A Self-Concept Comparison of LDS and Non-LDS High School Students

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"...the self becomes a mirror reflecting its...experiences."1

A Definition

Purkey, a leader in self-concept theory and research, has made it clear that the perception of self is the agent around which an individual organizes his life. "More and more there is a deepening interest in the individual's perception of himself and his situation as a major influence on his behavior."2

Proliferating enormously in recent years, most studies of the self have settled on the term "self-concept" to name "the traits and values which the individual has accepted as definitions of himself."3 According to Hurlock, "This concept of self is established in the early years of life, taking its fundamental form in the years of babyhood and childhood."4 In addition, Mead held "that the individual's attitude to himself is determined largely by the early attitudes of 'significant others' to him."5 Supporting these views, Poussaint commented, "Like it or not, his image becomes a composite of how others see him or how they tell him he should be seen."6

There are numerous quotations of authorities past and present in the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and education which define the self-concept, its growth, stability, and consistency. However, in order to avoid the ensuing redundancy of doing so, those already quoted will suffice in order to establish a working definition of self-concept.

Statements regarding the emergence and establishment of the self-concept in the individual's repertoire of beliefs and attitudes about himself increasingly engage the attention of thoughtful scholars. The writings of Mead, Maslow, Lecky, Rogers, Combs, Berne and others in the field of self-concept theory, research, and practice are noteworthy for in-depth study of the subject.

The Minority Issue

The people of the United States are bound together in a political amalgam which is unified by such widely held values as a comfortable life, a sense of accomplishment, equality, family security, freedom, and self respect.7 These values are reflected in the orientation often attributed to Americans toward "materialism, competition, and achievement."8

Indeed, the United States of America is a conglomerate of ethnic, national, religious, social, and economic groups from all areas of the world, welded together in large part by a common value system. Some similarities and differences have been researched.

At this point there arose the question crucial to this study: In a country where society demonstrates the great leveling effect of the pull toward homogeneous values, is it possible to find a group which holds sufficiently peculiar beliefs, attitudes, and values that a measurement of their perceptions of themselves will show significant basic differences? In order to explore the possibility that such a group exists and to ascertain whether or not their beliefs, attitudes, and values do indeed result in significantly different self-views, this study turned to a sampling of young people from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Transmission of LDS Values

The earliest members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) were part and parcel of the fabric of America, but they chose to identify themselves as early as 1830 with "modern revelation" from God, the idea of a "personal" God with "body, parts, and passions," divine inspiration available to worthy individual Church members, eternal progression toward eventual perfection and godhood, "priesthood authority," angels and divine intervention, the need to perform certain ordinances for those who have died, a unique explanation of North and South American history, free agency, personal stewardship and responsibility, and, among other such uncommon beliefs, the view of the family as the central, microcosmic, patriarchal unit for the divine purposes for which the Church was organized. Members of this Church, hereinafter called the L.D.S. Church, also see themselves as children of God in a real sense, made in His image and capable of reaching eventual perfection.

These beliefs, acted upon, become the values by which members of the L.D.S. Church identify themselves. Furthermore, some of them at present run contrary to the values and beliefs of the larger society from which the Church member originates. Consider, for example, that L.D.S. theology defines very different roles for women and men in the family with the woman remaining in the home to care for the needs of her husband, her children, and herself. The future expectations for girls are different from those for boys, based on the valuation of the family unit and the roles assigned to members of the family. L.D.S. views toward abortion and over-population are in contradiction with those of growing numbers of the larger society. The belief in a personal God is distinctive as are the beliefs in eternal progression, the origin of the American Indians, and some aspects of life after death. The philosophical

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basis of the Church authority delegated to male members is without modern parallel.

As the family's relationship with the child is affected by religious values, so the child's view of himself is affected. Surely such a singular religion as that taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides experiences which are mirrored in the developing self. Much has been written of the self-concept with relation to ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries.

