A Marriage Counselor Looks At Treatment Strategies For Troubled LDS Marriages

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*Dr. Hepworth is a professor and associate dean in the graduate school of Social Work at the University of Utah. This presentation was given at the AMCAP Convention, Salt Lake City, October, 1977.

As I pondered the topic assigned me, “Treatment Strategies for LDS Marriage”, my immediate thoughts were that marital difficulties presented by LDS couples are not unlike those of non-LDS couples. My experience, in fact, has been that the needs of marital partners, the factors that block or facilitate the reciprocal gratification of those needs are strikingly similar irrespective of a couple’s religious orientation. My treatment strategies for LDS couples, therefore, are essentially the same as for other couples. Because certain LDS religious beliefs concerning marriage, marital roles, and the nature of the family relationships, define and determine certain aspects of the marital relationship, there are certain factors which the marital therapist should have a keen awareness of and must possess effective strategies to guide his or her interventions. Moreover, the behavior in marital therapy of the LDS therapist will be shaped in one way or another by the interaction and perhaps in some instances, even collision between his or her religious and professional beliefs and values. Potential dilemmas, to be sure, exist and to the extent the marital therapist has owned, faced, and resolved these dilemmas she or he will avoid the inherent pitfalls when the therapeutic arena includes role ambiguities resulting from uncertainties or lack of awareness of the therapist’s part as to whether he or she is or should be wearing a professional, religious or some type of a “hybrid” hat.
I will attempt in the next few minutes to highlight some of the potential dilemmas and to describe counter strategies that I’ve developed in my practice. Before proceeding, however, I should like to acknowledge openly that the strategies rest on nothing more solid than one man’s subjective opinion. I do not purport to possess the only therapeutic truths and am not advocating that you should wear the hat that fits me reasonably well—a hat that I must admit sometimes blows off in the wind.

The first dilemma encountered in work with LDS couples often involves the question, “Are you LDS?” How one responds to this question may have vital consequences in enhancing or diminishing receptivity of one or both partners to the therapist’s influence. Many assure that sharing the same religion with the clients will facilitate trust and communication, and therefore will accelerate the development of effective helping relationship. To be sure, this is often the case where it is inconceivable to many LDS couples that a non-LDS therapist could understand their difficulties and be helpful to them. Moreover, other LDS clients believe that a non-LDS therapist would attempt to dissuade them from their LDS beliefs. Although there may be partial truth to both of these views, it is erroneous to assume that revealing one’s religion will necessarily expedite the therapeutic process. Such a disclosure, in fact, may have the opposite effect. One or both partners, for example, may experience religious conflicts and be wary of or threatened by an LDS therapist because of a presumption—erroneous or not—that an LDS counselor will attempt to impose his or her religious views upon them. The likelihood of such an untoward cognitive set is substantially greater if the marriage involves an active Mormon and a non-member of the Church. The non-member in such instances often sees entering marital counseling with an LDS counselor as playing with a stacked deck consisting of a coalition between the LDS partners and the marital therapist with the plan of converting him or her into the Church. Certainly, opposition to therapy under such circumstances is understandable and resistance is a normal and perhaps a healthy response.

Disclosure of one’s religion may also activate another cognitive set that may diminish the interpersonal attractiveness of the LDS therapist. Some LDS marital partners may have committed serious moral infractions and may therefore be extremely apprehensive about revealing their behavior to an LDS therapist because of the fear of being condemned or perceived as evil. These fears, of course, are often soon dispelled as the therapist proceeds consistently in an accepting and non-judgemental manner. The point, of course, is that the fears may be less of an impeding factor initially if the client is not aware of the therapist’s religion. It could be argued, of course, that the ultimate potential benefit to a client under such circumstances is even greater if he or she can obtain a feeling of acceptance and of being valued by the therapist of the same religion.

The strategy I have used to deal with questions posed by LDS marital partners as to my religion is to answer the question as I often do only after I have first ascertained the impact that my answering the question is likely to have. In assessing the probably impact, I utilize what I regard as the work horse of effective therapy, namely, empathic communication. Thus, I endeavor to attune myself to the cues as to the feelings that motivated the client’s question. I have found that empathic responses, as for example, “I gather that it’s important to you to know if I can understand and accept your religious views. Could you share with me your concerns in that regard,” often draw out the concerns of the client and lead to productive dialogue that diminishes the resistance.

