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# The Strengths and Challenges of Contemporary Marriages of Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Dean M. Busby and David C. Dollahite

Many people follow religious beliefs, principles, and practices because they believe these will lead to a higher quality of marriage and family life.<sup>1</sup> It is clear from the extant research that belonging to and practicing a religion can lead to improved outcomes that benefit couples and families. A large body of social science research indicates that religion has salutary influence on a number of personal and relational outcomes, including greater physical and mental health,<sup>2</sup> positive psychological outcomes in adolescence,<sup>3</sup> better marital relationships and higher fidelity,<sup>4</sup> transformation in marital relationships,<sup>5</sup> reduced anxiety,<sup>6</sup> marital

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1. Carolyn A. McMurdie, David C. Dollahite, and Sam A. Hardy, "Adolescent and Parent Perceptions of the Influence of Religious Belief and Practice," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 32, no. 3 (2013): 192–205.

2. Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King, and Verna B. Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. Julie E. Yonker, Chelsea A. Schnabelrauch, and Laura G. DeHaan, "The Relationship between Spirituality and Religiosity on Psychological Outcomes in Adolescents and Emerging Adults: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Adolescence* 35, no. 2 (2012): 299–314.

4. Amy M. Burdette and others, "Are There Religious Variations in Marital Infidelity?" *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 12 (2007): 1553–81.

5. Michael A. Gore and others, "Religious Faith and Transformational Processes in Marriage," *Family Relations* 62 (2013): 808–23.

6. Melissa Soenke, Mark J. Landau, and Jeff Greenberg, "Sacred Armor: Religion's Role as a Buffer against the Anxieties of Life and the Fear of Death," in *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Context, Theory, and*

stability,<sup>7</sup> reduced domestic violence,<sup>8</sup> greater father involvement,<sup>9</sup> and many other positive outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these general benefits, in an age when relationship distress and dissolution are quite common, we wondered if a religion that has a particularly strong relational focus might have specific influences on romantic relationships. Consequently, in this study we will look at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and explore whether adherents are unique in their approach to relational values, relational decisions, relational processes, and relational outcomes.

There are several reasons to suspect that there might be unique elements of the Latter-day Saint faith that have a particular influence on relationship variables. LDS doctrine emphasizes the centrality of marriage and family relationships, including the doctrine that we have heavenly parents (hence marriage is an element of godhood) and the doctrine that marriage is necessary for happiness during this life and exaltation in the next.<sup>11</sup> Some faiths include the possibility of marriage or family life continuing beyond death, but none of them believe family relations are salvific like Latter-day Saints do.<sup>12</sup> What is particularly unique about LDS doctrine is that achieving and maintaining one type of marriage in this life, temple marriage, is considered a requirement for exaltation (eternal life with God).<sup>13</sup> One scholar of early LDS history

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*Research*, ed. Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline, and James W. Jones, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2013), 1:105–22.

7. Annette Mahoney and others, “Religion in the Home in the 1980s and 90s: A Meta-Analytic Review and Conceptual Analyses of Links between Religion, Marriage and Parenting,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 15, no. 1 (2008): 559–96.

8. Carol B. Cunradi, Raul Caetano, and John Schafer, “Religious Affiliation, Denominational Homogamy, and Intimate Partner Violence among U.S. Couples,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 1 (2002): 139–51.

9. W. Bradford Wilcox, “Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 3 (2002): 780–92.

10. Loren D. Marks and David C. Dollahite, *Religion and Families: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

11. David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks, and Heather H. Kelley, “Mormon Scholars and Mormon Families in Family Studies: A Brief Retrospective,” *Mormon Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2017): 16–40.

12. David C. Dollahite, ed., *Strengthening Our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2000).

13. Tim B. Heaton, “Religion, Sexually Risky Behavior, and Reproductive Health,” in *Religion, Families, and Health: Population-Based Research in the*

and doctrine, speaking of the canonized revelations and doctrines about marriage and family, said: “Marriage was the basis for human exaltation. . . . To those sealed by the priesthood, the promises were startling. . . . The great, godly power was procreation, the continuation of seed. The ultimate social order of heaven was familial. . . . To be exalted, men and women must be bound together. . . . The marriage revelation culminated the emergence of family theology. More than any other previous revelation, this one put family first.”<sup>14</sup>

Because most faiths do not distinguish between chapels and temples or salvation and exaltation, and because the importance of LDS temples cannot be overemphasized in trying to understand the religious experiences and importance of marriage relationships for LDS adherents, a fuller explanation of these concepts is provided here as described by an eminent non-LDS scholar of religion, Douglas Davies:

Mormonism uses “salvation” to describe Christ’s atonement and the resurrection it brings to all people and goes on to use “exaltation” to account for the ultimate realms of glory in the celestial kingdom obtained through obedience and the fulfilment of the “ordinances” of the gospel. . . . “Exaltation” is an instructive doctrine, in the sense that it cannot be explored simply as some abstract idea, but requires an understanding of the theological significance of temples and the way in which the emergence of temple ritual turned Mormonism into a distinctive form of western, Christianly sourced, religion. . . . The Church argued that rituals conducted on earth, in specially designated places, were prerequisite for specific effects to be possible in heaven. Ritual was the prime soteriological medium. This was as true for baptism and confirmation in relation to “salvation” as for temple rites of eternal marriage and endowments for “exaltation.”<sup>15</sup>

Continuing with more detail about temple marriage, Davies says:

The essence of temple marriage is that a man and woman are joined together through the power and authority of an officiating Melchizedek priest. This “sealing,” as it is called, is not a simple union until death parts the pair, but is for eternity. Herein lies what ultimately distinguishes LDS temple marriage either from LDS marriage in local chapels or from

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*United States*, ed. Christopher G. Ellison and Robert A. Hummer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010): 368–84.

14. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 443–45.

15. Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 195, 198.

non-LDS unions. . . . Precisely because it takes place in that sacred place where time and eternity meet, and is conducted under the power of the officiating person who holds the necessary high-priesthood authority and power, what is done on earth will have heavenly consequences.<sup>16</sup>

Of equal importance to the doctrines underlying temple marriage is the process of becoming qualified for temple marriage. While common marriage is the right of any person, regardless of conduct or spiritual worthiness, eternal temple marriage, the singular type of marriage discussed and taught in the Church, is available only to those who have made serious covenants to raise their lives to a higher level of conduct. The unique pattern then of LDS doctrine and practice is that a person has to strive toward high standards of personal worthiness in their relationship with God to be worthy of an eternal relationship with a spouse. This practice and doctrine are likely among the most unique and distinguishing features of the LDS faith, and the implications for marriage and family life are profound. Perhaps the most important implication is how the process of qualifying for a temple recommend creates strong incentives to put the gospel into practice as it relates to making decisions about how to act in relationships.

An example of the way these doctrines can have substantial relational and behavioral effects is in regards to sexual behaviors prior to marriage. Whereas sexual abstinence before marriage was once considered a common belief of most traditional forms of the Abrahamic faiths, members of almost all of these faiths can still marry in their places of worship and before their congregations by their ordained ministers even if they are currently involved in a sexual relationship. However, because LDS couples must be worthy to enter the temple, and sexual abstinence outside of marriage is part of that worthiness, they would not be allowed to marry in a temple while having a premarital sexual relationship. Such a marriage could take place only after a sufficient period of repentance and abstinence. Consequently, attitudes about sexual exclusivity and abstinence might be quite strong for highly religious LDS couples, and this might lead to different relational behaviors and possibly even relationship outcomes since in the general population fewer sexual partners prior to marriage has been linked to more stable and satisfying marriages.<sup>17</sup> Some research has validated these expectations by showing that

16. Davies, *Introduction to Mormonism*, 213–14.

17. Dean M. Busby, Brian J. Willoughby, and Jason S. Carroll, “Sowing Wild Oats: Valuable Experience or a Field Full of Weeds?” *Personal Relationships* 20, no. 4 (2013): 706–18.

