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# LDS Counselor Ratings of Problems Occurring among LDS Premarital and Remarital Couples

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*A fundamental purpose of this study was to furnish marriage preparation providers (counselors, educators, and ecclesiastical leaders) with information about specific problem areas that might be encountered in LDS first marriages and remarriages. A structured questionnaire was sent to a national sample of LDS counselors, defined as members of the Association of Mormon Counselors & Psychotherapists (AMCAP). These LDS counselors rated 29 problem areas that couples might encounter in a first marriage or remarriage. Results were analyzed in an attempt to determine the most frequently occurring, most damaging, and most difficult problems to deal with in LDS first marriages and remarriages. Findings suggest that "unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse," "communication," "money management/finances," "decision making/problem solving," "power struggles," and "sex" were all identified as the most frequently occurring problems/complaints which first time LDS marriages might encounter. For LDS remarital couples, "communication," "children," "problems related to previous marriage," "unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse," "money management/finances," "power struggles," and "decision making/problem solving," were identified as most frequently occurring problems. These findings suggest specific areas of focus in LDS marriage preparation programs and for those who assist couples in preparing for marriage. A secondary comparison of the findings with those of a sample of Protestant clergy counselors confirmed strikingly similar identification and ranking of problems for LDS and Protestant premarital and remarital couples.*

Geiss and O'Leary (1981) stated that marital problems are one of the three leading reasons people enter therapy. Alleviating marital problems and divorce would save enormous personal, social and economic costs (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Duncan & Markman, 1988). Even though treatments for marital problems have generally proven effective (Doherty & Simmons, 1996; Hahlweg & Markman, 1988; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993), it can be argued that "treatment programs are akin to closing the proverbial barn door after the horse has left" (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993 p. 29).

In the United States, out of 100 marriages occurring

on a given day, some 54 are first marriages for the bride and groom, while the other 46 are marriages in which at least one of the partners have been married previously

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(Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997). With divorce rates suggesting that approximately 40 % of first marriages, and an even higher percent of remarital couples will eventually divorce, alleviating divorce could be seen as one of the primary tasks of mental health professionals (Stahmann, 2000).

In the recent years there have been several studies highlighting the benefits of marriage (Center of the American Experiment and Coalition for Marriage, Family & Couples Education, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2001; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). There has also been important literature focusing on methods for improving preparation for marriage (Silliman & Schumm, 1999, 2000; Stahmann, 2000; Williams, Riley, Risch, & Van Dyke, 1999). At the same time, professional and lay interest and activity in marriage preparation activities in communities and churches has increased dramatically with such efforts as marriage mentoring, community marriage initiatives (McManus, 1995), and a major national organization, the Coalition for Marriage, Family & Couples Education (CMFCE) with its web site and annual meeting focusing on marriage preparation and marriage enrichment (see <[www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)>).

Wright (1977) has argued that a major contributor to marital problems and divorce is inadequate preparation for marriage. Bagarozzi, Bagarozzi, Anderson & Pollane (1984) recommend that the most effective preparation takes into account developmental tasks that a couple must resolve successfully if they are to enjoy a satisfying relationship. Since all couples do not face the same issues or developmental tasks, many experts (Fowers, Montel & Olson, 1996; Bishop, 1993; Williams, 1992; Bagarozzi, et al., 1984; Schumm & Denton, 1979) recognize a need for preventative counseling tailored to specific groups or populations, such as religious denominations (Anderson, Browning, Evison & Van Leeuwen, 1998; Center for Marriage & Family, 1995; Bishop, 1993; Rolfe, 1985; Bagarozzi, et al., 1984; Schumm & Denton, 1979; Boike, 1977; Microys & Bader, 1977; Wright, 1977; Oates & Rowatt, 1975; Gangsei, 1971).

Koltko (1990), citing May (1980) and Shipps (1985), stated that because of their beliefs, history and culture, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) are a distinct ethnic and religious group. With LDS church members representing the fifth largest religious body in the United States (Koltko, 1990; Stark,

1984), and with LDS divorce rates similar to the national average (Heaton, 1992), it is probable that a counselor or therapist will work with LDS clients. In anticipation of this event, it seems important for counselors to be aware of information which may be helpful when working with LDS couples preparing for a first marriage or remarriage, or for helping them adjust after marriage.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this study was to discover which problem/complaint areas LDS mental health professionals identify as the most (1) frequently occurring, (2) most damaging to marriage and (3) most difficult to deal with in marriage preparation among LDS premarital and remarital couples. The sample consisted of members of the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP), who were asked to rate 29 potential problem areas that couples might face, as identified in a previous study of marriage problems (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Geiss and O'Leary (1981) affirmed that it was appropriate to seek information from practitioners to determine guidelines for focusing and directing research and clinical practice. In the present study, AMCAP members were the practitioners studied.