Gentle probing may also be used in tandem with empathic communication to elicit feelings that underly the client’s question. With a male non-member, for example, one might comment, “You know, it occurs to me that you want to be sure your wife and I aren’t going to be ganging up on you. I’d be interested in hearing any feelings you might be having about that.” By bringing possible resistant feelings into the light of discussion, apprehension can be allayed and misconceptions clarified. By responding empathically to resistant feelings and concerns, the therapist in effect conveys support, acceptance and understanding, all of which tend to counter the ill, the negative cognitive set, and to foster a therapeutic alliance. When resistant feelings are handled in this manner, it has been my experience that the client usually pursues the question as to my religion no further and manifests a readiness to plunge into the exploration of the marital difficulties.

If a client’s motivation for asking about my religion appears to consist of simply wondering if I can understand aspects of the difficulties related to religion, as is more often the case, I often simply respond that I’ve worked with numerous LDS couples and am knowledgable about their religion. Often this assurance is all that is needed to free them to proceed in disclosing their difficulties.

When the client enters the initial interview with previous knowledge of the therapist’s religion, as when one practices under the Church’s auspices or when referral is made by an officer of the Church, the LDS marital therapist must still be sensitive to and deal with possible consequence—adverse psychological effects associated with this foreknowledge. A case in point involved a recent interview I had with a man referred to me by a bishop. The man and his wife were both converts of approximately two years, but the husband had reverted soon thereafter to his preconversion behavior of smoking, drinking, and behaving somewhat irresponsibly. He also announced to his wife that he did not accept Mormonism as true though he was a strong advocate of what it stood for in family life and in other respects. There were referred by the bishop because the wife had seen another counselor who had recommended divorce and the bishop
Another situation encountered with LDS marital partners involves those who have received ecclesiastical counseling from and been referred by bishops or stake presidents or other Church officers. It has been my experience that some of these couples are perplexed and feel guilty or resentful because they were unable to resolve their marital difficulties by following the bishop’s counsel, to repent, to be more loving, to pray together, to hold family home evening, read scriptures together, to pay their tithing, in short to live the gospel. Unfortunately, some wonder if they are evil or unworthy of the Lord’s blessings or been forsaken for some obscure reason because following the counsel to the best of their abilities did not produce resolutions to marital difficulties.

Another potential dilemma involved in work with LDS couples involves the attitude of the therapist and of the marital partners concerning divorce. Divorce is often, if not usually, a major concern to LDS couples in difficulty, especially those who have married in the temple for eternity, a concern that often emerges in the first interview. Attitudes of marital partners towards divorce are by no means uniform, and range from openness to unequivocal opposition. Those of the latter cognitive set may be extremely threatened and resistant to marital therapy if the therapist

had recommended that she get another opinion. During the course of the interview, I used the word share with the husband in the sense of conveying certain troubled feelings with his wife. He responded unexpectedly be observing that share is a Mormon word and implied critically that my use of the word indicated I was counseling from a Mormon perspective. I replied that share was a term employed in my field for many years, but irrespective of that, I could see that he had some strong concerns about being counseled by an LDS person. He acknowledged such concerns and expressed misgiving about seeing a “Mormon shrink”. He had his own beliefs and did not want anyone tampering with them. I responded by validating his right to his own beliefs and explained that although I was LDS, I entertained no aspirations of dissuading him from his belief system or of converting him to my own. He was assuaged by my explanation and continued to participate actively in the interview.

From my discussion to this point, it should be evident that I choose to wear a professional rather than ecclesiastical hat in my therapeutic work. I’ve made this choice, not because of lack of testimony, eschew missionary work, or minimize the spiritual aspect of man. The rationale for my choice is purely pragmatic. I feel comfortable with a clearly defined role and my clients do not have to suffer possible detrimental effects associated with role blurring or role confusion. If clients ask me the position of the Church on certain issues, I explain that I would be happy to refer them to a Church officer or to some relevant literature, but that I do not believe that I can serve them best by functioning as an authority on religious matters. On certain rare occasions that I will discuss later, however, I may take the lead by referring to relevant Church publications if I believe one partner is perverting the meaning of the scripture, a doctrine, or a principle to justify being exploitive with the other.

Before changing to another topic, I would like to acknowledge that there are sharp differences between marital therapy in an ecclesiastical setting and in a secular setting. In the former, the expectations are that counseling be conducted within a spiritual framework and the hat that one wears thus is fabricated from a blend of professional and spiritual threads. Effective therapy in such a setting is possible because of the selection factor and the referral process is sure that the client is aware of and accepts to some degree the duality of the therapist’s role. I have no ecclesiastical experience base from which to draw, but I am sure that a substantial number of you prefer counseling in such a setting and would take exception to some of my preceding remarks. I would conjecture, however, that many of you have experienced role conflicts and have had to deal with therapeutic impasses related to your dual role.

