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The Symbolic Universe of Latter-day Saints: Do We Believe The Wealthy Are More Righteous?

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

This study was conducted in order to determine if members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) make attributions consistent with the idea that wealth and righteousness are related. Results indicated that Church members are more likely to attribute righteousness to a wealthy church member than a poor one. Potential reasons for these findings are explored, along with the ramifications such beliefs might have for members of the LDS Church.

From its beginnings, Christianity has been infused with an inner tension as a result of the teachings of Jesus on one hand, and the desire of Christians to co-exist and be accepted within larger economically-oriented host cultures on the other – in other words, to live a life of the spirit while being immersed in the world. For the early Christian church, monasticism was one response to this tension. Those who were more sensitive and enlightened often felt “called” to renounce the world through entering the cloistered monastery. With the advent of the Protestant Reformation, however, a shift occurred. Martin Luther, for example, proclaimed that all individuals could best fulfill their callings in life through serving God where they stood, in the dedicated and proper performance of their daily tasks (Fullerton, 1959). John Calvin extended these ideas by encouraging Christians to magnify their callings not only by performing their daily work in a devoted fashion, but by distinguishing themselves through prospering (Fullerton, 1959). Ironically, as John Wesley (founder of Methodism) pointed out, this leads Christians full circle to confront again the conflict between the life of the spirit and life in the world:

I fear whenever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of true religion to continue for long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and the love of the world in all its branches. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away ... What way can we take that our money-making will not sink us to the nethermost hell? (John Wesley, as quoted in Fullerton, 1928, p. 19)

Mormonism has not escaped these tensions. The proper place of wealth and material goods has long been an area of concern and confusion for church members. Indeed, President Brigham Young stated:
SYMBOLIC RIGHTEOUSNESS

The worst fear I have about this people is that they will get rich in this country, forget God and his people, wax fat, and kick themselves out of this church and go to hell. This people will stand mobbing, robbing, poverty, and all manner of persecution and be true. But my greatest fear for them is that they cannot stand wealth. (Brigham Young, quoted in Nibley, 1936, p. 128)

In order to help clarify the ambiguity, LDS leaders have periodically spoken on the nuances of "being in the world, but not of it" as this relates to the accumulation of wealth (Kimball, 1976; Christensen, 1999). However, the potential for further confusion results when it is noted that both local and general church leaders often come from the upper echelons of American society; also when well-to-do Mormons receive attention and praise in both the church and secular press. How might this impact individual church members' beliefs? When combined with popular interpretations of LDS theology, could such occurrences foster the perception that "good people prosper"? These are some of the questions this study was designed to answer. Particularly,

• do Latter-day Saints tend to believe that wealth correlates with righteousness, and
• what demographic and psychological variables predict whether Latter-day Saints make such attributions?

At present, no studies have analyzed the differences which exist among the world's religious traditions and their beliefs about wealth and poverty. Attempting to answer such questions about Latter-day Saints would provide a starting point for this line of research, and could be meaningful for a variety reasons. Asking such questions is not only culturally intriguing, but more importantly, can also lead toward better understanding of the various religions to which people belong — and the real-world impact religions have on adherents' lives. For example, India's caste system is a direct result of Hindu theology (Ross, 2001). Caste system beliefs about the meaning of wealth and poverty play a primary role in determining the quality of life for millions of Indians. More specific to the mission of AMCAP, asking these questions will encourage therapists to be aware that some of their LDS clients might endorse views about wealth and poverty which could be part of their deeper, more debilitating psychiatric problems.

METHODS

Procedures

Participants were selected via a random sampling format (Borg & Gall, 1989). The sample was drawn from residences included in the 1997 phone book for Utah County, Utah (Utah County has the highest percentage of Mormons per capita of any comparable county in the United States). Only those who were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and were adults in the household, were asked to complete and return the experimental measures.

