10-1-1979

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Marital Adjustment in Mormon and Non-Mormon Marriages

By Richard A. Heaps and Karen M. Walker*

As evidence of the major social impact marriage has on our society, it has been estimated that 90 percent of Americans marry at sometime during their lives (Cavan, 1969:1). During 1975, there were 2,126,000 (10 per 1,000 population) marriages performed in the United States. Unfortunately, there were also 1,026,000 (4.8 per 1,000 population) divorces during the same period (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). In recent years only one-fourth of the total increase in divorce can be explained by changes in the size of the married population (U.S. Dep't of HEW, 1970:iv).

This alarming incidence of marital failure should be of significant social concern in America. In fact, it is not likely that there will be any lessening of such marital deterioration since modern social pressures and practices will likely promote a further weakening of marital and familial relationships (Novak, 1976; Reuben, 1972; Sullivan, 1975). It would be of particular practical value to identify variables associated with marital adjustment in the hope that such knowledge would be helpful in bringing about a lowering of divorce rates and marital failure.

It is an assumption of the present writers that the types of mutual commitments explicitly made by a couple entering a marriage contract provide the parameters within which a marriage can be expected to function. However, even casual observation indicates that the commitments entered into at the time of marriage range from being quite perfunctory (e.g., civil and many Protestant ceremonies) to being highly structured and demanding (e.g., traditional Jewish, Catholic, Mormon ceremonies) (Bunbaum, 1964; Christiansen, 1971; Thomas, 1958).

One might assume that more rigorous marriage commitments would lead to greater marital longevity. This assumption seems to be supported by marriage and divorce statistics within the state of Utah, which are generally comparable to the national average and which indicate an important difference between divorce rates of the population in general and divorce rates for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) who are married in "temples". During 1975, there were 13,899 marriages and 6,160 divorces in Utah (World Almanac, 1977:952). In Salt Lake County (the most populous Utah County)

There were 832 marriages in a single month, and there were 414 divorces. That is half as many divorces as marriages. There were 364 (Mormon) temple marriages and of the temple marriages, about 10 percent were dissolved by divorce (Kimball 1976:11).

In attempting to discover why marriages performed in Mormon temples do not dissolve with the same frequency as other marriages one must realize that members of the Mormon Church may choose one of three possible marriage ceremonies. The first ceremony, preferred by Church leaders, takes place in designated temples, and involves a commitment by and a promise to the couple that their marital relationship will continue after their lives on this earth are over, upon the condition that they remain faithfully committed to each other and maintain high standards of personal conduct. The significance of this marriage agreement is made even more apparent when it is realized that Mormons may choose to marry outside the temple without an "eternal" obligation. The other two ceremonies, performed outside the temple, are much like those provided by other religions and by civil authorities wherein a couple is promised that their relationship may continue only for the period of their earthly lives. These marriages outside of the temple involve no stronger marital commitment or promise than those of other religious denominations.

Since a difference evidently exists in the divorce rates between Mormon temple marriages and non-Mormon marriages, it would be of potential value to discover variables influencing this difference. One might wonder whether this is because the strong religious and marital commitments made by Mormons married within the temple lead to a greater level of marital adjustment or simply a greater tenacity in keeping the marriage intact regardless of marital satisfactions (or dissatisfactions). Laws (1959) found that Mormon couples married in the temple did exhibit a significantly higher level of marital adjustment than Mormon couples married outside the temple. Since these latter marriages involve no greater commitments or promises than non-Mormon marriages it was assumed that a similar difference between Mormon couples married in the temple and non-Mormon couples could be found. Consequently, the hypothesis tested in the present study was that Mormon couples initially married in the temple would exhibit a higher level of marital adjustment than non-Mormon couples in the first year of marriage.

Method

Sample

The two groups studied were Mormon couples who participated in a temple marriage and non-Mormon married couples. In an attempt to make the two samples as reasonably comparable as possible, a systematic sampling technique was used and the following four limitations were placed on the selection of respondents for the study: (a) Each respondent was to be experienc-
ing his/her first marriage; (b) Each respondent was to be in the ninth to eighteenth month of marriage; (c) Each respondent was to be between the ages of nineteen and thirty; and (d) Each respondent or his/her mate was to be attending college.

The original sample was comprised of 220 individuals. Sixty Mormon couples married in the temple were randomly selected from the lists provided by Church leaders in the Provo, Utah area. Provo maintains a large population of Mormon married students attending Brigham Young University who are representative of all states in the Union. Fifty non-Mormon couples were randomly selected from lists provided by colleges and universities in the Seattle, Washington area.

The final sample was comprised of 207 individuals who returned the marital adjustment inventory described below (a 94 percent return rate). Fifty-seven (95 percent) of the Mormon wives and fifty-six (93 percent) of the Mormon husbands returned the inventory. Forty-eight (96 percent) of the wives and forty-six (92 percent) of the husbands in the non-Mormon sample returned the inventory.