The Research Question

We were intrigued by the possibilities of studying the self-concept with relation to Mormons. Teased by observation, thought, and a partial survey of literature, we formulated the questions to be answered by research: Is it possible to establish the existence and the extent of differences, if any, in self-view between Mormon youth and youth not of our faith? Along with this general question, a number of other sub-questions were of major interest to us: 1) Do the self-concepts of Latter-day Saint high school students differ significantly from those of non-Latter-day Saint high school students? 2) Do the self-concepts of Latter-day Saint high school students differ significantly from those of other Latter-day Saint high school students under the following conditions: a. in a predominantly L.D.S. population and in a pre-dominantly non-L.D.S. population? b. in a predominantly L.D.S. population and in an approximately 50 percent L.D.S. population? c. in an approximately 50 percent L.D.S. population and in a predominantly non-L.D.S. population?

Methods and Procedures

The Tennessee Self Concept Scale was administered to three classes of high school students in each of three locations: Mesa High School in Mesa, Arizona, with an approximately 50 percent L.D.S. population; Cordova High School in Rancho Cordova, California, with a predominantly non-L.D.S. population; and Sky View High School in Smithfield, Utah, with a predominantly L.D.S. population. The Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS) was chosen as the instrument of measurement of the self-concept because it is statistically validated and widely recognized and respected on a national level. Thus, any hint of bias or regionalism in the choice of instrument was avoided. It was also specified that the measurements come from heterogeneous groups of both sexes. Since American history is a class required of high school students in all three states from which subjects were chosen for this study, usually at the eleventh-grade level, these were classes in which the instrument was administered.

It should be noted here that for this study no attempt was made to determine the degree of church activity of the L.D.S. population. This could be an important consideration for future study.

The students were given the test booklets and answer sheets by the classroom teacher who then explained the nature and purpose of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale and supervised the time period required for completion. Administration of the instrument yielded the numbers of students for each of the six cells shown in the following figure:

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<th>Sky View High School</th>
<th>Mesa High School</th>
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Figure 1. Distribution of L.D.S. and non-L.D.S. Students in Three High Schools

Three classes at Sky View High School yielded 68 students, with six non-L.D.S. and 62 L.D.S. Like Mesa High School and Cordova High School, Sky View has 1,500 students. It is located in a somewhat rural valley in northern Utah. Most of the students are bussed or travel by private car from small communities and farms in the valley. The L.D.S.-non-L.D.S. population mix of the valley, about 10 percent non-L.D.S., is reflected in the number of students in the two Sky View High School cells.

At Mesa High School, three classes yielded 88 students, 32 L.D.S. and 56 non-L.D.S. The resulting percentages showed 63.6 percent non-L.D.S. and 36.6 percent L.D.S. students. This supports the population mix of Mesa, at approximately 40 percent L.D.S. Mesa High School is situated on the edge of the city, surrounded by growing sub-divisions and some small farms. Large numbers of students travel to school by bus or private car with some foot and bicycle traffic from nearby homes.

One hundred students were tested at Cordova High School. Five of them were L.D.S. and 95 were non-L.D.S. Again the numbers reflect the approximate mix of L.D.S. and non-L.D.S. population of Rancho Cordova, the small city of approximately 38,000 outside Sacramento, California, in which Cordova High School is located. Like the populations from which Sky View High School and Mesa High School students derive, Cordova High School draws from a middle class area. For full explanation of the statistical procedures and other detailed information of this study the reader is referred to the dissertation from which this paper was developed.21

The sum of the three L.D.S. cells in the study is 99 and of the three non-L.D.S. cells is 157. The scores and sub-scores resulting from the administration of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale to the two groups were statistically analyzed to ascertain the areas of difference between the L.D.S. and non-L.D.S. students and to determine the statistical significance of any such difference. In addition, results of the scores of the group in cell one were compared with those in cell three; results of the scores of the group in cell one were compared with those in cell two; and results of the scores of the group in cell two were compared with those in cell three. These three comparisons were then analyzed for
A listing of the scores which were statistically analyzed in this study follows:

1. Total positive. This is the most important single score of the TSCS.

Persons with high scores tend to like themselves, feel that they are persons of value and worth, have confidence in themselves, and act accordingly. People with low scores are doubtful about their own worth; see themselves as undesirable; often feel anxious, depressed, and unhappy; and have little faith or confidence in themselves.12

2. Self Criticism. The ten items on this part of the TSCS have been taken from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.

These are all mildly derogatory statements that most people admit as being true for them. Individuals who deny most of these statements most often are being defensive and making a deliberate effort to present a favorable picture of themselves. High scores generally indicate a normal, healthy openness and capacity for self-criticism.13

3. Self Identity. "This is what I am."24

4. Self Satisfaction. "This is how I feel about myself."15

5. Behavior. "This is what I do."26

Numbers three, four, and five represent the internal frame of reference for the individual's self feelings.