Materials were sent to 750 individuals. Potential participants were each mailed a packet containing a notification letter asking his/her consent, along with the various measures mentioned below. Participation was voluntary. A follow-up letter was sent three weeks after the initial mailing to those who did not initially respond in order to increase returns. Approximately 200 out of 750 individuals responded to the first mailing. Three to four weeks later, another 20 responded to the second mailing. Thus, the total N for the study was 220, for a return rate of approximately 30%.

Participants

The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 83, with a mean age of approximately 49 years old. The marital status of the sample was predominantly married (88.6%, n=195). Table 1 presents the remainder of the demographics of the sample (Utah County statistical data from Appleman, 2003).

Generally speaking, the typical sample-member tended to be a Caucasian, Republican, well-educated, married, middle or upper-middle class, active member of the LDS Church. Thus, although the response rate was low, the sample was fairly representative of Utah County in general.

Measures

In order to access subjects' attributions regarding the questions of interest, two separate methods were devised:

• life-history vignettes (see Appendix 1)

• a scale of items directly measuring the beliefs of interest (see Appendix 2)

The two methods differed in that the vignettes were more ambiguous and required subjects to make

[103]
assumptions about a person based on general biographical information, whereas the scale directly asked subjects their degree of agreement/disagreement with certain beliefs.

With regard to the vignettes, one depicted an LDS Church member of low socioeconomic standing, and one depicted an LDS Church member of high socioeconomic standing. Information in the vignettes included a brief mention of the person's church membership, with the remainder of the information focusing primarily upon the extent, or lack of, the person's worldly accomplishments and financial successes embedded in other, less relevant information. None of the information in the vignettes addressed the main character's moral or ethical qualities. Subjects were randomly assigned one of these vignettes. Thus, two equally-sized experimental groups were created: subjects who received the "wealthy" vignette, and subjects who received the "poor" vignette. Subjects read their vignette and then rated the individual depicted using a seven-point, Likert-type, semantic differential scale (-3 to +3, zero included, which was converted to all positive numbers for data input purposes; e.g., -3=1, -2=2, -1=3, 0=4, 1=5, 2=6, 3=7) on a number of religious and spiritual descriptor terms, such as righteousness, devotion to the gospel, spirituality, likeliness to be in a church leadership position, and disobedience, along with other descriptors, such as depression and attractiveness.

The Mormon Wealth Attribution (MWA) Scale is comprised of 12 statements (Rector, 1998) addressing specific aspects of the attributions of interest (e.g., "It is one of God's natural laws that living a righteous life leads to material prosperity"). All subjects received the MWA Scale and responded to these statements on a six-point scale (-3 to +3, zero not included), depending upon their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements.

A pilot study was conducted to test and potentially refine the vignettes and the MWA Scale: sixty-three undergraduate students in religion classes at Brigham Young University served as subjects. Each subject was given the measures in packet form, along with the several other measures described below. Participation was voluntary. The researchers did not know which vignette each subject received in his or her packet. Results of t-tests showed that semantic differential ratings for the two vignettes were statistically different. Based on this, the vignettes were determined to have face validity, and to be both meaningful and powerful enough to evoke effects. An item analysis shortened the initial MWA Scale from 31 to 12 items. The 12-item MWA Scale was determined to have high reliability (% = .93). Due to moderately strong correlations with other measures purporting similar underlying constructs, such as the Protestant Work Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garret, 1971) and the Belief in a Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), the MWA was considered to be valid.

Five other self-report measures were included in the packets to provide additional information regarding subjects' beliefs and also to determine how certain personal and psychological variables measured by these scales co-varied with the attributions of interest. These measures included the Belief in a Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), the Protestant Work Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garret, 1971), the Intrinsic/Extrinsic-Revised Scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989), the LDS Orthodoxy Scale (Christensen & Cannon, 1978) – as well as a demographic questionnaire including questions of socioeconomic status, years

### Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variable</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>% of Sample</th>
<th>Sample N</th>
<th>% of Utah County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>92.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Persuasion</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Level</td>
<td>High School Dropout</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Graduate</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some Grad. School</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Level</td>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$10-19,999</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$20-39,999</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$40-74,999</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$75-149,999</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$150,000+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime LDS Church Member</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>189</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>Once a Month or Less</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-3 Times a Month</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of church membership and church activity, etc.

