact that men seem to be about as susceptible to them as women. As I explained my plans to him, he looked a little puzzled and said, "Well, fortunately with our personal problems should not exist within the Mormon community--are acute. A great deal of energy is devoted to establishing and maintaining an image, both for non-Mormons and for Mormons themselves, that the Mormon way of life is superior. Trying to live up to that superior image is a potent factor in motivating Mormon action, but the resulting tension is palatable. The problems flowing from this tension have been variously termed the "Patty Perfect syndrome" and the "Emma Ray Riggs McKay syndrome." These two syndromes focus on women and ignore the fact that men seem to be as susceptible to them as women. Another issue closely related to the place of gentiles in the Mormon-world view is that of ambivalent loyalties. It has been explicitly stated and often reinforced in the Church that a person's prime loyalty is to the family. This axiomatic stance is challenged, however, by another axiom that Mormons should always be ready and willing to make personal sacrifices for the Church. The law of sacrifice, as we understand it, and the general willingness of active, converted members to dedicate enormous amounts of time and energy to the Church places another strain on the Mormon family. There is an implicit conflict of loyalties to Church and family.

It has been my unfortunate lot to counsel more than one bishop who was dedicating so much energy to his church work that his family was disintegrating. The Church and church service can become an escape for people to throw their energies in to avoid facing the fact that they have serious marital and family problems. With such high expectations of family living along with the exhaustive demands of church service, it is inevitable that these two areas of expectation come into conflict at times. When one adds the further expectations of civic and community involvement, and personal success and achievement, the pressures can be overwhelming. The strains attendant to these heavy and sometimes conflicting expectations can be demoralizing. Any Mormon who is sincerely trying to practice his religion has faced agonizing choices between his sense of loyalty and duty to family, career, Church, community and personal fulfillment. Managing this strain of divided loyalties is a major fact of life for dedicated Mormons.

In these few minutes together we could not hope to do more than scratch the surface of how the myths and the realities about the Mormon family put strains on the family structure and on the individuals within it. We have not even touched the major subject of the changing role of women in America and how this influences the Mormon family. Nor have we looked at the sexual revolution in America and the strains it causes among Mormons. These, as you will all recognize, are both major areas of strain and conflict within the present-day Mormon community, and again that strain focuses directly on the family.

The spirit of this conference has been such that I would like to close by bearing you my testimony. The thrust of this conference as I see it has been on being in tune with the Spirit and using divine inspiration in providing professional therapy services. This is a great resource which most of us, I think, do not tap enough. It was my great privilege to be trained as a therapist by Dr. Broderick, and one of the first things he taught me was how to be sensitive to the Spirit in my work, when and under what circumstances to give blessings, and to see myself as an instrument in the Lord's hands for helping to heal those he leads to me. I can say without question that some of the choicest and most spiritual experiences in my life have occurred during therapy sessions. I know that the Lord has led people to me and used my skills to help them.

I also know that being in tune with the Spirit is no substitute for professional competence. It must not be used as a cop-out. Spiritual guidance and inspiration can be a powerful tool in the hands of a skilled professional therapist, but it will not make up for a lack of competence. I am certain that given the choice between referring a member of his stake to a non-religious therapist who is competent, and an inspired sincere spiritual leader who is a mediocre therapist, Dr. continued on page 22.
Broderick would choose the competent therapist every time. The secret is not to choose competence or spirituality, but to combine the two.

As therapists we must know what we are doing and be good at our craft. Elder Packer told the story this morning about the clock repairman who could hear things others couldn't hear and who knew what needed to be done. The analogy suggested that as therapists we must have knowledge and skills and do our work with competence.

One element in the understanding we must develop, it seems to me, is an ability to look at our Mormon culture and social system with an objectivity which will allow us to hear those revealing sounds that others do not hear; to be able to comprehend the strains and stresses under which we as Mormons operate so that we can help people understand and deal with them effectively without finding it necessary to abandon the Church or reject its teachings. It is my prayer that we might work to thus improve our skills and become more effective tools in the Lord's hands to carry out His purposes.

REFERENCES