Perspectives on Human Intimacy: A Response

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When Richard Johnson asked me to speak, he indicated that he would like, in addition to some response to the papers presented, a woman's point of view concerning sexuality. Also, would I moderate a question and answer session afterward? Well, that sounded like a juggling act to me. Not being a competent juggler, nor sure that all three roles are entirely compatible, I shall try to handle them by considering them consecutively.

First, I would like to respond from a woman's point of view. The question, "What is a woman's perspective about sexuality?" itself raises some interesting questions: Does the request contain an assumption that male sexuality and female sexuality are basically different? And does that presuppose any problems with that difference?

A Woman's Perspective

We simply do not have any conclusive evidence about whether male and female sexuality is more different than similar. My sense is that we have been enculturated to view ourselves as basically different. Given such striking anatomical differences, it may not be difficult to draw that conclusion! However, by starting with the supposition that men and women are basically different, we are very likely to construe our own experience and understanding to fit that world view. The more we look for differences, the more we can find them.

On balance, I believe that men and women are sexually more similar than different. Sexual response cycles for men and women are similar. When asked to describe the sensations and processes of erotic feeling and the experience of lovemaking, they give descriptions that turn out to be amazingly alike. Men and women get turned on by the same things. They also give approximately the same personality qualities when asked what is desirable in a sexual partner.

Taking a view that we are more alike than different can create new areas of understanding. Some bridges can be built between people, in or out of the Church, that cannot be constructed when a position of basic difference is adopted. For example, rather than assuming women to be more emotional, love-oriented and passive, we are now free to consult a particular woman about her pattern of experience. Also, we are free to look for the traditionally assigned characteristics of one sex in the other sex's experience. Many men report enjoying being approached sexually as much as approaching. We do better by assigning the full range of emotions and characteristics to both sexes. Doing so, I can expect that a man with whom I am talking might experience much of his sexuality in a way similar to me—and then we have a lot of common ground to talk about.

However, my experience in talking with women of the Church is that many do believe that men are very different from themselves. Actually, they assume what many American women assume about American men. I believe our views about sex within the Church come more from American culture than from Mormon theology. However, because women make those assumptions, it is important to listen to them. Even when what they say may not be real in an objective sense, because they believe it, it is real to them.

So when we as therapists hear women clients talk about sex, we should listen with open ears. Tune in as they talk about themselves and adopt that point of view while listening. Do not assume you are an expert on anyone else's life; consult them to learn.

With these ideas in mind, I would like to share with you some views that I hear from women in the Church.

First, dichotomies between men and women are often drawn. One I have heard from time to time is that men like sex and, incidentally, love. Women like love and, incidentally, sex. This view suggests to me that these women are not educated about their sexuality nor about men's. If they understood that both sexes can enjoy sex for love, love for sex, and sex for sex, the dichotomy would be dissolved.

Another idea that I hear is a corollary to the first: men are more sexual, and women, in order to get love, have to work around that sexuality. This notion is even more dangerous than the previous one. It implies that a certain amount of manipulation or competition is inherent in the sexual relationship. Most sex therapists, as well as marriage counselors, would agree that what occurs within the sexual relationship is a microcosm of the larger relationship. Let me state this view more clearly: do women see their relationship with men as oppositional rather than cooperative? Do men likewise see women the same way? Anytime a strong partitioning in roles occurs, stereotypes easily abound and people can readily view differences as opposition or competition.

If I have been hearing women correctly and if these views are representative of women in the Church, there is a strong basis for continued misunderstanding between men and women. I think that as therapists there are at least two interventions that we could use to help change these ideas.

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First, I would like to relate a personal experience. As many other women, I have heard and believed at times that men want sex more than love, or at least they don't feel much love until they get turned on. If that is the case, women reason, then it must not really be love if they can feel it only when aroused. By listening carefully to male clients and friends, I recently detected some different ideas. All of the men I talked to said that they felt love in many ways that were not sexual. Additionally, romantic love did not have to be connected to sexual feelings. However, at times erotic arousal serves for many of them to heighten the loving or caring feelings. Some said that getting turned on helped them express themselves more openly and fully. Saying “I love you” came more readily when aroused. At other times, consciousness of loving feelings did not take place until the erection occurred. Interest in lovemaking primarily for relief of sexual tension did not happen very often. Consistently they said that the lovemaking experience was most satisfying when feeling in love was coupled with erotic arousal.

I interpret all of these responses as simply statements about a pattern of how men experience their sexuality. They are not statements about the veracity of their love. Men experience love, just as women do. Many of the above statements are true for women. It may be helpful to stop labelling differences in patterns of sexual expression as differences in love.

