4-1-2001

Extending the Influence of Research and Practice

Janet S. Scharman

Gary Dixon

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol26/iss1/5

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Extending the Influence of Research and Practice

Janet S. Scharman, PhD
Brigham Young University
AMCAP President, 1997-1999

with

Gary Dixon, MS
Vice-President, Bonneville International
President, The Foundation for a Better Life

Just a few years ago, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of AMCAP (see Bush, 1995). That was a time to reflect upon what actually prompted a handful of LDS mental health specialists to formalize their association and create this organization of Mormon Counselors & Psychotherapists. Among their thoughts at the time (Jensen, 1978; Lankford, 1975) were at least three things:

1. First was to create a safe haven from the many special interest groups in the field who can be very powerful and very confusing – and sometimes very distracting from the most important things (i.e., spiritual and eternal).

2. Another was, as members of a profession that is self-proclaimed to be the most non-religious of all professions, to be able to gather together and escape from that non-religious theme.

3. Third, they hoped to be able to learn new skills and to refresh previous learning in an atmosphere of shared values; that is, to take the very best of what is known professionally and mesh that with great spiritual truths.

AMCAP has done those things and done them well – and will continue to do them. Of course, an important question for each of us is, "What can I learn from this organization to help me?" However, to this question should also be added another: "How can I use what I learn here to bless others, to reach out to the rest of the world?"

A few weeks ago, Elder M. Russell Ballard spoke at a regional conference in the North Davis County area in Utah, and essentially what he said was:

We claim to have a living prophet who receives modern-day revelation. We also claim to believe in prophets of old who foresaw our day. And yet how often is it that we fail to acknowledge, or even recognize, that we are living out the fulfillment of those prophecies right now? (Ballard, 1999a)

A few years ago Elder Henry B. Eyring (1997) spoke about attending to the prophecies of church leaders, about paying attention to what the prophets are saying. He said that our choice is either to accept what they have to say or ignore them. But once a decision to ignore them is made, we stand on much more dangerous ground.

Janet S. Scharman PhD, AMCAP President 1997-1999, is a graduate (PhD) of the University of Utah. She previously was the Dean of Students and currently is the Vice President of Student Life at Brigham Young University. Address for correspondence: A-333 ASB, BYU, Provo UT 84602 (801) 422-2387 email <jan_scharman@byu.edu>
because we are no longer able to hear the words of the Lord in the same way. We are not nearly as receptive to the inspired counsel that could guide, help and direct us. Therefore, following the ongoing counsel and guidelines of the church leaders becomes vitally important.

A couple of weeks ago Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Arun Gandhi, spoke at the Brigham Young University Forum. The general theme of his lecture was quite interesting. He stated (Gandhi, 1999) that the twentieth century has been the most violent of any period of time in the history of the world. The most violent! Just think about what that might mean, in terms of prophecies and signs of the times. What comes to mind when thinking of "wars and rumors of wars" (Matt. 24:6)? It is an all-too-familiar phrase! This past week the media has broadcast the terrible events in Kosovo. And there have also been other tragic events around the world (and our hearts go out to those who suffer as a result of them). But even though the coming wars in the "last days" will be bigger than these, there might very well be more than just bombs and bullets and blood. Perhaps an even "bigger" war will be waged, attacking the very core of those things that are of eternal importance (see Bensen, 1974; Eyring, 1999b). For example:

- The number of people who are experiencing major depression nowadays is ten times greater than it was just two generations ago (Elliott & Tyrrell, 1999), yet indicators of general well-being are as high as they have ever been. There are no major worldwide wars, inflation is low, interest rates are low, unemployment is low, luxuries are more available than they have ever been. Yet depression is on the rise (see Bensen, 1974). And while in the past major depression was considered a disorder of middle-aged women, it is now significantly (Elliott & Tyrrell, 1999) affecting teenagers and young adults (young adults are now the most rapidly growing group suffering from depression, both men and women). Think about what that means: these young people are at the age of making major decisions shaping their identities and their sexual preferences, determining whether or not they will get married and have families, what they are going to do for careers, what kind of contributions they are going to make to society, what roles they are going to play. If they can be confused at this stage and caused to deviate from a wise course, what a powerfully tragic tool that influence could be!
- Advertisers are furiously targeting youth. The figures are surprising: in 1998 a staggering $119 billion dollars were spent by teenagers. It is expected this figure will go up to $136 billion by the year 2001 (Proctor, 1999). Some children cannot repeat one word of the Sunday School topic, yet they can repeat every word of many TV and radio commercials.