The Belief in a Just World Scale (JW) is a 16-item measure which requires the respondent to indicate his/her agreement or disagreement with statements regarding the belief in a just world on a seven-point scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Two separate studies utilizing university students as subjects showed estimates of internal consistency (coefficient alpha) to be .81 (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). In addition, various studies have supported the validity of the Just World Scale (Zukerman et al., 1974; Miller et al., & Flowers 1974). The Protestant Work Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garrett, 1971) is the most widely used Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) scale. It is a 19-item scale purporting to measure aspects of so-called "Protestant ethic values" such as the virtues of industriousness, asceticism, and individualism. The scale is reported (Mirels & Garrett, 1971) to have good reliability [Cronbach's alpha = .79]. The validity of the PWE Scale has been supported by researchers correlating it with other scales purporting to measure similar constructs (Ray, 1982; Blood, 1969). The Intrinsic/Extrinsic-Revised Scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989) is a 14-item Likert-type measure purporting to measure both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. The Intrinsic/Extrinsic-Revised Scale produces three scores: extrinsic personal, extrinsic social, and intrinsic. Analytes indicate the revised scale has reliability estimates of .57 for the E-personal subscale, .58 for the E-social subscale, and .83 for the I-subscale. The LDS Orthodoxy Scale (Christensen & Canon, 1978) was originally constructed in 1935 in an attempt to measure the religious and spiritual beliefs of students attending Brigham Young University. At present, there is no reliability data for the LDS Orthodoxy Scale.

Data Analysis

The first research question was analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This procedure allows for comparison of participants' scores in the two experimental conditions on all of the semantic differential items simultaneously. Because the overall MANOVA was statistically significant, it was followed up with univariate t-tests for each semantic differential item. In addition, the MWA Scale was analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the location of the overall mean for the sample and the degree of spread in the scores.

The second research question was analyzed via multiple regression. Participants' scores on the semantic differential items righteous, devoted to the gospel, spiritual, likely to be a Bishop/Stake President and disobedient were combined to compute an overall "spiritual-righteousness" score. This 'spiritual-righteousness' score was used as the criterion variable, with the interaction "vignette group" and the following variables used as predictors: education level, income level, political persuasion, age, convert status, temple attendance status, intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic-personal religiosity, extrinsic-social religiosity, just world beliefs, Protestant Work Ethic beliefs, LDS orthodoxy, and frequency of church attendance. The predictors were entered in the regression equation using a stepwise procedure (see Table 3)

### RESULTS

Table 2 presents the data from the MANOVA, the follow-up univariate t-tests, and the accompanying descriptive statistics for each semantic differential item, broken down by vignette group.

The Wilks-Lambda MANOVA revealed a significant difference between the two treatment conditions when all semantic differential items were analyzed simultaneously: F(20, 192) = 47.2, p<.001. The univariate t-tests showed that respondents who received the vignette depicting the wealthy church member saw him in a more positive light than respondents receiving the vignette of the poor church member for every variable. It should be pointed out, however, that no overall rating for any of the positively scored religious-spiritual items (i.e., righteous, likelihood of being a bishop or stake president, devotion to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Wealthy Vignette N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Poor Vignette N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Righteous</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>3.89**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop/StakePres.</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>10.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devotion to Gosp.</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>5.48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>5.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disobedient</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>4.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically Attract.</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>6.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>21.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligentic</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>14.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>11.89**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Democrat</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>4.25**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**=p<.0001
gospel, disobedient, and spiritual) exceeded the "slightly agree" (5.0) level for either vignette. On the one negatively scored religious/spiritual item (disobedient), ratings exceeded the "slightly disagree" level (3.0) for those who received the wealthy church member vignette, while those who received the poor church member vignette were more neutral in their perception of disobedience. The one religious/spiritual variable which surpassed the "slightly disagree" level for the poor vignette was likely to be a bishop or stake president, indicating subjects' perceptions that individuals who struggle financially are unlikely to be in positions of church leadership.