It may be that there is a difference in wiring between the sexes. Whether genetically or culturally caused is unclear to me, but from my perspective it does not matter. What matters is understanding the sequence of how each person experiences the intertwining of erotic and loving feelings.

The sequence for many men may be: loving feelings, erotic arousal, heightened love feelings. Or it may be: erotic arousal, love feelings. For many women it may be: loving feelings, erotic arousal. Of course, there are a lot of examples in which, for both men and women, there is sexual arousal with no love and love with no sexual component. But the difference in sequence does not prove a presence or lack of love. So, a man may get turned on in order to feel love, or he may feel love and then erotic arousal lowers the threshold of restraint so that the love finds a channel in tender talk or action.

I shared these ideas with a few men, and they heartily agreed. Granted, my sample size is small and obviously nonrandom, but the idea solves the dichotomy and allows us to explore which particular pattern each person had adopted. A couple may thus make adjustments since they are dealing, they feel, with individual difference, not immutable gender differences.

The intervention in therapy would be to carefully examine each person's pattern of erotic and love feelings. Clarify each person's pattern to both partners and then help them find a mutually satisfying way to help fulfill each person's needs.

Secondly, we as therapists could work on the broader issue of the basic nature of the relationship between men and women. Is it cooperative or competitive? I believe it is best when cooperative. That seems to fit best with the gospel principle of love: caring, sharing and serving. If I am right, then we can educate by persuasion in many direct and indirect ways to help marital partners cooperate so they may fulfill both couple and individual needs.

For example, rather than give a couple a lecture on the basic rightness of cooperation, it might be more productive to give them a task with a double purpose: to cooperate with each other and to have each of their own needs met. Guiding a husband to experiment with different caresses in order to discover which more fully arouse his wife while simultaneously noting which of those same caresses heighten his own excitement is such a task. Asking a woman to share with her husband her most exciting or loving memories of their sexual past while attending carefully to his response to her stories so they can recreate the delightful times for both of them is another assignment with a double purpose. Using this type of instruction in therapy implies careful watching by the therapist in order to truly understand each partner's need well enough to assign a task that would satisfy both husband and wife individually while simultaneously accomplishing couple cooperation.

Women in the Church have also expressed from time to time a “sex as work” theme. Given the lists of jobs that must be done daily by a typical homemaker such as cleaning, caring for children, cooking running errands, and caring for her husband, sex is one more item on the list. Again, I think that this is true of American women and is not unique to Mormon women. However, it may occur often enough among Mormon women to deserve some focus. The “sex as work” idea may be perpetuated because sexual interaction generally comes after everything else—after being tired and hurried during the day, after coping with numerous changes and disappointments as well as joys and satisfactions, after getting dinner and getting kids to bed. If sex is always after everything else, it will likely be seen as one more task. Most people report sex to be at its best when unhurried and uninterrupted, and when both partners feel relaxed with a reserve of energy. Women report needing time to let the world go in order to become excited and sufficiently aroused to enjoy lovemaking. Many also want time to express love afterwards. One of the documented gender differences is longer arousal time for women than men. If these leisurely conditions do not exist on a somewhat regular basis, sex may become perfunctory, timed primarily to the man's quicker response.

If a therapist, particularly a male therapist, is listening to truly learn of the woman's experience, it may help if the husband is taught to listen also. It may also be beneficial for another understanding male to guide the wife into hearing her husband more deeply. Men and women in marriage often polarize their thoughts and feelings about significant issues they see differently. Sex is often such an issue. Since sexual relationships are rarely discussed outside of the marriage, the therapist may be the only person allowed a view inside their world to unpolarize their feelings by underscoring some basic similarities between them and teaching each partner the
other's bias or pattern.

For those therapists who also have a Church role, I would like to highlight three areas in which women have expressed a particular vulnerability concerning sexual issues. It seems to me that in each one of these areas, the healing and priestly roles could combine to help these women have a positive experience with men. As a result, both men and the Church would be viewed more positively.

Church court organization and procedure can leave women vulnerable. In this arena, entirely composed of men, there is no opportunity for women to give another woman support or to provide an ally. Court trials for sexual misconduct may sharpen the "us" and "them" division held by many women. For example, if a woman being considered in a trial views her sexuality in a negative manner (or at least different from men's) she may feel particularly exposed in an all male court. I have talked to a couple of women who expressed feeling utterly alone, with no possibility of being understood.