Another situation encountered with LDS marital partners involves those who have received ecclesiastical counseling from and been referred by bishops or stake presidents or other Church officers. It has been my experience that some of these couples are perplexed and feel guilty or resentful because they were unable to resolve their marital difficulties by following the bishop’s counsel, to repent, to be more loving, to pray together, to hold family home evening, read scriptures together, to pay their tithing, in short to live the gospel. Unfortunately, some wonder if they are evil or unworthy of the Lord’s blessings or been forsaken for some obscure reason because following the counsel to the best of their abilities did not produce resolutions to marital difficulties.

The stance I have taken with these couples is that their ability to resolve these difficulties is not an unworthiness on their part or poor counsel by their bishop, but rather that the principles that they have been admonished to follow specify behavior only on a relatively high level of abstraction, whereas following the gospel principles consists of being able to behave in very specific ways in very specific situations. Another way of saying this, which I do not recommend saying to clients, is that gospel principles are expressed on a high level but their application in daily living is on a molecular level. I recall an article I read a few years ago and I think the title expressed it very well, and it was this: “He who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars.” What we will be seeking to accomplish in marital therapy will be learning specific behaviors that they have not yet mastered—behaviors that are entirely consistent with gospel principles. Mastery of these new behaviors will involved learning to express love more effectively, learning to understand their own and their partner’s needs through communicating more effectively, learning to work together in solving problems, and other related functional marital behaviors. Thus, my strategy is to affirm the validity of ecclesiastical counsel, to mitigate inappropriate guilt by reframing the reason for their unsuccessful problem solving efforts, and to motivate them to work on their difficulties from a fresh perspective. This strategy has worked well for me and has appealed to the bishops and stake presidents in my stake with whom I met monthly for about a year in providing training to bishops, some of whom were floundering in their role as a counselor to their ward members and were most receptive to learning to counsel more effectively.

Still another potential dilemma involved in work with LDS couples involves the attitude of the therapist and of the marital partners concerning divorce. Divorce is often, if not usually, a major concern to LDS couples in difficulty, especially those who have married in the temple for eternity, a concern that often emerges in the first interview. Attitudes of marital partners towards divorce are by no means uniform, and range from openness to unequivocal opposition. Those of the latter cognitive set may be extremely threatened and resistant to marital therapy if the therapist
even mildly suggests that divorce is one alternative. By contrast, others enter marital therapy only tentatively until they have ascertained that the therapist regards divorce as a viable alternative to their difficulties.

Interestingly, some people have the mistaken belief that irrespective of circumstances, marriage counselors are interested only in preserving marriages. Perhaps that belief is not mistaken if some marital therapists originally oppose a divorce, as indeed a bishop usually must. In my stake at least, bishops do not have the option of recommending divorce except under extraordinary circumstances. When they have referred couples to me, it has appeared because they knew I do not counsel from an ecclesiastical perspective and am, therefore, free to help one or both partners consider that option. In actuality, however, I can remember few instances in which I have recommended divorce.

My strategy has been to explain from the outset that I have no preconceived idea as to what is best for a couple. My role is not to apprise them what to do but rather to help them reach their own decision after they have thoroughly explored their relationship together. I often add that my goal is to assist couples to preserve and strengthen their marriages whenever possible, but in some instances couples decide that they are mismatched or otherwise lack the ingredients for a successful marriage. For them divorce may be preferable to remaining in a relationship that is destructive and unfulfilling to both.

During the past year I have adopted the approach advocated by my colleague Richard Stuart who tells couples that the best way they can determine if their marriage is viable is to invest themselves totally in it for at least a few weeks. To do so requires a total commitment to the partner in the most positive ways possible, relating on an as is basis as though theirs were a happy marriage and each loved the other deeply.

If, after such a trial period, they remain miserable, they will be in a better position to reach a sound decision. Interestingly, if each partner makes and follows through with the commitment, both tend to experience caring from the partner that motivates them to see their marriage in a more positive way and to choose to sustain the relationship.

From the foregoing it should be evident that for both moral and strategic reasons, I adopt a neutral stand towards divorce. Please do not construe this to mean that I favor divorce. Like all of you, I deplore the alarming escalation of divorce in our state and nation. I fail to see merit, however, in two people being bound together legally and spiritually to the detriment of them and their children, and I would add parenthetically that I think in some instances preserving the marriage is to the detriment of the children. I might add that I likewise do not see the virtue of perpetuating for eternity a relationship that brings misery to the participants, a view that is ascribed role of head of the household. Again, defining his I have expressed to a limited number of couples who have.