In summary, a mild general tendency was seen for subjects to rate the wealthy church member as being a more righteous person than the poor church member. However, this tendency was surpassed by subjects' willingness to make flattering non-religious attributions about the wealthy church member over the church member who struggled financially (e.g., physically attractive, intelligent, etc.).

Overall Findings on the Mormon Wealth Attribution Scale

Subjects' responses on the MWA scale approximated a normal distribution where the bulk of subjects' total scores fell around the scale's absolute neutral point (45.5); the overall mean for the sample was 42.51, which approximated an average item score equivalent to a very slight disagreement with the righteousness-wealth belief system. This suggests that most subjects were mild to moderate in their agreement or disagreement with the notion that righteousness leads to wealth, while fewer subjects strongly endorsed or rejected these beliefs.

Multiple Regression Findings

Table 3 displays findings of the multiple regression analyses. These analyses showed participants receiving the vignette depicting the wealthy church member consistently scored their vignette higher on each of the positive attribute variables, and lower on the negative attribute variables, than did participants who received the vignette depicting the church member who struggled financially.

Of the predictor measures and demographic variables, only just world beliefs and education level interacted significantly with whether spiritual-righteousness attributions were made for the wealthy vignette: subjects with higher just world beliefs and lower levels of education were more likely to endorse such beliefs. This tendency was mild, though statistically significant.

Discussion

Results from the Vignette method indicate subjects hold a general bias on all of the traits measured by the semantic differential items: the wealthy church member was seen as being a better person, both secularly and spiritually, than the poorer counterpart. These findings are consistent with previous research in two primary ways. First, individuals with conservative political outlooks (note that this sample was overwhelmingly Republican) tend to attribute wealth in others to personal characteristics and abilities rather than to external variables such as luck or societal determinants (see Furnham, 1983). Second, current results underscore the statements of previous researchers who assert that individualism is the predominant explanation for wealth and poverty in America (Feagin, 1975; Free & Cantril, 1967; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Smith, 1985). Within a religious framework, individualism appears to take the form of a belief which asserts that people are personally responsible for their prosperity and position in life via their obedience to God; that is, obedience to God's laws brings about prosperous circumstances. Righteousness, devotion to the gospel, spirituality, and disobedience are all aspects of pious behavior which are considered to be under one's control. Accordingly, each of these variables (except disobedient) was rated
higher for the wealthy vignette, suggesting that in some theistically-oriented belief systems, wealth and prosperity are seen as evidence of one’s history of behaving in a virtuous, observant, upright fashion.

Results from the analyses of the predictor measures and demographic variables indicate that subjects with higher just world beliefs and less education are more likely to attribute a relationship between righteousness and prosperous circumstances than those with low just world beliefs and higher levels of education. These findings make intuitive sense in various ways. First, it may be that an inverse relationship exists between education level and just world beliefs: the more educated a person is, the less likely she/he is to believe that the universe is a just place (and vice versa). Conversely, if one believes that the world is indeed a just place, then individuals who experience prosperous circumstances must have somehow earned those circumstances. Those who do not experience prosperity must have somehow earned their predicament as well. For religious individuals, it seems a natural extension of these ideas to assume that one’s devotion to God is an influence in determining one’s life-situation and experiences. With respect to education level impacting whether or not an individual attributes righteousness to wealth, it could be that those with higher levels of education consider a wider range of explanations to account for the condition of prosperity, or are less likely to utilize their religious/spiritual beliefs to explain the condition of prosperity. Conversely, it is possible that those with less education consider fewer alternatives to explain prosperous conditions, or are more likely to rely upon their religious/spiritual beliefs as possible explanations for real-world events. These hypotheses are speculative and need verification. However, they do pose some interesting empirical questions about the impact education has on people’s tendencies to attribute religious/spiritual causes for real-world events, or to even ascribe to religious beliefs in general.