It seems to me that Church courts are "courts of love" only when conducted in a loving manner. The needs of the person involved in the trial should be paramount. The procedural issues should be clearly secondary. In other words, every step of the process should be considered in terms of this particular person's needs, and then tailored as much as possible to fit the individual. Only then does it start to qualify as loving. If it does not, the negative impact is double. Not only is it a negative trial episode with all the feelings of being judged, deemed unworthy and rejected, but it is also hypocritical. The concept of love is being used as a way of justifying to those engineering the proceedings that everything is alright. But it does not feel like love to the recipient. The result may not only be disillusionment with the Church but also undoing feelings of resentment towards those conducting the proceedings and worse, towards oneself.

Two interventions might be employed to further a loving process. One is to provide a woman ally in an understanding woman who has a sensitive and nonjudgemental attitude towards sexual issues. The woman being tried (whether in a bishop or high council court) then has a place to ventilate, be comforted, and be supported. The woman involved may not want another woman to talk with, but if the opportunity is offered, she can have access to a companion in the process that is occurring. Additionally, she may see the priesthood as more compatible with her interests and may easier feel it to be truly a court of love.

The other intervention would be to allow a woman to talk with a male who will take part in the proceedings in advance of the court. It is often the practice of the Rape Crisis Center to have a considerate, understanding male available to talk to the woman or her family so that she will not generalize her horror and anger to all men, while in crisis. The theory is that a considerate person of the same sex as the one who committed the crime can have a positive effect in neutralizing some of the feelings about all men and will catalyze the trust-building process with men that she will need to work on when the crisis is past.

A second area of concern is the issue of sexual abuse. Although it is true that women do sexually abuse boys or men, far more often women are sexually victimized by men. Very often these victims form generalizations about all men. If the abuse occurred while a child, the woman often carries these negative experiences and feelings with her throughout the ensuing years until they are unravelled by more positive experiences with other men or women in adolescence or adulthood.

Male therapists who hold Church callings should be aware that just being male may create suspicion in the woman they are encountering. Some statistics estimate that between 20 and 40 percent of all American women are subjected to some type of sexual abuse (molestation, incest, rape) before the age of 21. If that is the case, and I have no reason to believe that Mormon women are excluded from this statistic except for a lower set of family disruption rates, in general, for religiously active families, then a significant proportion of all the women in the Church will have had some sexual abuse and may view men wholly or partially in a negative light.

The male therapists among us are in a unique position to effect some change in the stereotype that may be carried within such women. A consistently warm, caring model that behaves as considerately toward the feminine sex as toward the masculine will go far to defuse negative past experience. In other words, a male therapist or Church leader should take careful note not to bias judgements or actions in favor of himself or other males. Warmth and evenhandedness should prevail, and it should come from an internal, generous sense that women and men are similarly vulnerable, strong, weak, changeable, etc.

Discussion of gospel topics in therapy needs to be treated with extra sensitivity. In my experience, the way the gospel principles are often transmitted are unhelpful even though the principle being discussed is right. Often a person is told rationally what he or she must feel, rather than acknowledging what he or she actually feels before considering how he or she would like to feel. Most people are already aware of the recommended state of feeling, such as the spirit of forgiveness or lack of guilt. They need help experiencing it, however, not more descriptions. A teenage client of mine who suffers intense guilt about her grandfather's sexual abuse of her at a young age reports that chastity lectures many times only serve to increase her guilt, not solve it.

Continual reiteration of the desired state doesn't make it necessarily come about for sexual abuse victims (or anyone else). The admonitions or lectures may only serve to heighten the discrepancy between the idealized state and their own negative experience. In talking to women with a traumatic sexual past, it is more often than not underscored that they might be permanently lost, bad, or used. Instead, the therapist or Church person might focus on the feelings and experiences that the person is currently having. Starting where the person is rather than where the person should be is a well-known counseling principle. Searching for the core of guilt or shame and reworking those feelings is a crucial first step. Once that condition begins to come clear,
discussion of feelings the woman would like to gain is more appropriate.

I do not believe that men (therapists, teachers, leaders, husbands, fathers) are consciously inconsiderate in this area. I do believe they are blind. Many just do not realize the high incidence of sexual abuse nor do they understand the internal devastation of being abused. Misunderstanding may often come simply because the man may have had little or no common experience to help him understand her feelings. For those men who want to gain some personal understanding, some of their own past experiences may be applicable. Thoroughly recalling a past event—often a childhood, school, or neighborhood incident—of being bullied, shoved, shamed, ridiculed, or forced into some action will arouse feelings similar to those felt by sexually abused women. Having felt those feelings intensely yourself, it is hard to ignore or discount them in others.