Giblin (1994) stated that effective premarital counseling needs to provide couples with a realistic sense of potential problems associated with marriage and family life. Knowing specifically what needs and problems should be addressed is one of the most important tasks related to successful premarital counseling (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997; Williams, 1992; Bagarozzi, et al., 1984; Schumm & Denton, 1979). It was anticipated that the results of this study would be useful to marriage preparation providers who may work with an LDS population.

#### METHOD

##### Sample

The sample used in this study came from members of the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP) living within the United States:

AMCAP is an international professional organization of counselors, psychotherapists and others in helping professions whose common bond is adherence to the principles and standards of the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints. Individual opinions and ideas do not necessarily reflect those of the AMCAP board or the general AMCAP membership. AMCAP is neither sponsored by nor does it speak for the LDS church or its leaders. (AMCAP, 2002)

A "Marriage Preparation Provider Questionnaire for AMCAP Members" (MPPQ-AMCAP) was sent to each of 847 AMCAP members living within the United States. A postage paid return envelope was included. Two weeks following the initial mailing of the questionnaires, a follow-up reminder was sent to each person indicating the importance of returning the questionnaire. In order to preserve anonymity of the AMCAP members surveyed, only two sets of mailing labels were generated with no identifying information kept by the researchers, so that additional follow-up to those who did not return a questionnaire was not possible.

Over a period of six months, 350 usable MPPQ-AMCAP questionnaires were returned (41%). This response rate was determined to be acceptable, considering that the response rate for a major national study of marriage and family therapists was 34%, which was viewed as "typical for questionnaires sent to professionals" (Doherty & Simmons, 1996, p. 12). Information from the last page of the six-page MPPQ-AMCAP survey was used for this study. The last page was accurately and totally completed by 231 respondents. Doherty & Simmons (1996) suggest that there is variation in response rates on different parts of a questionnaire. That was certainly confirmed by this study: The lower usable response rate on the last part of the MPPQ-AMCAP questionnaire may be attributed to the length of the questionnaire and the extremely careful reading required for completion of the final page.

### Sample Demographics

The MPPQ-AMCAP questionnaire contained questions with regard to demographic variables such as marital status, professional identification, number of years experience in profession, gender, age and the number of premarital and remarital couples seen in the last twelve months.

Nearly all of the 231 responding AMCAP members were married (203 or 87.9%) at the time they completed the survey. Of those married, 175 (75.8%) were currently married to their first spouse and 28 (12.1%) were remarried. Of those not currently married 11 (4.8%)

had never been married, 4 (1.7%) were separated, 8 (3.5%) were divorced and 4 (1.7%) were widowed. All respondents indicated membership in the LDS Church.

In response to professional identification approximately 90% identified as mental health professionals. Of those identifying themselves as mental health professionals, 67 (29%) identified themselves as "social workers;" 61 (26.4%) identified themselves as "counselors;" 43 (18.6%) "marriage and family therapists;" 28 (12.1%) "psychologists;" 6 (2.6%) "clinical sociologist," and 1 (.4%) as a "psychiatrist." The remaining 10% identified themselves as something other than those already described.

The mean number of years of experience in these professions was identified as 15.8 years. The majority of respondents were male 149 (64.5%) with 82 (35.5%) female. The mean age of respondents was 48.9 years. Respondents reported that the mean number of premarital couples seen during the previous twelve months was 3.3 couples. Also they reported an average of 2.5 remarital couples seen during the same time period.

### Procedure

Using the same 29 problem areas outlined by Geiss & O'Leary (1981) (with the exception that the term "premarital affairs" was used instead of "extra-marital affairs"), AMCAP members were first requested to estimate the percentage of LDS first marriage and remarriage couples who would have problems or complaints in each of the 29 areas. Next, they were requested to indicate five problem areas that would be most damaging to an LDS first marriage and remarriage. Lastly, the AMCAP respondents were requested to select five problem areas they believed would be most difficult to deal with in premarital counseling with LDS first marriage and remarriage couples. Respondents were asked to give these ratings separately for both first marriages and remarriages.