Results from the Vignette method are also consistent with the “halo effect,” which is the tendency to rate individuals either too high or too low on the basis of one outstanding trait (Chaplan, 1985). In other words, knowing that someone is financially prosperous would tend to predispose raters to be positively biased about that person: raters would assume the person to have desirable traits in general. However, I am unaware of any previous study which shows subjects’ willingness to carry a halo bias based on worldly or temporal information into the spiritual/religious realm. Results of this study suggest that Latter-day-Saints are willing to do this. Why might this be the case?

My attempts to answer this question have been impacted by scholarship from three separate fields: cultural anthropology (Mary Douglas), biblical history and criticism (Marcus J. Borg, Jerome H. Neyrey, and Bruce J. Malina), and sociology (Peter L. Berger). Particularly germane are these scholars’ ideas on symbolic universes and purity systems. These concepts can work together to help make more sense of the findings above.

What is a Symbolic Universe?

Biblical scholar Jerome H. Neyrey borrowed the sociological concept of the symbolic universe in his attempts to better understand the historical context of biblical peoples. Some relevant material from Neyrey’s (1991) text would be:

We note that human beings universally seek to find or impose order on the world in which they live, which means human beings have a symbolic view of the way the universe should be structured and ordered (see Berger & Luckman, 1966). This perception is generally quite implicit, and comes with being socialized as a child into the ways and workings of a family or clan … Human beings … seek to find order or to impose it on their world so as to give it intelligibility and to define themselves in relation to it. In this they are seeking and producing socially shared meanings. By erecting imaginary and/or real lines, people define “mine” or “ours” in relation to what is “yours” and “theirs.” (Neyrey, 1991, p. 273)

In other words, the symbolic universe of a particular society or culture is the collection of shared meanings and perceptions held by the group. It amounts to a “map” of the way the world is thought to work.

Another biblical scholar, Bruce J. Malina (1981), notes that human beings can be observed to draw lines which define and give meaning to their world in terms of six basic areas: self, others, nature, time, space, and God. A few examples from Mormonism are:

1. Self: It is important to know one’s spiritual heritage as a child of God (D&C 76:24; Moses 3:5), one’s family and ancestors, and one’s Israelite lineage (either literally or through adoption; see Smith, 1938, p. 151). In order to
reach one’s full potential, it is crucial for each individual to know the gospel (D&C 133:37; 1 Pet. 4:6) and, ideally, to live in accordance with it (Abr. 3:25).

2. God: It is important to know that God is an exalted man with body, parts, and passions (D&C 130:22) and that God is the spiritual father of all humanity (Heb. 12:9), and as such is intimately concerned with human lives. It is also important to know that God interacts with humanity primarily through covenants offered through his church, that God mediates blessings (D&C 130:20-21; 132:4-6), and that God’s greatest blessing to humanity is exaltation, or eternal life in his presence (D&C 6:13; 14:7).

Thus, according to the LDS symbolic universe, God and human beings are involved in a relationship of reciprocity – *quid pro quo* – where all blessings are dependent upon human behavior being in compliance with divine will.

Given the fact that Latter-day Saints believe obedience is required in order to receive any blessing from God, and that the ultimate goal of human existence is to attain God’s greatest blessing, it makes sense that obedience would be considered as the core value of Mormonism; particularly, the belief that obedience to divine will brings blessings. LDS leaders have affirmed this viewpoint (for example: “Nothing is more important to you than obedience to God’s commandments” [Wirthlin, 1994, p. 39] and “Obedience is the first law of heaven” [Benson, 1988, p. 26]). While such a focus on obedience is likely to have both positive and negative impacts upon the church membership as a whole (Rector & Rector, 2003), the central message of Mormonism is, in essence, that the Church is the sole possessor of God’s saving truths, and that obedience to these truths brings happiness and qualifies human beings for God’s greatest blessings.