The third area deals with nonmarital sexual behavior. Again, a similar principle applies: because women may perceive that men are different, they will likely be hesitant or closed about sexual discussion. A woman who knows that a therapist is both male and LDS may have double difficulty in speaking freely. She may wonder how much she will be judged rather than how much she will be understood. An air of tolerance about sexual behavior is rarely communicated openly in Church publications or over the pulpit. Because of this, women may feel that the individual men they are approaching will be carrying identical attitudes.

It seems to me that it might be very helpful if the man (therapist or Church leader) could take the initiative to inject some degree of tolerance or understanding of whatever situation is presented, even though the behavior may be inappropriate even to the woman herself. This would pave the way for a more open and honest discussion of sexual feelings and actions. Often people only disclose the amount they think the other person can tolerate—not the full measure. If the client perceives the therapist as not understanding or ignorant of sexual issues, she may protect the therapist! If a full measure of tolerance is offered, a full measure of disclosure is more likely. The more a person can discuss openly all of the thoughts, feelings, and actions around the issue involved, the more likely they will discover themselves and their deepest values. That person is then more easily able to choose the right or moral course of action for himself or herself rather than choose it out of fear of punishment, loss of status, etc.

Recently a bishop of my acquaintance told a young woman in his ward who was troubled about her past sexual behavior to freely sift through what parts of those experiences had been good and bad for her, to hold on to the good and to discard the bad. He said he felt the sexual experiences gave her a good measure of the closeness, feeling needed, and enjoyment that she needed. Only the situations were inappropriate. He told her he had full confidence that she could sort out what was best for herself and that eventually, if her best choices coincided with the Church's, she would be welcomed into full fellowship. There was no punishment or judgement rendered.

To express this degree of tolerance, at least two qualities are important: an ability to love and respect a person while possibly disagreeing with their actions, and a sexual maturity in oneself that easily accepts and expresses the sexuality in all of us. Only by being sexually whole ourselves can we hope to transmit a hope of sexual goodness to clients.

Response to Papers

When asked to give a response to this session, I noted that the session is titled "Human Intimacy." I was prepared to see papers on both sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy. However, when I received the program, all of the papers concerned sexual intimacy. As in the labelling of this program, intimacy is often used as an euphemism for sex. But intimacy doesn't need to mean sexuality.

If we fail to make a distinction between sexual and emotional intimacy, we lose sight of an important resolution to a dilemma many people face. Many single people see no way to fully enjoy intimate relationships if intimacy can only be equated with sexual interaction. One single friend told me, "In the past, whenever I heard the word intimate I always equated it with love, sex, romance, marriage. I cut myself off from a lot of enjoyment with people I cared about but with whom I would experience any of those things.” If we can give intimacy a broader meaning and have it include emotional intimacy—loving, caring, sharing—there are wonderful ways to closeness that do not entail sexual interaction.

Also, married people are freed, with this broader definition of intimacy, to have friendships of both sexes that can be caring and loving without feeling that such relationships are wrong or suspect. Val MacMurray hinted at these possibilities for single and married people in his paper during his discussion of emotional and affectionate intimacy with sexual interaction.

Let me first make two comments on the papers collectively, then consider each briefly.

I grew up with a fairly negative sexual history. During adolescence and early adulthood, I held many negative associations about my own sexuality and sexual actions. Later on, I discovered sexuality to be an area of positive growth and discovery. That period in my life was like springtime. Fresh ideas, warm feelings, and a budding view of myself positively as a sexual being all came during that season. These papers bring some of the feelings of that time back again. We have experienced collectively in the Church a winter season of buried feelings, ideas, actions. Discussing sexuality openly has been difficult. These papers, along with other recently presented, seem to open this important topic more fully as we give ourselves permission to discuss, explore, and share common concerns with each other. I truly hope that we will continue.

Just as one good turn deserves another, these good papers deserve others. All of these topics provide important background information to the therapist and Church member about sexuality among Mormons. As therapists, we need information. But possessing
information is only the first step in helping people. Just as a diagnosis doesn’t provide the treatment, information does not bring about change. Information is only meaningful if skillfully woven into the relationship between therapist and client. None of these papers addressed this issue: How do you use these ideas in therapy?

One of my greatest satisfactions with the field of therapy is that it confronts directly and consistently the problem of how to turn theory into practice. Giving a person a philosophy or pointing to a desired goal rarely supplies the needed insights or skills about how to accomplish what is desired. Using the therapist’s seat to preach is not enough. We must tailor and time these principles discussed to the individual (or couple or family) situations presented to us, hopefully catalyzing our clients’ own thinking and acting.