## RESULTS

### Most Frequent Problems

Table 1 contains information on LDS counselor's estimates of the percentage of LDS premarital and remarital couples who would have problems/complaints in each of 29 problem categories. The MPPQ-AMCAP questionnaire asked the respondents to estimate the percentage of LDS couples (first marriages and remarriages) who would have problems/complaints in each of the 29 areas listed.

**Table 1**  
Mean Percentage Estimates and Ranking by LDS Counselors of Most Frequently Occurring Problem areas for LDS Premarital and Remarital Couples

For LDS Premarital Couples. (N=218)	%	For LDS Remarital Couples. (N=192)	%
Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse	70.7%	Communication	71.3%
Communication	68.9%	Children	70.7%
Money management/finances	57.9%	Problems related to previous marriage	63.7%
Decision making/problem solving	54.4%	Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse	60.3%
Power struggles	53.1%	Money management/finances	60.2%
Sex	50.4%	Power struggles	56.4%
Role conflicts	45.9%	Decision making/problem solving	55.5%
Demonstration of affection	43.1%	Sex	49.2%
In-laws/relatives	39.8%	Role conflicts	48.1%
Employment/job	38.3%	Serious individual problems	47.6%
Value conflicts	37.8%	Demonstration of affection	46.0%
Children	37.2%	In-laws/relatives	44.8%
Household management	34.2%	Value conflicts	44.2%
Serious individual problems	32.5%	Jealousy	41.5%
Jealousy	31.5%	Employment/job	39.7%
Lack of loving feelings	29.0%	Household management	38.1%
Conventionality	27.9%	Lack of loving feelings	37.5%
Recreation/leisure time	27.5%	Pre-marital affairs	36.1%
Pre-marital affairs	27.2%	Recreation/leisure time	30.1%
Personal habits/appearance	23.6%	Conventionality	29.8%
Religious differences	23.0%	Religious differences	29.3%
Friends	22.9%	Friends	27.7%
Addictive behavior other than alcoholism	20.8%	Addictive behavior other than alcoholism	27.5%
Physical abuse	20.1%	Personal habits/appearance	27.0%
Incest	18.3%	Psychosomatic problems	26.9%
Psychosomatic problems	18.2%	Physical abuse	25.1%
Health problems/physical handicap	14.0%	Incest	23.2%
Alcoholism	13.5%	Health problems/physical handicap	20.6%
Problems related to previous marriage	13.2%	Alcoholism	20.0%

As shown in Table 1, LDS counselor ratings of the percentage of occurrence for each of the 29 problem areas in LDS first marriages ranged from 71% to 13%. Six areas emerged in which counselors rated problems as occurring in at least 50% of first marriages. Those six areas and the estimated percentage of occurrence included: Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse 71%, Communication 69%, Money management/finances 58%, Decision making/problem solving 54%, Power struggles 53%, and Sex 50%. The other 23 problem areas and LDS counselor's estimates of the percentage of LDS premarital couples who would have each problem/complaint are shown in Table 1.

Also, as shown in Table 1, LDS counselor ratings of problems occurring in LDS remarriages ranged from 71% to 20% for the 29 areas. There were seven areas in which counselors rated problems as occurring in at least 50% of remarriages. Those seven areas and the estimated percentage of occurrence were: Communication = 71%, Children = 71%, Problems related to previous marriage = 64%, Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse = 60%, Money management/finances = 60%, Power struggles = 56% and Decision making/problem solving = 56%. The other 22 problem areas and counselor estimates of the percentage of LDS remarital couples who would have each problem/complaint ratings are shown.

**Most Damaging Problems**

Table 2 contains the ratings by AMCAP members as to which five of the 29 problem areas would be most damaging to LDS premarital and remarital couples. The top five (of 29 areas) rated as most damaging problem areas for LDS first marriages rated were: (1) Communication, (2) Incest, (3) Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse, (4) Physical abuse, and (5) Money management/finances.

Also, in Table 2, LDS counselor ratings as to which

**Table 2**  
Ratings by LDS Counselors of Five Most Damaging Problem Areas for LDS Premarital & Remarital Couples

For LDS Premarital Couples	For LDS Remarital Couples
1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Incest	2. Incest
3. Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse	3. Children
4. Physical abuse	4. Problems related to previous marriage
5. Money management/finances	5. Physical Abuse

five of the 29 problem areas would be most damaging to LDS remarriages are shown. The five most damaging problem areas rated for LDS remarriages were: 1) Communication, 2) Incest, 3) Children, 4) Problems related to first marriage, and 5) Physical abuse.