What is “Purity”?

Influential British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has called the orderly system of lines and classifications which make up a symbolic universe “purity,” a term which refers to a group’s sense of correctness when the system is known and observed. *Purity* in this sense is much broader than the typical, narrower definition of “freedom from taint or contaminants” (though this broader definition subsumes the narrower). *Purity* is a term which stands for “the order of a social system.” In this sense, all people have an understanding of what is pure and what is polluted, what is orderly and what is disorderly, although just what constitutes purity and pollution changes from culture to culture. Further rounding out these ideas, Bible scholar Marcus J. Borg (1994, p. 50) has said:

> Purity systems are found in [all] cultures. At a high level of abstraction, they are systems of classification, lines, and boundaries. A purity system is a cultural map which indicates a place for everything and everything in its place. Things that are okay in one place are impure or dirty in another where they are out of place. Put very simply, a purity system is a social system organized around the contrast or polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean. The polarities of pure and impure establish a spectrum or purity map, ranging from pure on one end through degrees of purity to impure or off the purity map at the other. These polarities apply to persons, places, times, things, and social groups. [emphasis added]

Occurrences should be added to this list. Depending upon one’s symbolic universe, certain occurrences make more sense, seem more appropriate or orderly, and thus are more pure than others. Take, for example, the case of the man who was blind from birth cited in John 9. Part of the symbolic universe of first-century Jews was that those with bodily defects, such as the lame, the deaf and the blind, lacked wholeness (see Lev. 21:16-20) – and lacking bodily wholeness, they lacked holiness (see John 9:34), which was the core value of Judaism (Neyrey, 1991; Malina, 1981; Borg, 1994). The account reads:

> And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, “neither” … (John 9:1-3)

Blindness was thus a condition considered to be impure by first-century Jewish tradition (Neyrey, 1991, p. 285) and as a result did not seem an appropriate fate for someone who was not somehow wicked.

By the same token, for many twenty-first century Latter-day-Saints, wealth is considered a blessing, and by implication is a state “purer” than poverty. According to the symbolic universe of Latter-day-Saints, blessings
come via obedience to divine laws. Thus, someone who has been blessed with wealth surely must have behaved in such a way as to warrant this blessing from God.

**Ramifications**

How might such beliefs impact the lives of Latter-day Saints? At the macro level, such beliefs could predispose church members towards elitism. The perspective that the wealthy, prominent, and powerful are also more likely to be the “elect” of God creates an ethos that worships worldly success—often at the expense of things which should matter most to Christians. Such a perspective would make it all the more difficult to understand and appreciate that living the spiritual life has much to do with things qualitative, intangible, and immeasurable (Rector, 2004). One of the main themes of the Book of Mormon is the apparent paradox of material prosperity: When a group of people make a concerted effort over time to live the spiritual life—which includes living by their best understanding of God’s commandments—they are blessed by God with prosperity. But it is that very prosperity which contributes to sow the seeds of the peoples’ downfall. Is it possible that many Latter-day Saint readers of the Book of Mormon define “prosperity” too narrowly? Must prosperity necessarily imply “larger flocks and herds,” or could it simply refer to peaceful harmonious circumstances, both individually and communally? Is it possible that, as suggested above by John Wesley, prosperity often follows the industry and frugality which typically accompany religious dedication, rather than being a direct bestowal from God for good works? Whatever the case, once a community experiences an abundance of material goods, the stage is set for the group’s eventual downfall because of pride. No materially prosperous Book of Mormon group escapes this eventual fate.

At the individual or micro level, such beliefs could impact Latter-day Saints in numerous ways. First, such beliefs, though consistent with the LDS symbolic universe mentioned earlier, often represent inaccurate or faulty logic. Righteousness in and of itself, does not necessarily lead to materially prosperous circumstances, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks has stated:

> Those who preach the gospel of success and the theology of prosperity are suffering from “the deceitfulness of riches” and from supposing that “gain is goodness” (1 Tim. 6:5).