6. Physical Self. The individual describes his view of his body, health, appearance, and sexuality.

7. Moral-Ethical Self. Here the subject describes his view of his moral worth, his feelings of "goodness" and "badness," his relationship with God, his satisfaction with the state of his religious belief or non-belief as the case may be.

8. Personal Self. The individual reveals his sense of personal worth, his feelings of personal adequacy, and evaluates his personality apart from his body or his relationships with others.

9. Family Self. The subject describes his sense of adequacy, worth, and value as a family member. This score reflects his self-perception with reference to his earliest and closest associates.

10. Social Self. This score reflects the subject's feelings about his adequacy and feelings of worth with relation to people not of his family.

The TSCS is broken into several "self-concepts." When significant differences were discovered, the levels of significance are stated and inferences drawn.

Review of Significant Findings

1. Self-Satisfaction. With respect to the Self-Satisfaction variable, L.D.S. students at Mesa High School, Mesa, Arizona, reported a more positive self-view than did non-L.D.S. students at Mesa High School. Self-satisfaction among them was also more positive than it was among students, L.D.S. or non-L.D.S., at either of the other two high schools. Significance was determined for this variable at the 10 percent level with an actual probability of .0618. This study shows that the L.D.S. students at Mesa High School enjoy more positive feelings in this regard than do the other students. Large minority. Investigation prior to the time of this study revealed that the population of Mesa is quite close to 40 percent L.D.S. If an individual is a member of a very large majority as are the L.D.S. students at Sky View High, he tends to take his membership in that majority for granted. On the other hand, if one is a member of a very small minority, as are the L.D.S. students at Cordova High School, merely maintaining his identity may be a struggle. If, however, one's membership in a large, somewhat select minority is assured, he is confident of having friends who share his attitudes and values. With L.D.S. students in Mesa being part of a large minority whose forebears endured rigorous difficulties to pioneer the area, it is entirely probable that they have developed an esprit de corps which increases their feelings of self-satisfaction. At the least, if the actual forebears of an L.D.S. student did not help settle the area, as a resident and Church member he still partakes of a vicarious kind of kinship of belief. This kind of kinship is apparent to the most casual observer of the L.D.S. scene worldwide. It cuts across national, economic, and ethnic boundaries, and it would almost certainly help tie Church members of a geographic area together with shared pride.

2. Moral-Ethical Self. A statistically significant difference appeared in the data for the Moral-Ethical Self variable. Reporting a probability of .0361, the difference was well within the 5 percent level of significance determined for this variable. The view of the L.D.S. students in this study with regard to their moral-ethical selves was more positive than that of the non-L.D.S. students.

Teachings of the L.D.S. Church. Morality pertains to right ideals or principles of human conduct, and ethics is the science of moral values: these two, morality and ethics, are the areas of greatest emphasis in the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Right Principles. As reported earlier there are many areas of belief unique to the L.D.S. Church, several of which relate directly to right principles of human conduct. Not only does the theology of the Church emphasize the Ten Commandments and the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, but it also emphasizes beliefs in the ability of the individual to progress toward perfection and eventual godhood. Added to these beliefs is that the individual attains to that position in the life after death which he has earned in this life by his degree of "goodness" or "badness."27 The teachings of the Church in virtually every connection with the developing child is with these beliefs in mind. Further, adults who conform to the orthodox values of the Church tend to pattern their own lives after such beliefs, thus adding example to precept in the moral education of the child. In addition, the very young child of the L.D.S. family is led to the powerfully climatical event of baptism by immersion shortly after his attainment to his eighth birthday. He has been taught that the waters of baptism wash away his previous sins and leave him clean, but that from this time forth he is personally responsible for the "good" and "bad" things he does. He is taught that if he transgresses, he must repent in order to get back onto the right path, that his eventual goal in life (life with God) at which only people who have totally lived according to the teachings of his Church arrive. In addition to those which are unique to the L.D.S. Church, the child is taught moral-ethical beliefs which his
Church holds in common with others.