LDS youth are less likely to be involved in premarital sexual activity than those without a religious affiliation, and when comparing them to youth of other faiths, they have some of the lowest rates.<sup>18</sup>

A good deal of social science research has been conducted on LDS individuals, couples, and families.<sup>19</sup> While some in-depth qualitative studies have focused on LDS marriage,<sup>20</sup> fewer studies have employed quantitative measures to extensively explore the effects of LDS doctrines and practices on marriage and family life. Carroll, Linford, Holman, and Busby found that highly religious Latter-day Saints have much in common with other highly religious persons of faith but that they have more conservative views about some issues (such as sexuality before marriage and mothers having a central responsibility for nurturing children).<sup>21</sup> Researchers have also found that strong belief in the importance of family relationships led LDS families to engage in a variety of family-based religious rituals and practices.<sup>22</sup> In terms of family formation, others have shown that LDS individuals are more likely to marry and less likely to divorce than Catholics and Protestants and people with no religious affiliation.<sup>23</sup>

A Pew Research Center study casts some light on general patterns within the LDS faith that might hint at unique relational attitudes and behaviors. In the section on family life in this report, the researchers stated, "One common association that the general public has for Mormons is 'family' or 'family values.' This survey finds that family is, indeed,

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18. Heaton, "Religion, Sexually Risky Behavior, and Reproductive Health," 368–84.

19. Dollahite, Marks, and Kelley, "Mormon Scholars and Mormon Families in Family Studies," 16–40.

20. Michael A. Goodman, Loren D. Marks, and David C. Dollahite, "Transformational Processes and Meaning in Latter-day Saint Marriage," *Marriage and Family Review* 48 (2012): 555–82.

21. Jason S. Carroll, Steven T. Linford, Thomas B. Holman, and Dean M. Busby, "Marital and Family Orientations among Highly Religious Young Adults: Comparing Latter-day Saints with Traditional Christians," *Review of Religious Research* 42, no. 2 (2000): 193–205.

22. Rachel W. Loser, E. Jeffrey Hill, Shirley R. Klein, and David C. Dollahite, "Perceived Benefits of Religious Rituals in the Latter-day Saint Home," *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 3 (2009): 345–62; Rachel W. Loser and others, "Religion and the Daily Lives of LDS Families: An Ecological Perspective," *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 37 (2008): 52–70.

23. Stan L. Albrecht, "The Consequential Dimension of Mormon Religiosity," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Research on the LDS Church and Its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 253–92.

very important to most Mormons. Mormons are more likely than the general public to feel that marriage and childrearing are some of the most important things in life. More Mormons are married compared with the population as a whole, and Mormons have more children on average than the general public.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the findings from this survey indicate that Latter-day Saints had the lowest rates of intermarriage with others not of their faith: 15 percent, as compared to 19 percent for Protestants, 22 percent for Catholics, and 50 percent for those unaffiliated with any religion. Finally, in terms of life goals, the Pew report included statistics indicating that Latter-day Saints were much more likely to list having a successful marriage (73 percent) and being a good parent (81 percent) as one of the most important things in life than the U.S. general population (34 percent and 50 percent, respectively, for the same items).

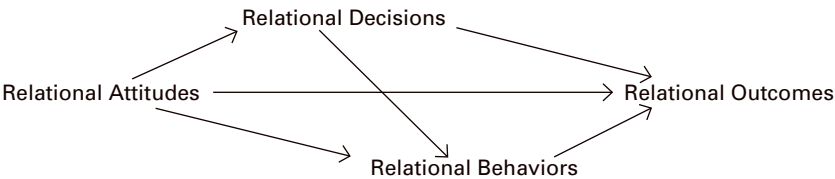
While these findings from the Pew Research Center are illuminating, they do not provide enough detail to allow analysis beyond the simple description of a few variables. Using the developmental contextual theory<sup>25</sup> and more detailed data, we are interested in exploring how the relational nature of LDS theology and rituals might manifest themselves in the lived relationships of LDS adherents. This theory emphasizes that a variety of systems or contexts surround people, including individual, couple, family, and cultural (such as religious) contexts. These contexts developmentally interact with one another and influence individuals to create distinct attitudes and values that then influence decisions, behaviors, and eventually outcomes. In this study, we explore specifically the cultural context of religion and whether LDS adherents have unique relational attitudes (attitudes that support marriage) and make unique relational decisions (decisions about cohabitation and premarital sexuality) that in turn are associated with relational behaviors that help sustain relationships, such as good communication and emotional connection, which may be associated with different relational outcomes (relationship satisfaction and stability) as illustrated in figure 1.

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24. Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, “Mormons in America: Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society,” January 12, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/01/12/mormons-in-america-executive-summary/>.

25. Dean M. Busby, Brandt C. Gardner, and Narumi Taniguchi, “The Family of Origin Parachute Model: Landing Safely in Adult Romantic Relationships,” *Family Relations* 54 (2005): 254–64; Thomas B. Holman, *Premarital Prediction of Marital Quality or Breakup: Research, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Prenum Publishers, 2001).

**Figure 1. The Initial Model**



First, we compare highly religious LDS members to less religious LDS members. Second, we compare these two LDS groups to the two dominant religious traditions in the United States, Catholicism and Protestantism. In addition, we include two groups of unaffiliated individuals, a highly religious group and a less religious group. Our general expectation is that there would likely be little or no differences between these religious groups for typical individual nonrelational variables such as self-esteem<sup>26</sup> but that for more relationally oriented values, decisions, and behaviors, there might be significant differences between the Latter-day Saint group and other religious groups as well as those who are not religious.

**METHOD**

**Sample**

The sample for this study comes from a large national study in which participants completed an online survey, the RELATE Questionnaire.<sup>27</sup> This instrument is used to provide feedback for couples about the strengths and weaknesses of their relationships and to gather data to help advance research about relationships. Most individuals who took RELATE did so because they were interested in learning more about their relationship or were taking a course or working with an educator or therapist to help improve their relationship. Consequently the sample, though large and national, likely contains a higher proportion

26. Although based on Judd's work, we would expect the self-esteem of highly religious individuals in general to be better than that of nonreligious individuals. Daniel K Judd, "Religiosity, Mental Health, and the Latter-day Saints: A Preliminary Review of the Literature (1923–1995)," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Research on the LDS Church and Its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2008), 473–98.

27. Dean M. Busby, Thomas B. Holman, and Narumi Taniguchi, "RELATE: Relationship Evaluation of the Individual, Family, Cultural, and Couple Contexts," *Family Relations* 50 (2001): 308–16.



of individuals interested in improving their relationships than a random sample of U.S. residents. However, because the instrument was originally developed at Brigham Young University, the LDS Church is one of the faiths that widely use this instrument, and this survey likely includes the largest sample available of LDS couples that contains extensive relational data.

Because of the nature of the relational variables used in this study, it was necessary to select individuals who were only in a serious dating, engaged, or marriage relationship in contrast to those who were not in a relationship. In addition, in order to provide the statistical power needed, only those religious groups with a minimum of several hundred individuals in the survey were retained, along with a group of nonaffiliated individuals. Therefore, we eliminated survey results for individuals who were affiliated with faiths that had fewer than two hundred people in the sample. This resulted in a final sample of 16,116 participants.