The possession of wealth or the acquisition of significant income is not a mark of heavenly favor, and their absence is not evidence of heavenly disfavor. Riches can be among the blessings that follow right behavior—but riches can also be acquired through the luck of a prospector or as the fruits of dishonesty. (Oaks, 1988, pp. 75-76)

If church members think about it, they will likely realize there are just too many examples of good people who, for a variety of reasons, never “arrive” financially. Conversely, there are many examples of individuals who have experienced considerable material prosperity while living lives of corruption, exploitation, and so forth. The conditions of wealth and poverty are complex and don’t necessarily have to do with the quality of one’s character—just as the poor could be both righteous and unrighteous, so can the wealthy.

Second, if church members believe the wealthy are more righteous, then the wealthy are even further entrenched as role models—not just in the secular realm, but in the spiritual as well: wealth becomes a key marker of success, both temporally and spiritually. Church members are then even more likely to strive to emulate the lives of the wealthy, while dismissing as role models those who do not seem to measure up socioeconomically. As pointed out by the historian Michael Lenhart (2003), it’s as if many church members take the old American dictum, “If you’re so smart, how come you’re not rich?” and transform it into “If you’re so righteous, how come you’re not prospering in the land?” Thus, in order to be validated that they are really on the right track—that they are approved of God—they too need to make a substantial amount of money. These perceptions could have subtle but wide-ranging impacts on church members’ life decisions—from the choice of a career to the choice of a spouse.

Third, this perspective could impact which individuals eventually receive calls to serve in positions of high visibility and responsibility in the Church (e.g., bishop, stake/mission president, general authority). Of course, if a ward or stake was comprised of only wealthy or only poor members, those congregations’ leaders’ socioeconomic status would naturally correspond. However, this tendency could be especially marked when a ward or stake is composed of members from a broad socioeconomic background (as many wards and stakes are). So long as church members place a premium on wealth, not
only seeing it as a highly desirable life-condition but also as a mark of heavenly favor, their inspiration will likely be biased toward the wealthy when making decisions regarding whom to put in leadership positions. Many individuals who are not prosperous, but who would nonetheless make good spiritual leaders, could be bypassed as a result.

Finally, the idea that the wealthy are more righteous is antithetical to the life and ministry of the ultimate role model: Jesus. Jesus was a wandering minister who proclaimed

... foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head. (Luke 9:58)

Jesus had, at most, few possessions. He did not encourage the accumulation of wealth or the achievement of status. If anything, he warned against the accumulation of worldly goods and status with statements such as

... it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Matt. 20:24).

If the Church as a whole struggles with these tendencies, it is only to the extent that individual members are muddled. In other words, the conflict over the place of wealth, status, and prestige lies within each individual Christian. Latter-day Saints have worked hard to be accepted and to be assimilated into mainstream Western society. As a result, they have adopted many of the manners, values, and preoccupations of “respectable,” middle-class America; they place a high premium on worldly markers of success. They not only want to be Christians, but many also want to be prosperous Christians, though they know Jesus said: “ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). In many ways, this is the very conflict mentioned at the beginning of this paper – one Christians have been grappling with for nearly 2000 years. So long as Latter-day Saints want it both ways – to be spiritual and to live a God-centered life, but also to live lives of respectability, affluence, abundance, and prominence – they are bound to feel a tension within themselves.

References


**APPENDIX I**

**Wealthy Vignette:**

Michael is 44 years old, and was born into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Overall, Michael has experienced little difficulty in making his way in the world. He has seemed to "be at the right place at the right time" for most occurrences in his life. As a result, things have gone quite well for him.