Maureen Jensen Proctor, who wrote Madison Avenue Wants Your Children, says:

The television screen gives us a very different set of commandments than we get from the burning bush: Thou shalt endlessly covet. Thou shalt grow up too fast. Thou art the center of the universe. Thou shalt put the gods of materialism and business before all else. (Proctor, 1999)

If any part of that is true, and it certainly seems to be, it is a very sad commentary on how things have shifted in society in recent years. Emotionally, senses and sensitivities are being challenged at every turn. To watch TV or movies nowadays, besides being subjected to sex and violence, is to experience a very high-energy kind of "attack" through visual sensations and high-intensity musical stimulation.

For example, several weeks ago, Brent [S. Brent Scharman PhD, AMCAP President 1988-89] and I took a couple of grandchildren to see the animated movie Prince of Egypt (Chapman, et al., 1999). It was really quite an interesting movie. But it starts out with a lot of very loud music and really dramatic images: the perspective goes up to building tops and mountain tops, then it shows a slave carrying a heavy load on his back, and he trips and falls, then is beaten with a whip. The look of terror on his face is intense. Then Rameses and Moses race chariots through the city creating havoc. The chariots tip over; there is a lot of loud music and very loud sounds. Well, about ten minutes into this onslaught, the three-year old crawled onto my lap, hid his face, closed his eyes, and went to sleep. That is how a lot of children react to this kind of over-stimulation or to frightening things. But it is not just children: adults also act similarly when bombarded with too much, because sometimes it is just too hard to keep dealing with it all.

An obvious example of the war being waged over things of eternal significance is the past year's historical events: the president of the United States was
impeached, and we watched a Senate trial. These are pretty momentous events. And yet how often during the course of these events, did we hear all that was talked about on the radio or TV, and felt like turning it off – just did not want to have to handle it any more? There is a significant social impact. These things heard on the TV or radio and read in the newspapers have now become so commonplace that people who just a few years ago would have blushed at the words “oral sex” are now discussing such things in social settings, in church, even in AMCAP meetings! Society has become significantly desensitized (see Ballard, 1999b).

A few weeks ago an article in the Salt Lake Tribune (Jackson, 1999) reported a survey of certain sexual behaviors among a thousand people randomly sampled across the United States. Of these 1000 randomly surveyed people, 9% admitted to having made love at work. And even more interestingly, 12% said they had accidentally interrupted colleagues who were making love at work. Now there are some looks of shock in the audience. What many of you may be thinking is, “This doesn’t happen where I work – I must work in a pretty boring place!” But the fact is that something is happening. It is not known if this is happening more commonly nowadays than in the past, or if society is just more open now and it has become more acceptable to talk about such things (see Ballard, 1999b). Once again, though, these are the kinds of things that our society, including the children, is being exposed to.

Tom Lickona PhD, a developmental psychologist and a professor at the State University of New York at Cortland, has researched college-aged people who have engaged in premarital sex (Lickona, Lickona & Boudreau, 1994; Lickona, 1994). Note that all the people he interviewed had willingly been involved in premarital sex. So this is not about people who have been raped or sexually abused or coerced or seduced, or who have been forced in any way at all. These are people who have willingly participated in premarital sex. His interviews resulted in some very interesting findings. Dr. Lickona said:

In discussions of teen sex, much is said about the dangers of pregnancy and disease – but far less about the emotional hazards. And that’s a problem, because the destructive psychological consequences of temporary sexual relationships are very real. (Lickona, 1994, p. 34)

What he found is that a significantly high percentage of these people who chose to engage in premarital sex reported feeling emotionally distraught afterwards. They felt distrustful of relationships, oftentimes embarrassed or depressed. About a year ago, at a conference at the Institute on College Student Values in Tallahassee, Dr. Lickona reported specifically what some of these young people had said. One of the most powerful quotes is from a young woman who said, “There is no condom for the heart” (Lickona, 1998).

Of course, spiritually-aware counselors and psychotherapists would understand these things. But sometimes there is a real hesitancy to speak out. Dr. Lickona does not know very much about the truths taught in the LDS church. Rather, he is merely talking about his research. AMCAP members already know these principles but may sometimes be a little reluctant to move clients in spiritual directions that might very well be most helpful and healthful for them. Dr. Lickona gave the example:

we would never get a group of young people together and talk about the problems of drug usage, and then say “you know, in spite of everything we have said, if you still want to use drugs, let’s give you some clean needles and hook you up with a good drug dealer.” (Lickona, 1998)

And yet, as Dr. Lickona points out, that is exactly what is happening all around this country regarding premarital sex.