In this final sample, 16 percent were Catholic, 28 percent were Protestant, 36 percent were Latter-day Saint, and the remaining 20 percent were not affiliated with any religion. In terms of race/ethnicity, 82 percent of the sample were Caucasian, 5 percent were African American, 4 percent were Latino/a, 3 percent were Asian, and the remaining 6 percent listed “other” or “biracial” as their race. Thirty-nine percent of the sample were male, and the remaining 61 percent were female. The average age of the sample was 29.7 ( $SD = 9.8$ ). For education, 13 percent of the sample had less than a college education, 8 percent had an associate’s degree, 30 percent were currently enrolled in college, 22 percent had a bachelor’s degree, and the remaining 27 percent had some level of graduate training. In terms of relationship status, 31 percent were in an exclusive dating relationship, 39 percent were engaged, and 30 percent were married. For relationship length, 41 percent of the sample had been in a relationship for a year or less, 28 percent between one and four years, 23 percent between four and eight years, and the remaining 8 percent for more than eight years. While this sample is nonrepresentative, it is highly varied and provides sufficient numbers in each category to allow for appropriate statistical analysis.

## Measures

All of the scales were taken from the RELATE inventory and have been used extensively in previous research where reliability (consistency) and validity (scales measuring what they are purported to measure)

information has been presented.<sup>28</sup> This study provides as many details about the scales as possible, and further details can be obtained by contacting the first author of this study.

**Religiosity.** The religiosity scale consisted of three items. One item asked participants to rate how often “spirituality was an important part of their lives”; the second question asked them how often they prayed; and the third question asked them how often they attended religious services. The first two questions were coded on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from never to very often. The last question on church attendance was coded on a five-point response scale. The response options were never, once or twice a year, several times a year, at least monthly, and weekly. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was .92, meaning this scale has high levels of consistency and reliability. For the means comparisons, we divided each of our four religious segments (LDS, Catholic, Protestant, nonaffiliated) into high- and low-religiosity groups. The cutoff between high and low was 3.0, since this indicated that respondents were spiritual or prayed sometimes or less, and attended church a few times a year at the most as opposed to monthly or weekly attendance. The percentage of individuals in the four groups in the high- and low-religiosity categories are listed in table 1. Although the percentages of each group that was divided into high and low religiosity were not evenly distributed, there was a sizeable number of people (for most groups well over a thousand) in each of the eight groups except the highly religious nonaffiliated group, which included only sixty-five individuals. Although the nonaffiliated group was primarily of interest to compare nonreligious individuals with the other groups, we left the highly religious nonaffiliated subsample in the analyses. While the percentages of the high- and low-religiosity groups are not likely consistent with a nationally representative sample, these groups can still be used for an initial evaluation of the impact of religiosity on the different scales that are evaluated.

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28. Busby, Holman, and Taniguchi, “RELATE,” 308–16; Dean M. Busby, Jason S. Busby, and Brian J. Willoughby, “Compatibility or Restraint: The Effects of Sexual Timing on Marriage Relationships,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 24, no. 6 (2010): 766–74; Busby, Gardner, and Taniguchi, “Family of Origin Parachute Model,” 254–64; Sarah L. Tackett, Larry J. Nelson, and Dean M. Busby, “Shyness and Relationship Satisfaction: Evaluating the Associations between Shyness, Self-Esteem, and Relationship Satisfaction in Couples,” *American Journal of Family Therapy* 41 (2013): 34–45.

**Table 1. Percentages of Individuals in the Four Religion Groups Classified as High or Low in Religiosity.**

Religion	High Religiosity	Low Religiosity
LDS	92% (N=5432)	8% (N=483)
Catholic	33% (N=843)	67% (N=1685)
Protestant	54% (N=2386)	46% (N=2065)
No Affiliation	2% (N=65)	98% (N=3155)

However, because the sample is not representative, the results should be interpreted with caution.

**Self-Esteem.** We used an individual characteristic scale, self-esteem, to test if the LDS participants had different patterns on a nonrelational construct than the other two religious groups and the nonaffiliated group. This provided an evaluation of whether the differences on the relational variables, if there were any, were simply due to overall differences between the LDS group and the other groups or were more specifically about the relevant relationship dimensions. The self-esteem scale is good to use for this purpose because it taps into general well-being and is strongly associated with other individual constructs like depression and anxiety.<sup>29</sup>

There were four items on the self-esteem scale, including phrases such as “I take a positive attitude toward myself” or “I think I am no good at all.” These items were adapted from Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (1965). Individuals were asked to indicate how much the phrases described them on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). In this sample, the Cronbach’s alpha for internal consistency reliability was .87, indicating high levels of reliability.

**Relational Attitudes.** The relational attitudes scale consisted of four items. These items assess how important marriage is for individuals as compared to cohabitation or more casual relationships. This scale included items such as “Being married is one of the one or two most important things in life” and “Living together is an acceptable alternative to marriage.” Questions were answered on a five-point Likert-type response scale that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Cronbach’s alpha with this sample was .79, indicating moderate levels of reliability.

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29. Busby, Holman, and Taniguchi, “RELATE,” 308–16.

**Relational Decisions.** For this dimension we used four questions. Two questions were asked about cohabitation: first, whether they had ever cohabited with a partner before marriage, and, second, if they had, with how many partners they had cohabited. The third question asked how many people they had had sexual intercourse with, and the fourth question asked when in their current relationship they became sexual, if ever. These questions were also combined to create the overall scale of relational decisions for evaluating the final model. For this analysis, the items were recoded such that a higher score indicated less cohabitation, later sexual involvement, and fewer sexual partners. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .67, indicating adequate levels of reliability.

**Relational Behaviors.** There were two scales used for this dimension: negative communication and emotional connection. These two scales addressed two of the primary ways couples interact that enhance relationships: communicating in nondestructive ways and staying emotionally connected. The negative communication scale consisted of seven items that asked the participants to rate how often their partners used criticism, contempt, and defensiveness in their communication. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .91, indicating high levels of reliability.

The emotional connection scale consisted of three items that asked participants to rate how much love their partner expressed toward them, how much their partner admired them, and how much their partner included them in his or her life. These questions were answered on a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from "never" to "very often." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .84, indicating high levels of reliability.

These two scales were combined in the analysis of the model. The negative communication scale was reverse coded so that a higher score indicated less negative communication, and the combined scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .86, indicating high levels of reliability.

**Relational Outcomes.** This consisted of two scales: the relationship satisfaction scale and the relationship stability scale. The relationship satisfaction scale consisted of seven items evaluating how satisfied participants were with the communication, the intimacy, the way conflict was resolved, the love experienced, the amount of time spent together, the equality in the relationship, and the overall relationship. These questions were answered on a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89, indicating high levels of reliability.

The relationship stability scale consisted of three items that evaluated how stable the relationship was by asking participants how often they had thought of ending the relationship, how often they had discussed ending the relationship, and how often they had broken up or separated and gotten back together. These questions were answered on a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from “never” to “very often.” This scale was reverse coded so that a higher score indicated more stability. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .80, indicating high levels of reliability.

**Control Variables.** In this study we controlled for levels of education and race/ethnicity since these are two variables that sometimes influence levels of religiosity and religious denomination. Controlling for these variables allowed us to say that our results are significant even when controlling for the influence of race and education levels. The results of this study include adjustments to means and other values when holding education and race constant.