Michael attended a local college. Shortly before graduation, he married his wife Kathryn, who is also LDS. Soon after graduation, Michael found work at a local computer software company. Shortly thereafter, Michael had received word he had been left a $100,000 inheritance from an uncle which came quite unexpectedly. Shortly before the birth of their first child, Michael and Kathryn decided to purchase their first home using the money they had received and bought a "fixer-upper" which they sold 18 months later for a substantial profit. With this income, Michael and Kathryn not only purchased another home for themselves, but also a duplex as an investment. Within the next seven years, Michael and Kathryn had twins, sold the family's second home, the duplex, another project home, and had purchased a complex of 30 apartments. As a result of the experience he gained from fixing up older homes, and the continued up-turn in the housing market, Michael quit his job at the computer company and began overseeing the building of new homes with the help of a small crew he hired. Now (14 years later), Michael is founder of a prosperous development corporation which is currently expanding into neighboring states. His position pays him a substantial amount of money, and allows him to spend more time at home. Michael and his wife now own a spacious, fully restored, Victorian home situated just down the road from an LDS chapel in a prestigious wooded suburb. The home has a large deck and yard. The family owns four automobiles, and often take vacations during the year to various destinations.

**Poor Vignette:**

Michael is 44 years old, and was born into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Overall, Michael has had considerable difficulty making his way in the world. He has seemed to have been at the "wrong place at the wrong time" for most occurrences in his life. As a result, his life has been difficult.

Michael attended a local college. Shortly before graduation, he married his wife, Kathryn, who is also LDS. After graduation, he began working for a local computer software company. Michael and Kathryn decided to
purchase a home due to their new level of income, and the increasing costs of renting. However, Michael was laid off some ten months after they bought their home due to a down-turn in the computer software industry. Just previous to the birth of their first child, Michael found another job selling mainframe computers with a national company with a local office. As a result of his sporadic sales, Michael didn’t make sufficient income from his commissions to meet the family’s financial obligations. Michael left his job after 18 months, and found work selling cars just after his wife gave birth to twins. Michael sold some cars initially, but sold very few over the next number of months in a row. Due to his unreliable commissions, and the financial stresses of the family, Michael and Kathryn were unable to pay their bills for a number of months. As a result, the bank foreclosed on their home.

Kathryn’s parents allowed the family to live in their home for two years while Michael got back on his feet with a new job. During this time, Michael worked at various temporary jobs, one of which was plastering houses. In order to supplement their income, both Michael and Kathryn became involved during the evenings with a multilevel marketing company. Finally, they were able to move out of Kathryn’s parent’s house and into a duplex rental. However, after a year of work, Michael severely strained muscles in his back and had to quit his plastering job. His boss was not covered by workman’s compensation, and income from multilevel marketing was insufficient to sustain the family for long. As a result, Michael and Kathryn became dependant upon church welfare for a number of months because they decided against moving back in with Kathryn’s parents. As soon as he was able, Michael found work, this time at a local high school as its custodian. He has been at this job now for seven years.

**Appendix 2**

The Mormon Wealth Attribution Scale

1. For a Latter-day-Saint, one of the keys to financial success is to live the gospel fully.
2. One of the main causes of long-term financial hardship is disobedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.
3. God has a purpose in rewarding the righteous with material prosperity.
4. One of the main reasons church leaders (e.g., stake presidents, mission presidents, general authorities) are typically more wealthy than the average church member is that they have demonstrated more righteousness over time.
5. One of the best insurances against long-term financial hardship is to be as obedient to the gospel as possible.
6. The Book of Mormon teaching that “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land” means that if we live righteously, God will bless us with material prosperity.
7. There is no relationship between the level of a person’s righteousness and his/her level of worldly success and accomplishments.
8. It is consistent with the gospel that those who are more righteous get rewarded with more material prosperity than do those who are less righteous.
9. There is a direct relationship between the level of a person’s righteousness and the level of his/her temporal prosperity.
10. The Book of Mormon plainly teaches that if people are righteous, they will become more financially prosperous than those who are less righteous.
11. If a person wants to become financially secure and well-off, one of the best things he/she could do to insure this would be to obey all the principles and ordinances of the gospel.