Another example of this war we are all involved in is related to this AMCAP convention theme – the family. Characteristics of the changing family over the last several years are really astounding. In 1975, 32% of women with children under 2 years of age were working outside the home. But in 1995, 83% of women went back to work within 6 months after childbirth (Advancing Women, 1998). Now for some women this was a choice, but for many it was not a choice. It was something they felt compelled to do, oftentimes because of financial reasons. In an informal survey (Advancing Women, 1998) in the state of Utah, working women with children were asked why they were working. The vast majority said it was to provide necessities for their family, not because they were dissatisfied at home or they needed more stimulation, but because of serious financial needs. They talked about things like orthodontic braces and music
lessons and college and missions. Of course, it is very hard to judge exactly what necessities are compared to luxuries. But the truth is that society is changing in such a way that more women are feeling compelled to go back to work, even when they would prefer to stay home with their babies. This is a very difficult issue for them, financially as well as personally.

Only 7% of U.S. families conform to the "Ozzie and Harriet" model: that is, a husband working outside the home and a woman working as a homemaker, with two children in their home (Advancing Women, 1998). Most of the children being raised now do not know these models or who Ozzie and Harriet were (or Donna Reed or others like them); they don't have any idea what these characters symbolize. Grandma does not know about MTV; the children do not know about Ozzie and Harriet. Certainly there are some very big differences between children's experiences and role models today and those of their parents and grandparents.

Another important statistic regarding families is that almost half (48%) of married working women provide at least half of their family's income (Families and Work Institute, 1995). This is an important statistic because it means both husband and wife are being exposed to the same kinds of stresses and pressures at work (and likely long hours, with high demands). When they both get home, which of them has enough energy to be able to pick up the pieces for the family and hold it together?

Another example comes from Eric Jensen's book (1998), *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, which talks about what is really helpful in raising young children. He talks about the high sensitivity a developing fetus has to the mother's stress levels and nutrition. For many young people, nutritional levels are oftentimes very low. Certainly this is common in the university setting; young students eat terribly unbalanced meals and are under very high stress. Jensen (1998) also points out that because of the way the brain is being organized in infancy, if a child is exposed to stress or violence within weeks or months after being born, the developing brain is actually reorganized so as to become more impulsive and more aggressive. No wonder many educators report the number of children with impulsive and aggressive behaviors has been rising dramatically in recent years.

Jensen (1998) discusses a recent poll which showed that 82% of parents say they do not encourage reading at home. Eighty-two percent – that is astounding! These parents say their children are too distracted by TV to read. Another poll stated that 90% of children aged 9-13 play video games, and that 26% of them play about 6 hours a day. Now, when they are in front of the video machines, they are not doing other things, and this can be very important developmentally. They are focusing on two-dimensional kinds of things instead of three-dimensional; this impacts them socially and physically in some very dramatic ways (see Jensen, 1998).

One more example of modern spiritual warfare has to do with computers. There are two things I really love about computers: I love email, and I love being able to correct a mistake without having to redo the whole thing; I love being able to cut and paste. These are great advantages! But the computer has also brought great problems, and one of these problems is pornography. Recently, at BYU, the Student Life secretary was doing an Internet search and did not know exactly where to find what she was looking for, so she just typed in a word – a pretty benign word. All of a sudden what popped up on the screen were two very large-breasted naked women! She let out a little bit of a scream. This is not the best thing to have on a computer in an office that oversees the BYU Honor Code! She exited from that program pretty quickly, and everyone had a good laugh. But the reaction might have been quite different if this had been a child who accessed that site in the privacy of his bedroom.

Society is bombarded with such things. One of the people who works at the university library mentioned there is a program which is able to detect a lot of the incoming pornographic web sites, and thus these sites can be blocked from the campus network. He said that one night he left work about 8:00 pm, got back to work at 7:00 am, and found there were over 400 new pornographic sites identified that had been published onto the Internet overnight. This could be overwhelming!

Or it could be energizing, considering that AMCAP members are uniquely qualified – because of training, education, experience, and the knowledge of great truths – to fight for what is right in this battle for the hearts and minds of children. We should be thinking of what we can do to help, what talents we can share, knowing we understand something of human development and what it takes to really help people change. And, because of our spiritual commitment we know these things at a much deeper level than many other professionals who
have similar training. So, how can we use this knowledge to bless lives? This is one of the significant problems AMCAP members face – how to send a message from our vantage point to other professionals, one that will truly be heard (see Ballard, 1999b).