### **Analysis Strategy**

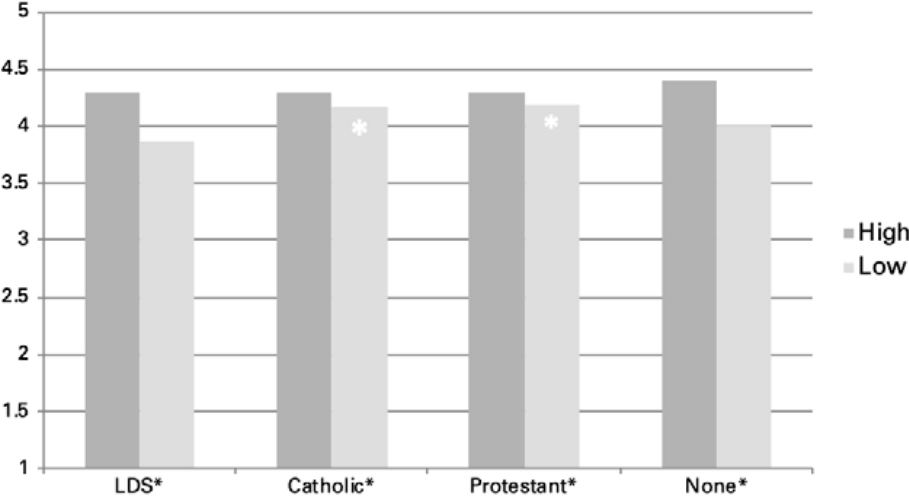
The first series of analyses were means comparisons. The first scale was a nonrelational scale, self-esteem, to contrast with the more relational scales that followed. There were four groups that were compared: an LDS group, a Catholic group, a Protestant group, and a nonaffiliated group. Participants of each group were divided into a highly religious and a less-religious group, as indicated in table 1.

## **RESULTS**

### **Individual Variables**

Figure 2 shows the means of the eight religious groups on self-esteem while controlling for levels of education and race/ethnicity. The asterisk by the name of the religion indicates that the high- and low-religiosity groups within that religion were significantly different from one another. An asterisk on the bar indicates that that particular bar was significantly different than the corresponding LDS high- or low-religiosity groups. None of the highly religious groups were significantly different than the LDS group on self-esteem. Curiously, all of the low-religiosity groups were significantly higher than the LDS low group. Also, all of the high- and low-religiosity groups were significantly different within the same religion. It appears that being high in religiosity is associated with higher levels of self-esteem. However, there is a greater degree of difference between the LDS high and low groups than for the other groups.

**Figure 2. Self-Esteem**



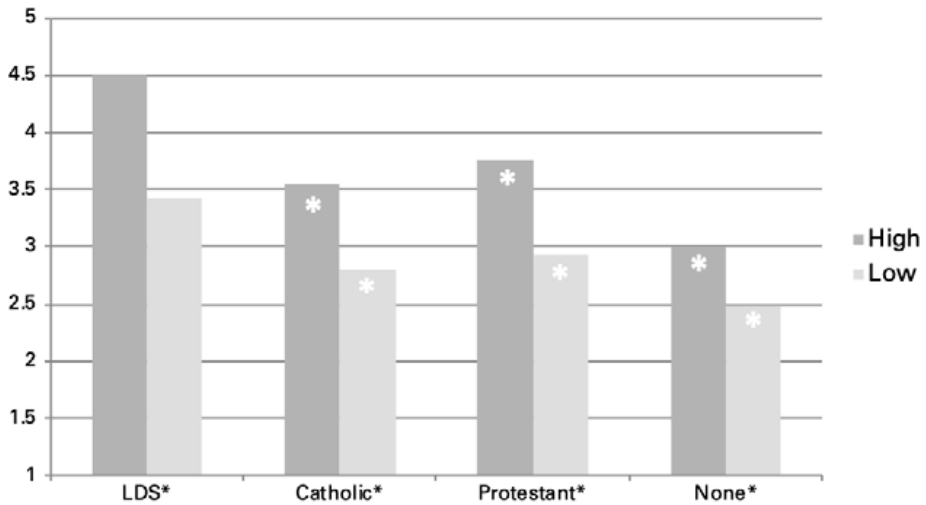
**Relational Attitudes**

Figure 3 shows the means of the eight religious groups on the relational attitudes scale with the same control variables. The LDS groups are significantly higher than all other groups by a substantial margin, and all high and low groups within each religion are significantly different. It does appear that religion overall is associated with higher relationship values, but in particular Latter-day Saints appear to value marriage significantly more than even the highly religious members of the other religious denominations. It is also noteworthy that the low-religiosity LDS group has significantly higher relational attitudes than all other low-religiosity groups. It appears that even when LDS individuals are not particularly religious, they still highly value marriage. This may be related to the results reported later on relationship behaviors.

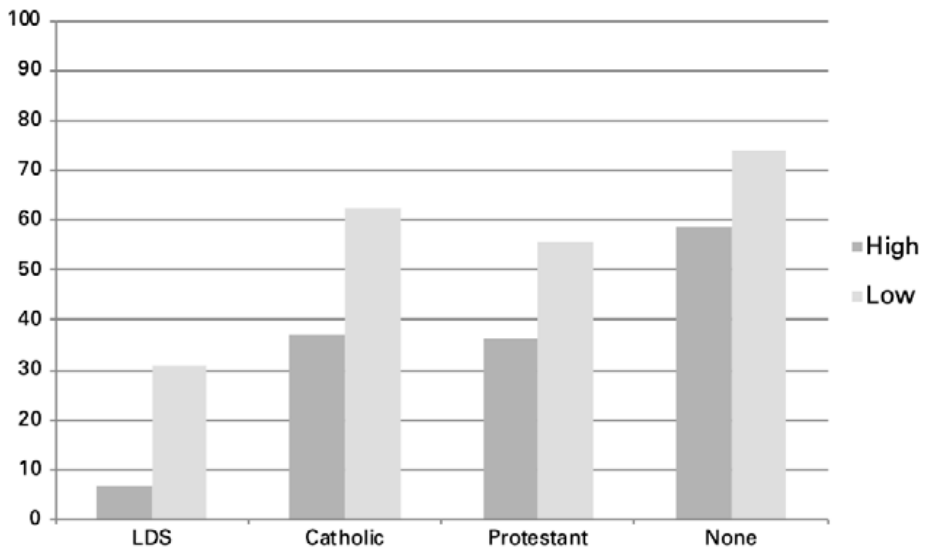
**Relational Decisions**

In this section, we look specifically at three of the four questions for the relational decisions scales, including cohabitation, the number of sexual partners, and sexual timing in the relationship, rather than the overall relational decision scale, which will be used to evaluate the model later, since these variables more clearly illustrate some of the most substantial differences between the LDS group and the other faiths than the overall scale. Figure 4 shows the percentage of individuals in each faith who

**Figure 3. Relational Attitudes**



**Figure 4. Percentage of Individuals Who Have Cohabited Prior to Marriage**



have cohabited. Since this variable is a dichotomous variable, it wasn't possible to conduct means comparison tests for significance; as a result, we simply show the percentage difference. However, the statistical test evaluating whether these overall patterns were different than we could expect by chance was significant. The results in this figure show a strong association of the LDS faith with patterns of cohabitation prior to marriage and also show a general association of religiosity with patterns of cohabitation.