### Most Difficult to Treat Problems

Table 3 contains AMCAP counselor estimates as to which problems/complaints would be most difficult to deal with in premarital counseling with LDS premarital and remarital couples. The five most difficult problem areas to treat with couples entering a first marriage were: 1) Incest, 2) Serious individual problems, 3) Sex, 4) Alcoholism, and 5) Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse.

Also, in Table 3, LDS counselor ratings of problems which would be most difficult to treat in working with LDS remarriages are shown. The top five most difficult to treat problem areas in working with LDS remarriages are: (1) Problems related to previous marriage, (2) Incest, (3) Serious individual problems, (4) Children, and (5) Alcoholism.

## DISCUSSION

### LDS Counselor Perceptions

The results of this study revealed the problems/complaints that LDS counselors rated as the most frequently occurring, most damaging to marriage, and most difficult to deal with in premarital counseling with LDS premarital and remarital couples. Such information can be useful to mental health professionals who work with premarital couples as well as others such as educators, teachers, and those who work in ecclesiastical roles and settings.

It can be noted that for those *couples entering first marriages*, four of the six most frequently occurring problems are related to skills. Thus, communication, decision-making, power struggles and dealing with money management and finances are all problems that can be resolved, or more effectively dealt with, by skill building or skill enhancement. We agree with others that virtually all couples can benefit from skill enhancement (Stanley, 2001). That is not to say that all couples are deficit, rather that the skills in such areas as those mentioned can be reviewed and strengthened. In fact, skill enhancement and enrichment are among the very pur-

Table 3

Ratings by LDS Counselors of Five Most Difficult Areas to Deal with in Marriage Preparation for LDS Premarital & Remarital Couples

For LDS Premarital Couples	For LDS Remarital Couples
1. Incest	1. Problems related to previous marriage
2. Serious Individual Problems	2. Incest
3. Sex	3. Serious Individual Problems
4. Alcoholism	4. Children
5. Unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse	5. Alcoholism

poses of premarital intervention by counselors, educators, and ecclesiastical leaders.

The other two top problem areas for first marriages, unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse, and sex, are areas that can often be resolved and more adequately dealt with when couples have appropriate information about what to expect in marriage. Here formal information such as reading books or articles and taking classes can be helpful. Informal means such as talking with parents, counselors, teachers, and ecclesiastical leaders can also be helpful.

For LDS *remarital couples*, the resolution of four of the seven frequently occurring problems identified can be seen as related to skill enhancement. Two others areas, "unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse" and "children" fall into the category of obtaining appropriate information about what to expect in marriage and when children are already present in a remarriage. One problem area often facing remarital couples, that of problems related to a previous marriage, is in the category requiring more therapeutic work and should usually be handled with a trained professional. Here the couple can likely benefit from conjoint and/or individual therapy. When non-therapy trained premarital workers such as ecclesiastical leaders, teachers, or marriage mentors come across a couple facing issues related to a previous marriage, or other deeper problems, appropriate referral or consultation should be made.

### Comparison of LDS and Protestant Clergy Counselor Ratings

Because the authors had access to similar data from a national study of Protestant clergy premarital counselors, it was decided to compare the results of the present study and those of a study of clergy premarital counselors and their perceptions of the most frequent, most

**Table 4**  
Comparison of LDS Counselor and Protestant Clergy Responses to Most Frequent Problems Faced by Couples Entering a First Marriage

LDS Counselors	Protestant Clergy Counselors
1. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse	1. Communication
2. Communication	2. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse
3. Money Management/Finances	3. Money Management/Finances
4. Decision Making/Problem Solving	4. Decision Making/Problem Solving
5. Power Struggles	5. Power Struggles

**Table 5**  
A Comparison of LDS Counselor and Protestant Clergy Responses to Most Frequent Problems Faced by Remarital Couples

LDS Counselors	Protestant Clergy Counselors
1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Children	2. Children
3. Problems Related to Previous Marriage	3. Problems Related to Previous Marriage
4. Money Management/Finances	4. Power Struggles
5. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse	5. Money Management/Finances

**Table 6**  
A Comparison of LDS Counselor and Protestant Clergy Responses to Problems Most Damaging to First Marriages

LDS Counselors	Protestant Clergy Counselors
1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Incest	2. Money Management/Finances
3. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse	3. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse
4. Physical Abuse	4. Alcoholism
5. Money Management/Finances	5. Physical Abuse

**Table 7**  
A Comparison of LDS Counselor and Protestant Clergy Responses to Problems Most Damaging to Remarriages

LDS Counselors	Protestant Clergy Counselors
1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Incest	2. Alcoholism
3. Children	3. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse
4. Problems Related to Previous Marriage	4. Power Struggles
5. Physical Abuse	5. Children

damaging and most difficult to treat problems facing premarital couples whom they counsel. In that study, the sample was 238 clergy representing six denominations

from 44 states and every geographical region in the United States (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997).