Gary Dixon, Vice-President of Bonneville International, has graciously offered to talk for a few minutes about what the LDS Church has done in this regard, one of the ways the Church is sharing its message.

GARY DIXON, M.S., VICE-PRESIDENT OF BONNEVILLE INTERNATIONAL

Thank you, Dr. Scharman. About 25 years ago, this question was asked: knowing all the wonderful truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, how can the Church reach out with these truths to the rest of the world? This question was answered with the Homefront series (Homefront PSA Series, 1972). There were a lot of doubters, by the way, who said “Well, they are never going to let the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints put their name on television and not charge for it.” As a matter of fact, we did not know if the Homefront series would be broadcast even if the Church did pay for it. But it started with a very small effort in the beginning. Now let me show you a few of these spots. And by the way, I want to mention we have a great deal of appreciation for the counseling and the psychotherapy field. We tap into your world often and hire the services of a number of counselors and therapists to find those moments that would be most applicable in a Homefront setting. Long ago it became quite apparent that writers can live only so much life and have so many experiences, while therapists collectively have thousands upon thousands. So we interview on a regular basis many psychotherapists and counselors, and are very appreciative. You can see some of those experiences displayed here today [video of several Homefront clips: “Family: Isn’t It About ... Time?”].

In the beginning, we were quite concerned about whether TV stations would continue to accept these spots. They are sent out as public service announcements, meaning that the Church does not pay anything for the time, just like Smokey-the-Bear ads, for instance. In spite of the doubters, the popularity of the Homefront spots began to grow, largely because of this great truth about families: we all come from families and are all part of families. Thus, these Homefront moments on the screen have become universally accepted. Last year, in 1998, Homefront aired 130,000 times across the USA at no charge. The key in this effort is to make sure that people are watching. Nielsen surveys show that Homefront was seen on average 1.3 million times a day across the USA. This is a real credit to the many people over the years who have contributed to the effort. It is also a credit to the encouragement of Church leaders, such as Elder M. Russell Ballard, who has often challenged us to learn to use the media more effectively. As the Proclamation on the Family reminds us, “The family is central – central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children” (Hinckley, 1995, p. 101). The Homefront spots have a little laugh sometimes, they are a little poignant sometimes – but all of us can see ourselves in them. Each of the Homefront spots is about things that are immediately applicable. But even more importantly, together they provide a national audience the chance to associate the Church’s name with these truths.

I want to thank AMCAP for the hundreds and hundreds of moments you have given the writers and producers and directors over the years, because this series could not have been produced without you.

JAN SCHARMAN, PhD

Gary, thank you. That is a real benefit to the world. AMCAP is also starting to expand its outreach: Dr. David Bush (AMCAP Vice-President) has set up an AMCAP website [editor’s note: the current AMCAP website address is: http://www.amcap.net]. This is a great way of publishing gospel truths within the helping professions to more people in the world. But personally speaking, there are things that individual members of AMCAP can do. For example, instead of focusing on the benefits of membership in our own work with clients – “What’s going to help me?” – we need to ask, “What can I do as a therapist and a member of this Church with a special gift that the rest of the world does not have (it is called the Holy Ghost) that can really bless people’s lives?” Of course, many AMCAP members are already doing this in their clinical practices and classrooms. But there might be just a little more – a letter to an editor, an article for a journal, a presentation in another professional setting – which takes a stand and
shares ways to spiritually bless people’s lives.

In a meeting a couple of weeks ago Elder Henry B. Eyring said (1999a), “There is always going to be more to do than can possibly be done; get used to it!” Notice that rather than saying what might be expected (for example, “Now, let’s get our goals set; let’s prioritize”), he just said, “There is a work to be done; the prophet has set the pace; and we are the ones to do it.” There are many great opportunities to bless people’s lives, to be a positive influence. The Homefront series has probably significantly touched many lives. And AMCAP members have an exceptional ability to do the same thing – to creatively help God’s children, with his help.

There is absolutely no question what the outcome of the ongoing spiritual war is going to be. The only really important question is: what side will you be on? And what can you contribute to victory?

Please know that the AMCAP Board appreciates all of your great efforts. There are so many very fine things already being done! It is a privilege to be associated with this organization. It is a wonderful privilege twice a year to be able to rub shoulders with AMCAP members at these conventions. There is really something special here; there is not another organization like this anywhere. Great things can happen when we are willing to think about how to share spiritually. Thank you for all the good things you are doing, for the opportunity to serve, and for your support.

References