Figures 5 and 6 show the means for the number of lifetime sexual partners and the timing of sexuality in the current relationship and include the control variables in the analysis. Clearly, there were strong associations between religion and the amount of sexual activity prior to marriage, which is readily apparent in comparing the nonaffiliated groups with the other religions and the within-group differences between the high- and low-religiosity groups. These associations were substantially stronger in the LDS group, as were the differences between the high- and low-religiosity groups.

### **Relational Behaviors**

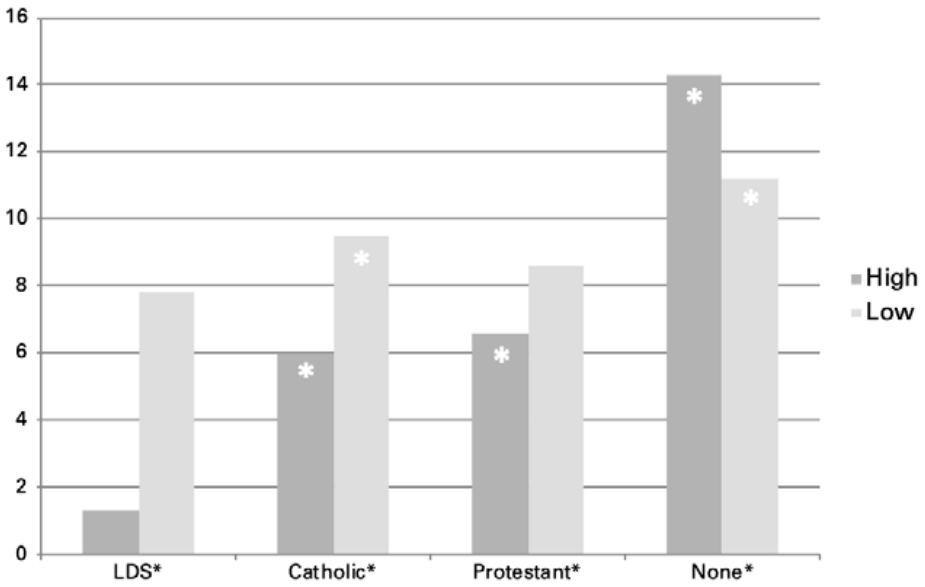
Figures 7 and 8 contain the means for the negative communication and emotional connection scales and include the control variables in the analysis. The patterns with these means are consistent with the other findings. The LDS high-religiosity group has significantly lower levels of negative communication and higher levels of emotional connection than the other highly religious groups. In contrast, the low-religiosity LDS group has statistically significant higher levels of negative communication and lower levels of emotional connection than almost all the other low-religiosity groups, and the difference between the high- and low-religiosity groups is much larger within the LDS faith. This may be indicative of the mixed costs and benefits of belonging to a high-demand religion that has a relational focus, a result that will be described in more detail in the discussion section.

### **Relational Outcomes**

Figures 9 and 10 include the means on the relationship-satisfaction and stability scales. The patterns on these two scales are identical to those of the relationship behavior scales in that the highly religious LDS group is significantly higher than the other highly religious affiliated groups, and the low-religiosity LDS group is significantly lower than most of the



**Figure 5. Number of Sexual Partners**



**Figure 6. Timing of Sexual Relationships**

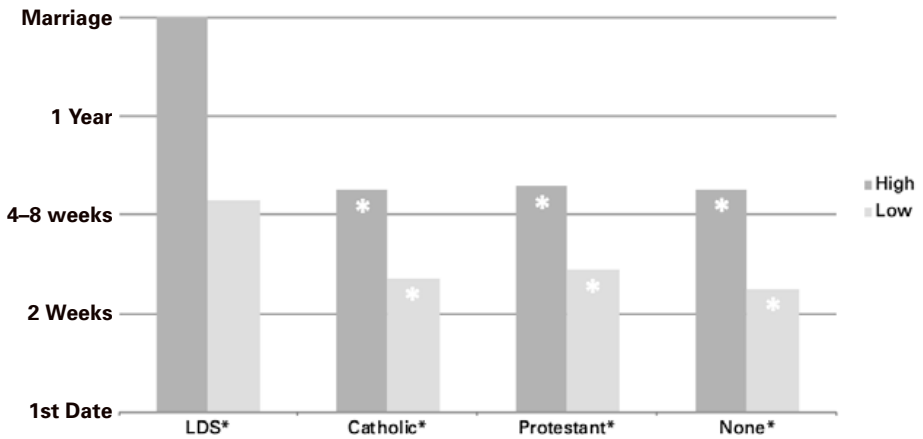


Figure 7. Negative Communication

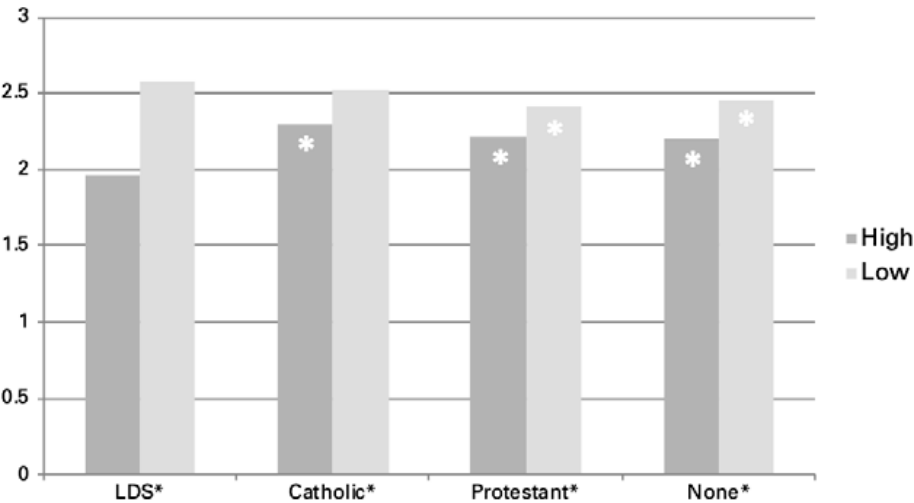
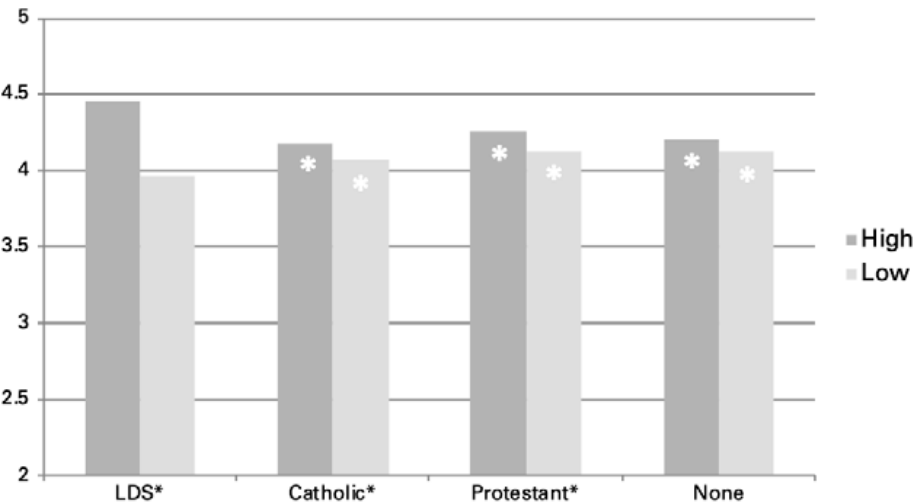
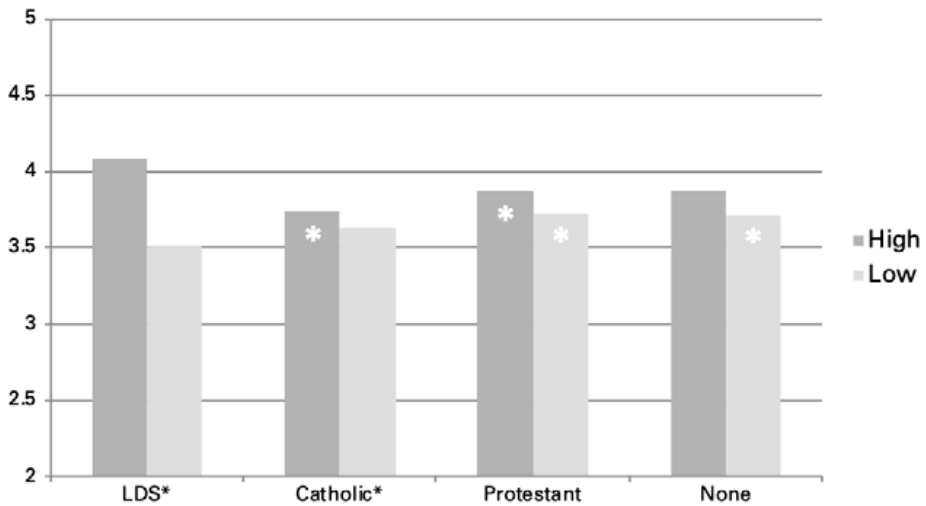