The last issue I should like to discuss concerns strategies in dealing therapeutically with struggles between LDS marital partners who are attempting to carve out mutually acceptable husband and wife role definitions. This is a particularly thorny topic—one deserving a more extended discussion than is possible in the time that I have today. As you are well aware, major social ferment involving the rights of women has occurred in the recent years, particularly in the last decade. Traditional male/female roles have been vigorously challenged and the effects of the Women's Lib movement have pervaded LDS family life in varying degrees. In some instances the impact of the movement has been minimal. Many LDS women indeed have been vigorous in their efforts to preserve traditional family roles. In other instances, LDS women have assertedly sought to achieve more of a balance of power in the marital relationship, rebelling against what they perceive as the traditional super-ordinate male role.

In my opinion, the increased assertiveness of some LDS women cannot directly be attributed solely to the women's liberation movement for I encountered similar, though less frequent, conflicts in marital therapy with LDS couples well in advance of women's lib. Women's lib, it seems to me, has played a catalytic role in bringing more to the level of overt action resentful feelings that have been festering in some LDS women for a long time—feelings that were often expressed only indirectly but they caused conflicts nevertheless.

Before undertaking marital therapy involving role conflicts manifested by women's desires to fulfill some of their needs through employment or civic activities or expecting that their husbands assume greater responsibility in housekeeping chores and caring for the children and/or other related expectations, the marital therapist must first have come to terms with her or his own related potential value conflicts. Otherwise his or her therapeutic efforts may be guided by unresolved biases that result in forming an alliance with one partner and attempting to impose his or her values upon the other. Should this occur, the therapist is likely to alienate one partner and to exasperate rather than ameliorate the marital difficulties.

As one seeks to explore his or her own stance regarding marital roles, it is important to consider the views and dilemmas that may confront some marital partners in our Church. Consider, for example, the dilemma in reconciling the position, on one hand, that men and women are equal but different, and the women's temple vows, on the other hand, to be obedient to their husbands, a vow that defines a subordinate rather than equal role. Consider also the fact that the male holds the priesthood and occupies thereby the role of head of the household. Again, defining his I have expressed to a limited number of couples who have.
role not only as different but of greater power. It is not my intent to magnify nor to resolve this seeming contradiction, and indeed, lesson 11 of the Family Relations Course addresses this issue in a most satisfactory manner. Rather, I simply wish to emphasize that this matter is a very real issue in the minds of some LDS women.

In working with gender role conflicts, my strategy has been to divert couples from futile and damaging role power struggles by redefining the conflict as reflecting the need to evolve an effective partnership based on mutual respect, commitment to understand, and to work towards the fulfillment of each other's needs and potentialities. In my office I have an impressive poster that displays a brilliant Monarch butterfly alighting on a delicate flower. Under this beautiful scene are the words of the Swiss psychologist, Carl Gustave Jung: "Where love rules, there is no will to power." To this powerful message might be added, "But in love the power is to produce growth in both partners and in their relationship." In marital therapy with LDS couples and others, I've often had occasion to refer to this choice poster and its profound message. If their marriage is to progress toward perfection, I emphasize each must become highly aware of, sensitive to, and responsive to the needs of the other. Each will include the other in decisions and plans. Not of necessity, but of love and a wish to affirm behaviorly the fact that the partner is important, cherished, and deeply loved. To settle for less than this is to settle, at best, for mediocrity and at worst for competitiveness, resentment, and hostility rather than unity and harmony.

In a few instances in which a husband has used his role as priesthood bearer and head of the household to justify dominating and abusing his wife, I have referred them to Lesson 11 of the Family Relations manual which is concerned with the patriarchal principle in marriage. This lesson refers to the scripture from the Doctrine and Covenants that declares "no power of influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned." This and related scriptures cited in this lesson may be used judiciously to counter the contentions of those who pervert to personal advantage the meaning of other scriptures concerning the role of the head of the household.

In closing, I will briefly describe a potent strategy of dislodging a heretical partner from clinging tenaciously to domineering and controlling patterns of behavior. This strategy highlights the self-defeating nature of tyrannical behavior and places the person in an therapeutic bind by defining continuation of the behavior as an admission, as lack of commitment to making constructive changes in the relationship. To illustrate, let us consider the not too rare situation of a husband who stubbornly persists, despite remedial efforts by the therapist, to exclude his wife from knowledge of the family's finances and from planning as to how the income should be used. The effect of his behavior has been to engender resentment, alienation and a sense of futility in the wife. In using this strategy termed a therapeutic bind, the therapist might comment, "You know, over and over your behavior seems to be saying that it's more important to you to be boss than to have your wife's love and respect and to improve you marriage. It's apparent that you can't have both and you appear to have decided the power is more important to you." The only way out of this therapeutic bind is for the husband to disprove the therapist by modifying the dysfunctional behavior. To be used only sparingly, this strategy is tantamount to resorting to the use of heavy artillery, but then defenders in well fortified positions rarely yield to infantrymen armed with B-B guns.