Measurement of Marital Adjustment

The instrument used to measure the respondents’ general level of marital adjustment was the Locke-Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). In addition, respondents were asked to provide the following background information: age at marriage, educational level, length of premarital acquaintance, length of engagement, husband’s feelings about wife’s employment status, number of children, ordinal position in family or origin, and religious affiliation.

Date Collected

After the original sample was identified, each potential respondent was telephoned and informed of his/her selection. Materials were mailed to each couple selected to participate in the study, with separate but identical packets for both the husband and wife. Each packet contained a letter of explanation, a copy of the marital adjustment inventory, and an addressed stamped envelope for the respondent to use in returning the completed inventory. Each respondent was instructed to complete the inventory in private.

Statistical Analysis

Each individual’s responses to the Locke-Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test were combined into a general adjustment score and group means were computed for both the Mormon and non-Mormon samples. A t-ratio assessing the significance of the difference between the means for the two groups was computed to determine if a significant difference existed in the general levels of marital adjustment of the two groups.

Results

A comparison of the marital adjustment scores for the Mormon couples (X = 128.46; SD = 10.30) and the non-Mormon couples (X = 120.52; SD = 19.59) yielded a significant difference in favor of the Mormon sample (t = 3.33, p < .01). These data supported the hypothesis that Mormon couples married in the temple would exhibit a higher level of marital adjustment than non-Mormon couples.

Although the present study did establish four criteria for inclusion as a respondent, there were some observed differences between the groups: (a) the non-Mormon sample was slightly older at the time of marriage (model age for men = 22-25 years, for women = 22-23 years) than the Mormon sample (model age for men = 22-23, for women = 19-21 years); (b) the non-Mormon couples knew each other longer and had a longer courtship before their marriages (model time = 1.3 years) than the Mormon couples (model time = 6 months - 1 year); (c) more of the non-Mormon husbands had received a college degree (41) than the Mormon husbands (15), although 96 percent of the entire sample had received some college training; and (d) 84 percent of the Mormon couples had one child or were expecting their first child, whereas 19 percent of the non-Mormon couples had one child or were expecting their first child.

Discussion

The major finding of this study was that Mormon couples married in the temple reported a higher level of marital adjustment in their first year of marriage than non-Mormon couples. There were a few descriptive differences between the Mormons and non-Mormon samples although both groups were well within the established guidelines for inclusion in the study.

The difference in marital adjustment of the two groups studied is especially interesting in view of the fact that the small descriptive differences observed between the two groups “could” have been associated with greater marital adjustment in the non-Mormon sample. This leads the authors to believe that although variables such as age, length of engagement, educational level, etc. may be associated with increased marital adjustment, they appear to be superseded by stronger value commitments of religion and mutual, personal commitment, etc. Apparently when considering levels of marital adjustment, external or extrinsic characteristics are more associationist than causal and have a lower priority power than the more internal or intrinsic value commitments referred to above.

Could it also be that the commitments made during the marriage ceremony have little binding power for most couples? It appears that most churches, and certainly civil authorities, do not have a “doctrine of marriage,” but are concerned only with establishing external contractual agreements rather than personally involving commitments between the couple, Church and society. There seems to be little concern within our general society about the personal aspects of the marital relationship between partners in a marriage, unless they engage in acts which encroach upon public awareness (Mace, 1977). In contrast, the Mormon Church has a very definite and well-articulated philosophy or doctrine of marriage which establishes significant standards for personal and mutual conduct within marriage. These are not limiting regulations, but are definite expectations which not only allow for, but promote full and mature human expression and, mutual development within the bounds of propriety. In addition, the Mormon Church generally views divorce as an escape rather
than a cure for marital difficulty (Kimball, 1976).

It is not assumed that temple marriages, per se, created a higher level of marital adjustment, but that the more rigorous and definite personal commitments to each other and to a way of life expected of couples married in temples allow for those conditions which lead to marital adjustment:

...the mere performance of a ceremony does not bring happiness and a successful marriage....Happiness is a state of mind and comes form within....It must be earned (through) sacrifice, sharing, and even a reduction of some personal liberties (Kimball, 1976:12 and 18).

In addition, the personal qualifications required of individuals entering into a temple marriage probably lead to a type of pre-selection which results in individuals who are somewhat more mature in their views of and their preparation for marriage.

The presence of the above variables of commitment, well-defined life values, pre-selection, and pre-marital maturity, as well as their relationship to marital adjustment should be fruitful areas for future research investigation. It would also be worthwhile in future studies to control for such variables as religiosity and religious commitment, and to use better, more explicit measures of marital commitment than to make the assumptions used in the present study.

References


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