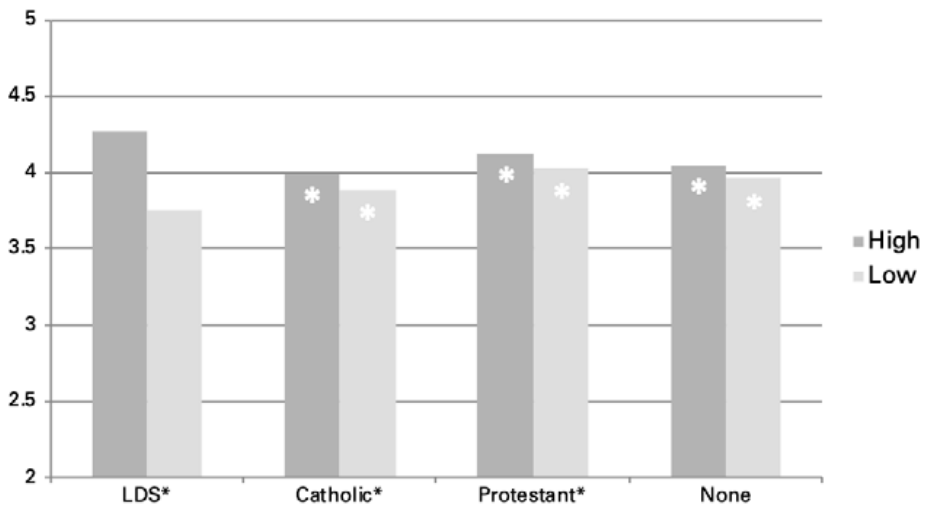
Figure 8. Emotional Connection



**Figure 9. Relationship Satisfaction**



**Figure 10. Relationship Stability**



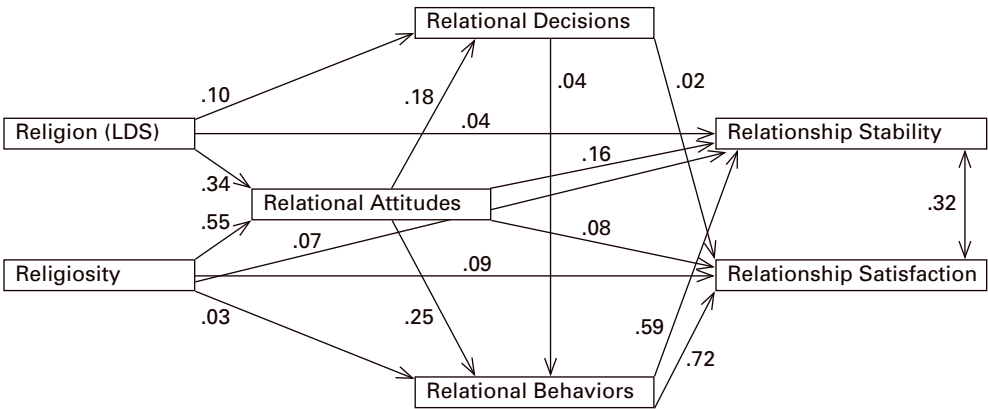
other low-religiosity groups. However, curiously, the highly religious LDS group on both scales is not significantly higher than the highly religious unaffiliated group. This may be a situation where the small sample size of the unaffiliated group is influencing the significance because the mean differences are very similar to those between the Protestant and LDS highly religious groups, which are significantly different.

**Model Results**

While the means comparisons were important and illustrate some intriguing patterns that may hint at the way LDS theology and practices influence relationships, the overall model illustrated in figure 11 is also of central interest. This model allows us to understand the associations between being LDS and relational attitudes, decisions, behaviors, and outcomes, while controlling for overall levels of religiosity, education, and race/ethnicity. The statistical program we used provides statistics to evaluate the overall fit of the model to the data and indicates that the model is an excellent fit to the patterns in the data.

All numerical values listed by the paths in figure 11 are standardized coefficients and were highly statistically significant. Pathways that were insignificant were removed. The results in figure 11 illustrate that both religion (if someone was a member of the LDS religion as compared to another or no religion) and religiosity (in this model the religiosity scale was continuous rather than the high/low designation used for the previous analyses) had significant effects on the variables in the model. The strongest effect of these two variables was on relational attitudes. In turn,

**Figure 11. The Final Model**



relational attitudes had a moderate influence on relational decisions and behaviors, as well as relationship stability and satisfaction. Relational decisions were weakly related to stability but not satisfaction, and they were related to relational behaviors. Relational behaviors had a strong association with satisfaction and stability.

## DISCUSSION

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is an interesting combination of religious distinctiveness and strictness. On the one hand, there are many similarities between LDS belief and practice and those of other Christian faiths regarding marriage and family life.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, fundamental differences in doctrine and practice make Latter-day Saint theology highly distinctive in some aspects of religious belief and observance.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark argued that the Church is a “new world faith” that is as distinct from traditional Christianity as Christianity is from Judaism or as distinct as Islam is from Christianity and Judaism.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also a “strict church”<sup>33</sup> or a “high demand faith”<sup>34</sup> that asks much of adherents—particularly in the areas of marriage and family life. Chastity before marriage, generally more traditional gender roles, unity in marriage, a larger than average number of children, high levels of involvement in the congregation, and other factors combine to impact active Latter-day Saints. Though this higher level of demand could be seen as detrimental, research indicates that it actually correlates with normal to higher levels of mental health,<sup>35</sup> higher levels of adolescent

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30. Carroll, Linford, Holman, and Busby, “Marital and Family Orientations,” 193–205.

31. David C. Dollahite, “Latter-day Saint Marriage and Family Life in Modern America,” in *American Religions and the Family: How Faith Traditions Cope with Modernization*, ed. Don S. Browning and David A. Clairmont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 124–150.

32. Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 18–27.

33. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

34. Dollahite, “Latter-day Saint Marriage and Family Life,” 124–50.

35. Daniel K Judd, ed., *Religion, Mental Health, and the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1999).

well-being,<sup>36</sup> greater marital stability,<sup>37</sup> and other personal and relational benefits.<sup>38</sup>

Together, a faith that is strict and that is distinct from other faiths, as evidenced by the results in this study, has important implications for marriage. For example, in their study of the religious determinants of marital stability, Lehrer and Chiswick found that, after five years of marriage, couples consisting of Latter-day Saints married to Latter-day Saints had the highest rate of marital stability (13 percent divorce rate), while Latter-day Saints married to non-Latter-day Saints had the lowest rate of marital stability (40 percent divorce rate). One way to interpret this finding is that the combination of Latter-day Saint distinctiveness with religious strictness has a profound impact on marital stability.<sup>39</sup>

The findings in this study illustrate several ways that Latter-day Saint theology may be associated with relationship attitudes, decisions, behaviors, and outcomes. The initial means comparisons illustrate three important points. First, nonrelational variables such as self-esteem do not appear to be substantially different between those belonging to the LDS faith and those belonging to other faiths or no faith. The self-esteem difference primarily appears to demonstrate that high religiosity, rather than religion, is associated with stronger feelings of esteem. While other studies have shown that membership in The Church of Jesus Christ provides a variety of benefits, these findings perhaps suggest that the Church does not insulate individuals from the normal vicissitudes of individual emotional well-being more than other faiths do.

In contrast, the strongest influence of the LDS religion appears to be in regard to relational attitudes and decisions. While the mean differences and the coefficients in the model do not demonstrate large

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36. Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton, "Adolescent Religion and Life Outcomes," in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, ed. Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 218–58.

37. Evelyn L. Lehrer and Carmel U. Chiswick, "Religion as a Determinant of Marital Stability," *Demography* 30, no. 3 (1993): 385–403.

38. Dollahite, Marks, and Kelley, "Mormon Scholars and Mormon Families," 16–40; Dollahite, "Latter-day Saint Marriage and Family Life," 124–50; David C. Dollahite and Loren D. Marks, "The Mormon American Family," in *Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations*, ed. Roosevelt Wright Jr. and others, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle Hall, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2012), 461–86.

39. Lehrer and Chiswick, "Religion as a Determinant," 385–403.

differences, taken across a substantial number of variables the patterns are very consistent and illustrate important findings. These consistent differences illustrate that highly religious LDS individuals are far more likely to hold strong marriage values and to make decisions in traditional ways regarding cohabitation and sexuality.

The third pattern is that in terms of relational behaviors and relational outcomes, there are some small but significant differences between the highly religious LDS group and others. However, for the LDS individuals who are not highly religious, the opposite effect appears; this group rates significantly lower in expressing relational behaviors that help relationships stay strong, and consequently their overall relationship satisfaction and stability are lower. It is worth considering the reasons for these intriguing and unique findings.

The findings from this study suggest that those who adhere to the unique doctrines and practices of the LDS faith are benefited in some very specific and important ways in their marriage relationships. Clearly, adherence to the LDS religion has significant associations with important relationship variables, especially in terms of relational attitudes and decisions. Highly religious LDS individuals are much less likely to cohabit, become involved sexually before marriage, and marry outside of the faith.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, in terms of predicting relationship behaviors and outcomes, attitudes that deem marriage as crucial are much stronger in LDS individuals. Why are these attitudes and behaviors unusually strong in LDS individuals?

The unique centrality of temple marriage and the need to have a significant relationship with the Lord that includes the process of qualifying for and achieving a temple marriage likely contribute to these unique relational outcomes. Catholicism, conservative Protestantism, and more orthodox branches of Judaism encourage people who are planning to marry to elevate their levels of spirituality before marriage. However, Latter-day Saints are required to obtain from Church leaders a “recommend” (a document that verifies members are ready to enter a temple and that is shown to temple workers upon entrance) in order to be eligible to be married in a temple; they thus face an even more exacting level of preparation.

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40. Stephen Cranney, “Who Is Leaving the Church? Demographic Predictors of Ex-Latter-day Saint Status in the Pew Religious Landscape Study,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2019): 99–108; Pew Research Center, “Mormons in America.”

In essence, LDS couples are asked to show their ability to become close to the Lord as a marker of their readiness for marriage. The fact that this elevation must be accompanied by deeds consistent with religious doctrine and principles adds additional weight to the process. This unique dynamic inextricably joins together religious worship and ritual with relationships with spouse, family, and community. This deep intertwining of faith, belief, God, marriage, family, and eternity may be a significant contributing factor explaining both the positive and negative findings in this study. These doctrines and principles represent some of the most inspiring and influential teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the area of family life and have had a profound impact on LDS attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes in regard to marriage. The success of a subset of the LDS population in this regard is something to celebrate and to work very hard to maintain.

Still, the other side of the coin speaks to the challenges faced by those who struggle with their relationship with God or with their partners. These findings suggest that Latter-day Saints who struggle to adhere to the religion may be more vulnerable to relationship distress and poorer outcomes. Perhaps when relationships are not working well, the already difficult stress of a struggling relationship is exacerbated by the sense that religious expectations are not being met. The lack of a support structure and possibly alienation from family and friends who are more religious also could undermine relationships. Of course, the direction of the association is not known, and it may be that when relationships don't go well, distance is created from a religion that consistently reminds individuals of the importance of relationships. What was once a supportive and helpful message could become a distressing message, depending on the relationship quality of adherents. If one indicator that we are living our religion requires us to be in a strong marriage, those who do not have a partner or are in a highly distressed relationship may feel alienated rather than supported by their religion. In fact, recent data on factors that are associated with people who leave the Church show that "divorce is one of the strongest and most robust predictors of having left the Church."<sup>41</sup>

The implications for members of the LDS faith are significant. It may be that for some individuals, when a marriage struggles or a divorce occurs, the sense of alienation extends beyond just the difficulties within

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41. Cranney, "Who Is Leaving the Church?" 106.



the family and is felt toward the religion and even God. The results from this study may suggest the need for individuals and families who are struggling with their relationships or with their beliefs to establish additional support structures or at least connect to existing structures in their communities.

This study also illustrates the potential value and importance of premarital education such as that offered by other faiths, because relational distress and dissolution are likely to have particularly deleterious effects on LDS individuals' relational and spiritual well-being. As much as adherence to the faith helps LDS individuals and their relationships, clawing back from divorce or other serious family problems to a sense of relational and spiritual well-being may be more challenging for LDS people. In many instances, they may elect to distance themselves from the faith rather than face the incongruence of the ideals and the lived realities they are reminded about each day.

The principle of mourning with those who mourn may be instructive here. Anyone who has "lost" a family member to death, illness, poor choices, and conflict knows how profound these losses can feel, especially when one worries about the eternal consequences. Curiously, when ward members face divorce and other types of relationship dissolution, we often feel awkward about how to mourn with those experiencing these challenges, so we distance ourselves from them. Perhaps we previously did things with the couple, but now that the couple's relationship is dissolving, we fear that if we do things with just one member of the dyad, we might be seen as taking sides in the marital conflict. There are no simple answers about how to mourn with others during these trying experiences, but surely moving toward those in distress and doing more to be with them would be better than distancing ourselves. What may be most helpful is continuing to be friends and neighbors with each other regardless of our relationship difficulties so that those feeling ostracized by someone within their family don't feel similar feelings from those outside their family.