The results of the clergy study and the present study of LDS counselors showed similar results in the rankings of the top five problems facing couples entering a first marriage (see Table 4).

The top five problems as rated by LDS and Protestant clergy counselors are the same. Only the first two areas are inverted in rank. Here is evidence that, from the perception of religious counselors preparing couples for first marriages, it is important to include information and discussion of marital expectations, communication, money management and finances, decision making and problem solving, and recognizing and dealing with power struggles.

Looking at the rankings for remarriages in Table 5, LDS and Protestant clergy counselors share the same overall perceptions of which are the most frequent problems (of 29 problems listed) for couples who are planning to marry where at least one partner has been previously married. Communication, children, and problems related to a previous marriage all emerged as being ranked the same in frequency—1, 2, and 3. Both groups rated money management/finances as being in the top five problems (# 4 by LDS counselors and # 5 by clergy counselors). Power struggles was ranked as # 4 by clergy counselors. LDS counselors ranked unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse as # 5.

As to the most damaging problems to first marriages and remarriages, the LDS and clergy counselors ranked communication as the most damaging problem for both first marriages and remarriages. See Tables 6 and 7. It is generally accepted that communication is a skill that is necessary for, but not sufficient for, a satisfactory marital relationship (Stanley, et. al., 1998). Perhaps that is what these counselors are saying, that communication is a core skill and without good communication a couple can likely do little else in the marriage.

It is noted that both the LDS and clergy counselors identified and ranked four of the same 29 problems as being most damaging to first marriages. Both groups included physical abuse among the most damaging problems. In addition, LDS counselors ranked incest as being in the top five most damaging problems while Protestant clergy counselors included alcoholism as being among the five top problems.

When asked about the most difficult problems to deal with in marriage preparation both groups identified

**Table 8**  
Comparison of LDS Counselor and Protestant Clergy Responses to Problems Most Difficult to Deal with in First Marriage Preparation

LDS Counselors	Protestant Clergy Counselors
1. Incest	1. Addictive Behavior other than Alcoholism
2. Serious Individual Problems	2. Alcoholism
3. Sex	3. Serious Individual Problems
4. Alcoholism	4. Incest
5. Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage or Spouse	5. Physical Abuse

**Table 9**  
Comparison of LDS Counselor and Protestant Clergy Responses to Problems Most Difficult to Deal with in Remarriage Preparation

LDS Counselors	Protestant Clergy Counselors
1. Problems Related to Previous Marriage	1. Incest
2. Incest	2. Alcoholism
3. Serious Individual Problems	3. Addictive Behavior other than Alcoholism
4. Children	4. Serious Individual Problems
5. Alcoholism	5. Physical Abuse

much more severe problems than the earlier questions of most frequent and most damaging problems. As shown in Tables 8 and 9, the problems identified are generally those requiring intensive individual, couple, or family psychotherapy. Both groups of counselors identified incest, serious individual problems and alcoholism as being among the top five most difficult problems to deal with. The findings here are useful to alert marriage preparation providers as to the reality of such problems as incest, alcoholism, serious individual problems, physical abuse, and addictive behaviors other than alcoholism. Appropriate referral can then be made.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of marriage in the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is clear: "marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God ... marriage between man and woman is essential to his eternal plan" (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995, p. 102). Over 25 years ago, Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

I believe that the most important single thing that any Latter-day Saint ever does in this world is to marry the right person, in the right place, by the right authority, and that ... the most important remaining thing that any Latter-day Saint can ever do is so to live that the terms and conditions of the covenant ... will be binding ... now and forever. (McConkie, 1975, p. 38)

Yet, the LDS church endorses no standardized program or process of marriage preparation or premarital education. And while this may be an accurate statement of church policy, there is much effort put forth by ecclesiastical leaders and lay church members to assist in preparing for and strengthening marriages (Holman, Larson & Stahmann, 2000). It is to that end, that the perceptions of LDS counselors in regard to the frequency, severity and difficulty of dealing with 29 potential marital problem areas which might be encountered in LDS first marriages and remarriages, is relevant. It is anticipated that these results may be useful for counselors, educators and clergy in developing marriage preparation programs designed to prepare LDS couples for common challenges.

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