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Diana C. Comstock

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# Observed Differences Between Priesthood and Relief Society Lessons

Diana C. Comstock  
Brigham Young University

This study was based on observations made in two separate Priesthood quorums—one in a single student ward and another in a married student ward—and two Relief Societies—one in a single student ward and the other in a residential ward. Three of the observed wards were affiliated with Brigham Young University and the other was a residential ward in central Provo.

In each of these groups, two different lessons were observed and notes were taken describing the visual differences. The lessons were also recorded on a portable tape recorder so that linguistic differences could be further analyzed.

The data obtained from the tapes and notes were then analyzed according to several criteria: (1). Atmosphere, (2). Setting, (3). Speaker/Listener Relationship, (4). Tone, (5). Linguistic Codes and Registers, and (6). Lesson Format.

## ATMOSPHERE

The major difference in atmosphere between Priesthood and Relief Society rooms prior to the meetings starting was the feeling present. In the Relief Society room, there was somebody playing prelude music on the piano, and the conversation in the room was somewhat reserved. In the Priesthood room, no music was present and most of the men were engaged in conversation, much of it rather lively and often centered on sports, school and work, although this was much more in evidence in the three student wards, and especially in the single student wards.

The atmosphere present in the Relief Society room seemed to be created to convey the feeling that spiritual experiences were going to take place there, whereas in the Priesthood room, there was more of a feeling of overall camaraderie.

## SETTING

The setting in all of the Relief Society rooms was by far more formal than that of the Priesthood rooms. The infamous, and seemingly omnipresent, tablecloth and plant/flowers were usually in place before the group arrived for opening exercises. There were also pictures of Christ, temples and families. Typically, when the teacher came to the front of the room, she was very well-dressed, which was interpreted in this study as indicative of the relationship between the teacher and the students being a formal one.

The setting of the Priesthood room was nothing more than whatever the room looked like when the members got there. Mostly, in the student wards, the room was just a typical classroom, and in the residential ward, where they had a priesthood room, there was no attempt made to change the setting in the room. Typically, the Priesthood instructors did not have anything written on the chalkboard, which is generally a well-used medium in the Relief Society room. Also, when the Elders came into the room, there was a casual feeling—the instructor would often remove his suit coat or loosen his tie, as would other members of the class.

## SPEAKER/LISTENER RELATIONSHIP

In the Relief Society room, there is a teacher and there are class members and the division is clear and constant. The teacher typically stood in front of the room the entire time, often behind a podium, and presented the lesson to the class. If anyone had questions or comments, they raised their hands and waited to be called on.

In the Priesthood meeting, the relationship between the instructor and the class members was much more casual. If anyone had comments or

questions, they were usually interjected without waiting to be recognized by the instructor, and statements by the instructor or points of doctrine were often called into question and discussed, even hotly debated.

### TONE

The Relief Society lessons and teachers were typically quite formal. The teachers spoke in a fairly soft voice and they didn't generally use humor in their lessons. They frequently invoked the Spirit and were often moved to tears at some point in their lesson.

In the Priesthood lessons, the tone was definitely lighter. The instructor often utilized humor as a means for getting his point across in a memorable way. Sports stories were frequently used as examples for various points, although this was more prevalent in the single student wards. The instructors seemed to take it as given that they would be interrupted fairly often for questions and discussions, and therefore they seemed to have much less preconceived structure to their lessons.

### REGISTER

An overwhelming difference between the two organizations was the fact that the Relief Society employed a much more emotionally-based register to convey the message of the lesson. The teachers and presidencies often referred to the women as "sisters" and used words like "love", "charity" and other emotionally appealing vocabulary to motivate the members. When asking the members to quickly complete their visiting teaching assignments before the end of the month, the president used the concept of charity as her motivational basis. The women were nicely asked, rather than bluntly told, to get their visiting teaching done because their "girls might need them." In a similar scenario in Priesthood, the men were told rather harshly to "just get it done," because it was their duty—no appeal to the emotions was made.

The Priesthood instructors and class also tended to use much more casual language and a lot more slang than the Relief Society did. The men were much more likely to speak as they did in their everyday lives, whereas the women used more formal

speech, were careful of how they articulated their thoughts, and used more "cliche" phrases.

### FORMAT

This area revealed another major difference in the two organizations. The Relief Society lessons were much more presentational, with little interaction between the teacher and class members or with class members among themselves. Even when sought, responses or personal experiences were not readily forthcoming.

Quite the opposite was true in the Priesthood meeting. The entire lesson seemed merely a spring-board into discussion. Rather than a strictly prepared lesson, the instructor had a topic and some general ideas which everyone could discuss as a class. The men were far more likely to speak their minds and did not wait to be called upon to state their opinions. A lot of joking took place and the Elders seemed to feel free to express dissenting opinions when they thought that the teacher was wrong. Questioning authority seemed to be a matter of course in the Priesthood format.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

While the results of this brief study are not necessarily surprising generally, it is somewhat surprising that the observed differences were so readily apparent in the student wards. As students, it would seem that most of the members of these classes should have been quite accustomed to class discussion and interaction, and this appeared to be true in the Priesthood meetings. But the weekday classroom and the Sunday Relief Society room apparently have two separate sets of social norms.

However, the structure of the two organizations is different all around, and so are their lesson manuals. The Priesthood lessons are, on the average, two to three pages shorter than those in the Relief Society manual. This obviously provides more structure for the Relief Society teacher and more room for discussion for the Priesthood instructor. Also, the Relief Society lessons are broken down into four categories: Spiritual Living, Home and Family Education, Compassionate Service/Social Relations and Home Management. These categories suggest that women are to learn about the

home and family and service to others. The Priesthood manual had no such categories, and most of the lessons focused more on doctrinal issues rather than role fulfillment.

The language used in the two manuals is also different. One of the lessons observed in this study was called, in the Relief Society manual, "Modesty in Speech", while its counterpart in the Priesthood manual was called "Taming the Tongue." Going only from the lesson titles, it is clear that the Relief Society lesson appeals more to traditional ideals of femininity, while the Priesthood lesson appeals to the traditional idea of masculine aggressiveness which must be contained. Overall, the appeal in the Relief Society lessons was to the emotions, while in Priesthood, it was generally to the intellect. This is not to say that the Relief Society lessons were inherently condescending to women, or that the Priesthood lessons were inherently better or geared toward a more intelligent audience, but there are certainly two very different perspectives to be found in examining the two organizations.

This study was both brief and superficial, but it could open the door for more research. This descriptive study could be repeated with a much larger sample of wards from throughout the Church to determine the extent of these differences. Then independent variables such as age, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, as well as the most obvious variables of gender and traditional prescribed gender roles, could be introduced and studied. The officially stated purposes of each organization could also be studied insofar as they affect the actual outcome of the curriculum in either of the organizations—what would an ideal Priesthood/Relief Society lesson be in relation to the respective organization's overall goals, and what should the lessons accomplish to meet these goals? How would the two organizations compare under ideal circumstances—would the differences be fewer or greater? Any existing differences found as a result of these studies could be evaluated, and the organizations' curricula could be subsequently realigned, if necessary, to more fully meet the needs of their current membership.

Diana is a graduating senior majoring in English and Sociology. After graduation she plans to begin work on a Masters degree in Sociology, followed by a Ph.D. She would eventually like to teach at the university level. Sociolinguistics and Social Psychology are her main areas of interest.