Prevention and intervention efforts for couples prior to and continuing throughout marriage are likely to be of particular value to LDS families. Research on relationship education and premarital education illustrates positive benefits that could help people avoid relationship difficulties or recover from them.<sup>42</sup> As seen from the results in this

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42. Alan J. Hawkins, "Does It Work? Effectiveness Research on Relationship and Marriage Education," in *Evidence-Based Approaches to Relationship and*

study, LDS couples experience relational benefits. Consequently, while we often do a fine job of reaching out to people and encouraging them to stay active in the faith, which likely has some indirect preventive value for marriage problems, helping LDS individuals learn how to get along in marriage and develop loving and nurturing relationships with children could be exponentially valuable to both the strength of each family and the strength of the overall religious community. But it is striking that while relationship education based on relationship science is often conducted within many religions,<sup>43</sup> the Church does not require or encourage premarital and marital workshops that include relational science materials. Relational science simply refers to the established scientific evidence that illustrates how couples develop and sustain successful relationships. We have institute courses on celestial marriage and family relations courses, but currently course materials contain mainly the common religious material students will have usually received previously in other settings, with little information from relationship science. We are teaching how to try to be close to the Lord but not as much about getting close to imperfect human partners. While we hope the spiritual steps we learn with the Lord translate into better relationships with our family members, this may not be likely for some, especially for those who have not seen healthy relationships or consistent spirituality modeled during their growing-up years.

Perhaps we do not teach more directly about relationships because it may appear to many that we are doing quite well. When during our weekly worship services, we primarily interact with those who are active and engaged in the faith, we are getting a distorted picture of our communities. It may be that those we do not see and those experiencing interactions behind closed doors that are different than our assumptions or ideals are the individuals with an illness of faith, of family, or of fortitude who are most in need of the Healing Physician. While we can see that we are doing much that is correct and helpful for strengthening relationships, both our relationships and our faith are at risk if we do not capitalize on the valuable relationship science that surrounds us.

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*Marriage Education*, ed. James J. Ponzetti (New York: Routledge, 2015), 60–73; Howard J. Markman, W. Kim Halford, and Alan J. Hawkins, “Couple and Relationship Education,” in *APA Handbook on Contemporary Family Psychology*, ed. Barbara H. Fiese and others (Washington, D.C.: APA, 2019).

43. Alan J. Hawkins and others, “Exploring Programmatic Moderators of the Effectiveness of Marriage and Relationship Education Programs: A Meta-Analytic Study,” *Behavior Therapy* 43, no. 1 (2012): 77–87.

An analogy with physical health might be particularly helpful at this point. If physical health were a necessary condition of exaltation, like marriage unity is, it would be as if we taught our people only to adhere to the Word of Wisdom while entirely ignoring the significant knowledge from nutrition and exercise sciences. The Word of Wisdom is an excellent foundational document for underlining the doctrines relating to physical health, especially in terms of addictive substances and moderation in diet. However, it is devoid of the types of details we would need to live a physically healthy life in the context of a modern world with sedentary lifestyles, prepackaged foods, and much more scientific data about the sources of significant diseases than was known when the Word of Wisdom was revealed. We could not imagine achieving physical health without attending to these others sources of truth along with the Word of Wisdom. Additionally, even with the Word of Wisdom, we often focus extensively on the negatives rather than the positives. In fact, the evidence in our communities suggests that our focus on the Word of Wisdom is not enough for physical health, since many of us are not achieving the outcomes of the Word of Wisdom, which are to “run and not be weary, and . . . walk and not faint” (D&C 89:20), because our obesity rates are very high. In addition, if we tried to get physically healthy without a careful collection and analysis of what is known in nutrition and exercise sciences, we would be left to the whims and fads of the day that we hear in the media or from acquaintances. We would then be prone to adopt these fads to our detriment, such as eating only raw foods, over- or underemphasizing specific foods such as wheat or proteins or the newest discovered “superfoods” at the expense of a balanced diet, or exercising in an extreme way that breaks down joints or other body parts.

Unfortunately, in terms of relationship health, we are approaching the mandate to develop unity in marriage and family life as if the scriptures are the only type of truth that can inform our practices. This leaves those who are vulnerable and who develop relationship problems to rely on only existing spiritual practices and sources or the “spiritual” or relational whims and fads of the media and acquaintances. While the scriptures are an excellent source for guidance, they may lead individuals to reach incorrect conclusions and see their relationships eroding even though they continue to be diligent in their daily and weekly religious practices. They may conclude that either they or their family members are unrighteous or that the religious practices that they are participating in and that are supposed to bring them the wonderfully rewarding family relationships they hear so much about are not true.

Perhaps if we supplemented the true doctrines and practices with relationship science about normal human and relationship development, managing stress and conflict, and developing intimacy, we might give our community more practical approaches to relationships, just like exercise and nutritional science could help us have a better chance of getting and staying physically healthy. In addition, we would find out, much like many of us have discovered in regard to our physical health, that as a condition of mortality, even when we follow the best practices, some of us will still get chronic or fatal diseases. Then we might be more inclined to avoid judging one another as to why we are sick or infirm and instead support and help one another along the way.

Where can members go to find resources to integrate gospel and relationship science? Some resources attempt to directly accomplish this task, such as those published by faculty at BYU. While highlighting or promoting specific resources would be inappropriate in this venue, there are existing resources that range from broad overviews of family life to more specific topics such as dating and preparing for marriage, dealing with financial difficulties in marriage, sexuality, stress, integrating spirituality into the home, and many more. Still, it would be severely limiting to seek out books only from LDS authors since they represent such a small percentage of those conducting relationship science. More important would be for the individual member to seek out the best books on marriage by those conducting research in the area the couple needs help with. Except for the area of sexuality and dating, most of the material in these sources from nonmembers will be very consistent with gospel principles. Some material will not be consistent with Church principles, but discerning members will have no difficulty identifying and ignoring these just as they currently do with dietary advice that conflicts with their values, such as recommendations for drinking wine or coffee. Importantly, reviews from online rating systems might indicate the popularity of the sources on relationships but will rarely indicate whether the material is scientifically sound. Focusing on material from active social scientists engaged in the peer review process will help insulate members from the fads and whims of armchair psychologists who are not required to vet their work through a sound scholarly process. Indications that an author is currently engaged in the scholarly process include being a professor at a university that conducts research, publications in research journals, and recommendations by other scholars.

In conclusion, we can be pleased with the way our religious principles and strong emphasis on relationships are filtering into our marriages.

There are also points of caution in attempting to help those who are struggling with their faith and their relationships. It will continue to be important to better study and understand our unique relationship strengths and weaknesses because succeeding in family life is of the utmost importance to our well-being and to our salvation.

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Dean M. Busby, PhD, is currently a professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. He has taught and been in administrative positions at a number of universities, including Brigham Young University, Texas Tech University, and Syracuse University. In about three decades as a scholar, he has published more than one hundred articles and book chapters and five books. His recent research has centered on the development and maintenance of sexual passion in marriage and development of healthy sexuality in families. With his recent scholarship on sexuality coupled with his past research on couple conflict, couple interaction, relationship assessment, and trauma, he has developed into one of the foremost scholars on the factors that lead to successful marriage. His research has garnered university and national awards, has been funded by federal and state grants, and has been presented to scholarly and lay audiences around the world. Recently, he has been teaching courses on the foundations of theory and research about marriage and healthy sexuality in marriage to hundreds of students and has taught graduate students how to conduct research on couples and families. His courses are popular and well received by students, who consistently express appreciation for the way his teaching helps them feel more confident and capable in improving their marriages and helping others do the same. He has been married to his wife, Colleen, for thirty-six years, and they enjoy their family of three sons and eight grandchildren.

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