Each of these papers raises a question of practice. I would like to suggest what one might be for each paper in the hopes that we will each orient the ideas we have heard to our own practice. Coombs’ paper needs to ask, “How should the statements given by Church leaders be interwoven into therapy sessions? What techniques are most helpful for delivering information in a positive light?” MacMurray’s paper might ask a similar question, “How do we help clients search for principles in their sexual choices?” Finally, Stahmann’s paper could helpfully add guidelines about how and when to refer couples with sexual problems to competent sex therapists who respect our clients’ value systems.

Now to brief comments about each paper

A good paper not only lets the audience digest the information easily, but presents the ideas in a readily discernible outline so that the hearer can recognize patterns and concepts that are important.

David Coombs work is such a paper. I found myself, while listening, fantasizing about the possibility of succinct two-page summary of the ideas given being prepared for general usage by Church members. This helpful summary would give a clear view of two important patterns in his paper. 1. The central ideas and principles about sexual choices stressed by Church leaders. 2. Trends over time about sexual topics emphasized within the Church. This paper, added to others, such as Ann and Marvin Ryting’s paper on trends about sexuality in the Church cited by MacMurray, provides a wider perspective that is needed by members embarking on an open discussion of sexuality within the Church.

Two patterns that emerged in his paper disturbed me somewhat. First, in comments by General Authorities, sexuality was almost always discussed by using a comparison of good and evil. Constant presentation of sex as good/bad rather than good in and of itself ingrains an ambivalent association with all of sex whether it is one’s sexuality or one’s sexual actions. My impression might be spurious, so a content analysis over the decades might yield different results.

Second, in many of the quotes concerning birth control, the wording implied that women were mainly responsible for this area of sexual decision making. A comment such as “Women should not seek to limit the number of children” reflects an assumption that the heaviest responsibility is on the woman. While it certainly is true that women bear the larger burden in childbearing and usually in childrearing, the decision about the sexual relationship and about the number of children should not necessarily rest primarily with her. Many times the number and spacing of children can become a power struggle between the marriage partners rather than an equal decision.

I was delighted that Val MacMurray talked about the topic of principles of sexual interaction from a positive stance. Two elements were especially worthwhile in my eyes. First, citing quotes about the positive nature of sexuality from the scriptures and providing a profile of the sexually well person starts one thinking about the positive roles sex plays in our lives. Carlfred Broderick has also taken a similar view in an interview for Dialogue magazine. He says that we all have a “sexual stewardship” and should seek to enhance our sexuality further our growth generally. Second, I am glad that Val took a leap and started the process of delineating possible principles of ethical sexual behavior. His principles might be more clearly stated, along with practical examples for easy transference to the sexual dilemmas we all face.

I hope that many of us will follow suit and enlarge on his example. The more writers we have who are suggesting sexual principles, the more likely we will generate a broad consensus about which principles are basic or core to sexual interaction. What may initially look like scores of separates lists may actually be many pieces of the puzzle. Let us get them out on the table. This process will take years and many people with good mind, hearts, and spirits to pull together a coherent system of ethics.

It occurs to me that sexual ethical principles are similar if not identical to ethical principles in other areas of human interaction. Basically, ethics addresses the question of how we conduct our lives with each other.

All of the commandments are statements about what is good between two or more persons. Even “following the Lord” or “sinning against God” includes this idea. We are our most responsible, moral and good selves when we extend our circle of interest beyond ourselves to equally include the interests of other persons—the more persons the better. Within sexual practice, it implies that many of the basic principles of righteous human interaction are also operative; hence, we can search the entire field of ethics for help and do not need to limit our focus to writings about sexuality.

Many of Val’s quotes and ideas come from writers out of Church circles. I applaud his freedom to look beyond ourselves, to find truth wherever it is to be found. I am also saddened that we have paid so little attention to this area that most of the significant thinking about one of the central areas of our lives has been done by others.

Bob Stahmann and Cory Hammond’s paper is an important addition for Mormon therapists. In addition to clarifying the nature of sex therapy for those of us...
who have faced sexual dysfunction in our clientele (or ourselves) and have not known where best to turn, I am appreciative of their consistent stance that good sexual skills learned through "sexual technologies," if one does not have them otherwise, can increase the loving and caring within a relationship. It is also reassuring that the field of sexual therapy is concerned about moral guidelines for sexual interaction and that sex therapists are concerned about ethics. Again, I urge them to supplement this paper with guidelines about when and how to refer. Referral and training sources would be additionally helpful. As all sex therapists are not equally concerned about ethical issues or clinically skilled to handle sexual dysfunction, I think some of Allen Bergin's cautionary tone referred to in Stahmann and Hammond's paper is justified. We simply need to know more about this field and become competent ourselves. I applaud both men for their efforts to become skilled sex therapists and to meld professional insights well with their views of LDS principles.