From his earliest days, the L.D.S. child has been taught the virtues of honesty and truthfulness through stories, poems, and admonitions. He has been taught to avoid work and most forms of recreation on the Sabbath Day. He has been taught that it is "good" to give 10 percent of his money whether earnings or allowance to his Church. He has been taught that it is right to act as a missionary in expounding the rightness of his religious beliefs to people not of his faith. From a very early age, family members have contributed to the young boy's "missionary fund." Later he himself is encouraged to add to it. Girls are encouraged to prepare themselves to be a worthy wife to a returned missionary, to be fit to be wed in one of the temples of the Church.

Added to these moral imperatives, by the time he reaches adolescence, the L.D.S. child has learned to equate "good" and "bad" to a large degree with sexual behavior. He must keep in close touch with his "Bishop," the leader of his "Ward" who looks after the spiritual and temporal affairs of his 400 to 600 ward members, so that he discusses at intervals the state of his moral cleanliness. All people are expected to remain virgins until marriage. This condition is weighted with a large measure of "goodness" or "badness." Immodesty of dress, homosexuality, masturbation, and abortion are heinous in the L.O.S. view. The L.D.S. child is taught to support his bishop and the other Church authorities, to avoid criticizing them, and to make certain he abides by their teachings. He is encouraged to seek the counsel of his bishop in solving his problems of whatever nature.

It is difficult to overstate the emphasis given to all areas of morality in the L.D.S. Church from the earliest teachings and social activities in the home through weekly spiritual meetings which all faithful Mormons are expected to attend—Youth Conferences, annual recreational, spiritual "revivals" of two or three days' duration, and Youth Camps, Boy or Girl Scout-like camps in an outdoor setting where self-sufficiency, responsibility, and moral values are emphasized. Added to these teaching activities is Seminary which is class time spent daily during the school year in religion classes under certified, carefully screened, orthodox L.D.S. teachers at those high schools where it is available.

The result of all this teaching is apparently successful in the moral-ethical self-judgments of L.D.S. adolescents.

3. Family Self. The statistical significance of the difference in the self-views of L.D.S. and non-L.D.S. high school students with regard to the Family Self variable lay close to the .05 level at .055. Non-L.D.S. students reported a more positive view of themselves in their relationships with their families than did L.D.S. students.

Given the strong emphasis of the L.D.S. Church upon family relationships, it was at first surprising to find the view of the L.D.S. students for this variable less positive than the view of the non-L.D.S. students. However, upon review of the literature pertaining to the instability and confusion at work in the personality development of the adolescent and the strength of the leveling effects of the more or less universal, culture-wide aspects of adolescent development, the present result seems somewhat less surprising. Three important factors may account for the lower self-concept of the L.D.S. students with regard to family.

First factor. First is the patriarchal order espoused by Mormonism. The patriarch with relation to the family is the father who calls upon his priesthood authority in love and righteousness to invoke blessings upon his family. In some families patriarchal order is practiced under an authoritarian mantle. Often the philosophy of home leadership as practiced is in direct contradiction with the democratic teachings the child receives in school. Moreover, in some settings the child encounters permisiveness under the guise of democracy. Thus, the developing adolescent must cope with areas of discontinuous value training.

Second factor. The second factor is that the eventual goal of members of the L.D.S. Church is perfection. Indeed, one of the favorite Mormon quotations is: "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become."28 The fact is, in L.D.S. theology, the family has been ordained as the vehicle to carry the individual to perfection. Auxiliary organizations within the Church have been established to aid the family in its primary task. Therefore, in some families there may exist great pressure for its members to become perfect. This may lead to a certain rigidity and lack of acceptance, and conflict between parents and child may be one consequence of this effort toward perfection.

On the one hand, the growing child is presented with strong religious teachings. On the other hand, he is bombarbed by contrary forces. His self-concept reflects his value conflict. His parents, as representatives of the Church, tell him not to date before he is 16. Society says dating before 16 is acceptable. His parents say revealing clothing is immodest. Fashion says the displayed body is beautiful. His parents say he must not experiment with sex. Society tells him sexual virtue is old-fashioned and passe'. His parents say not to try tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. Society asks him how he is going to be responsible. Feelings of guilt in the child are also likely to arise with a consequent result of lowering the child's self-view toward his place in the family.

Third factor. Of critical importance to faithful parents if that "eternal life" comes through obedience. If because a child is lured away by contrasting values, or for other reasons, it is quite likely that the relationship becomes strained to a point that a wedge is driven between parent and child. Feelings of guilt in the child are also likely to arise with a consequent result of lowering the child's self-view toward his place in the family.

Add to these factors situations in which parents do not model the behavioral standards which they verbalize to their children. The result is apt to be guilt and confusion in the minds of the children. Under all these circumstances, the young man or woman may encounter difficulty in establishing his own value system. According to Felker, the break with parents is a necessary adjunct to growing up. Apparently the non-L.D.S. family experiences less difficulty in letting its
young men and women find their own paths and less conflict in doing so than do L.D.S. families.

Self-Concept Similarities. Despite some differences in the measurement of the components of the self-concept as quantified by the TSCS, there are more similarities than differences between the ways in which L.D.S. and non-L.D.S. students regard themselves. It was not surprising that the present study indicated such widespread similarities in the self-views of teenagers. The developmental dictates of a culture such as the Western culture into which the students who were subjects of this study were born are extremely powerful.

Culture pressures. Given the power of cultural pressures, it is surprising that any differences surfaced. Not only do young members of the middle class have the same kinds of extra-institutional experiences, there is pressure toward sameness in formal institutions. The L.D.S. Church has been called a middle-class church by many writers, and after all, it embraces values in common with the larger American society. Among these are those widely-held values mentioned by Rokeach: a comfortable life, equality, family security, freedom, and self-respect. It is possible that these values are of such a widespread and pervasive nature that they take precedence over others where there may be areas of conflict. When all is said and done, L.D.S. adolescents grow up in situations parallel with and very often crossing into the growth paths of non-L.D.S. adolescents. They hear the same music, see the same movies, are subjected to the same advertising techniques, attend the same schools, participate in the same discussions, and talk informally to one another. No wonder there are similarities. The wonder is that there are differences.

The Composite Profile. Under final scrutiny in this review was the composite profile of the subjects. In every sub-score area, the means for these groups were below the norm as standardized by Fitts. There appeared to be a discrepancy between the means for the norm and the means for the students in this study. The means for all scores and sub-scores in this study in every case were substantially below the norm for the Tennessee Self Concept Scale which may mean that the groups studied were low in self-concept in comparison with other groups, or the validity of the TSCS is to be questioned with regard to adolescents. For example, the sub-score mean for Self Identity for the subjects in this study dipped below the first percentile. It appears very difficult to believe that the 252 adolescents in this study were very different from other adolescents across the country. It seemed reasonable to expect such a disparity between the norms established by Fitts and the composite means of the subjects in this study.

A Final Word

Obviously all that has been written with regard to reasons for self-satisfaction differences between Mormon students at Mesa High and all other students in this study is conjecture. Likewise, reasons for higher moral-ethical self-concepts for Mormons and higher family self-concepts for non-Mormons are somewhat theoretical. It is fact, however, that using the instrument of measurement and the population in this study, these statistically significant differences appeared.

For a long time the chief investigator of this study has observed particularly the behavior of adolescent students, has watched some of them behave contrary to their stated purposes; they desired certain achievements, they seemed to plan effectively, they possessed adequate capabilities, yet they failed to achieve that which they seemed overtly to desire. The exhortations of parents, teachers, and leaders apparently were ineffective. Many of these young people seemed "not to care." On the other hand, some other adolescents seemed to succeed at everything they attempted. Doors of success opened to them. Their difficulties were few, and they seemed to avoid the struggles which beset many of their peers. Surely the key to the contradictory behavior of these young people lay in their concepts of themselves, their capabilities, their possessions, their families, and all else suggested by James as long ago as 1890.29

Certainly in light of the abundance of literature on the self-concept and in view of the difficulty of establishing empirical research on the self-concept, these findings will prove valuable to those who wish to improve the effectiveness of their efforts to help young people achieve happiness and success through the development of strong self-concepts. For L.D.S. counselors and teachers who work directly with the youth, the findings will shed light on why generally L.D.S. youth on an individual basis have high self-esteem and yet seem to struggle for a positive place in their families.

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8. Ibid., p. 91.
10. The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 1962, 130:22.
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18. Doctrine and Covenants, 72:3.
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27. Doctrine and Covenants, 76.