Mormon Marriage: A Review of Family Life and Social Change

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This article is a review of Mormon belief and practice as it relates to family life. The principle of plural marriage is examined, followed by data on modern day practice in the areas of marriage, divorce, fertility, and family problems and strengths. Drawing heavily from religious sources, some conclusions about social change and accommodation are proposed.

This article is an attempt to review the beliefs and behaviors of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (L.D.S.) as they pertain to married life. There are already some excellent research and review articles published on the L.D.S. family (Heaton, 1988 and Thomas, 1983). The purpose of this article is to compare the interface of Mormon family belief and practice as it is today with how it was at the time of its historical beginning. For the benefit of non-L.D.S. social scientists, I have drawn from some important religious sources that otherwise may not be known to the reader. There are many religious groups which originated in the early years of the United States, some with ideas about marriage and family life that were considered different or provocative, but few have been as successful as the denomination which came to be known as the Mormon church (Thomas 1983).

However, Mormon marriage and public reaction to it is very different today from the way it was in the previous century. Therefore, let us begin with a look at the L.D.S. practice of polygyny, which in the church is generally referred to by the more generic term of polygamy.

POLYGAMY

Joseph Smith organized the L.D.S. church in 1830. About one year later he received a revelation from the Lord that the new church should emulate the Old Testament prophets in the practice of having plural wives:

Vs. 1. Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines.

Vs. 2. Behold, and lo, I am the Lord thy God, and will answer thee as touching this matter.

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Vs. 3. Therefore, prepare thy heart to receive and obey the instructions which I am about to give unto you; for all those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same.

Vs. 32. Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved.

Vs. 34. God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people. This therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises.

Vs. 61. And again, as pertaining to the law of the priesthood --if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then is her justified; he cannot commit adultery with that that belongeth unto him; for they are given unto him and to no one else (Doctrine & Covenants, 1981, pp. 266-272).

This was difficult doctrine as the large majority of members were typical New England protestants, holding traditional ideas about monogamy and fidelity.

Joseph Smith carefully introduced the practice to trusted associates in the early 1840s, after the church had moved its headquarters to Nauvoo, Illinois. This was an extremely difficult time for the young religion, because not only was polygamy illegal and a lightening rod for non-member hostility and persecution, but it was very difficult for the members themselves to accept (Newell & Avery, 1984).

After President Smith’s murder in 1844, the church was led to the Salt Lake Valley in present-day Utah by their new prophet, Brigham Young. In 1852 the church publicly declared that it practiced polygamy and in the ensuing decades, ever harsher laws and actions were taken against this peaceful and otherwise law abiding people.

In order to avoid imprisonment, disenfranchisement, and the seizure of property and other financial assets, Wilford Woodruff declared in 1890 that the practice of plural marriage had ended:

Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages, which laws have been pronounced constitutional by the court of last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them to likewise.

There is nothing in my teachings to the Church or in those of my associates, during the time specified, which can be reasonably construed to inculcate or encourage polygamy; and when any Elder of the Church has used language which appeared to convey any such teaching, he has been promptly reproved. And I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land (Doctrine & Covenants, 1981, pp. 274-292).

It took many years after that for some members to give up a principle for which they had sacrificed and suffered so much (Quinn, 1985). The practice eventually disappeared, however, and the Mormons were accepted into the mainstream of society.
Most of today's Mormons probably look back on the doctrine of plural marriage with the feeling that they are glad that the doctrine is no longer practiced. In addition, many members seem uninformed as to the rationale for the doctrine. It is commonly believed that the purpose was to provide homes for excess females and to care for the widowed, due to harsh living conditions on the frontier. It is clear, however, that the true purpose was to increase fertility (Logue, 1985).

Brigham Young once declared, "It is the duty of every righteous man and woman to prepare tabernacles for all the spirits they can" (Widtsoe, 1925, p. 305). Mormons believe that every child born to them is one more reared in the true religion instead of somewhere else, and that it is therefore one's duty to have large families. Since only the most faithful of Mormons practiced polygamy, they had the most children and therefore influenced more of the next generation of members than did the "less devoted".

While the husband was of course older with each plural wife that he married, the average age for each wife was always nineteen. First wives averaged eight children and subsequent ones averaged six children (Embry, 1987).

Life "in the principle" as it was called, was difficult, as evidenced by the fact that divorce was more common in polygamous marriages than it was in monogamous ones (Embry, 1987). Generally, polygamous families did their best to live in accordance with the victorian ideals of the larger society. Usually "hut polygyny" was practiced, with the father visiting his various homes as best he could. Wives worked at home or on their farms with their children, while husbands were often absent and did not have especially close relationships with their children (Embry, 1987).

Since the turn of the century, the public image of Mormons and family life has undergone an amazing transformation. While once considered the second half, with slavery, of "the twin pillars of barbarism," Latter-day Saints now often are looked up to as an ideal in promoting proper family values. Mormon feelings concerning family unity, love, and communication are well known and generally admired.

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Latter-day Saints are taught that marriage is a sacred duty and the only pathway to true happiness in this life and the next. Mormons believe that married life will continue beyond death for those who are married in one of the church's special temples. Such a ceremony is only permitted for the active and worthy members of the church. If they are living according to their religious beliefs, we would expect to find the marriage rates higher and the divorce rates lower among Mormons than among other groups.

In 1984, Heaton and Goodman published a study of marriage and divorce among Mormons for the L.D.S. church. Comparing a random selection of over 7,000 members of the church with other larger studies, results indicated that Mormons have a slightly higher tendency to marry than other groups.

Divorce rates also are lower for Latter-day Saints than they are for the other groups. Nevertheless, about one-third of L.D.S. marriage will end in divorce, which is very similar to the national average.
Table 1  Marriage Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Divorce Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though the tabulated rates may appear to be an artifact of the time period (1984-1985), the data substantiate this conclusion.

It is interesting that both Mormon and non-Mormon families had lower divorce rates per family than the national average, which places even more emphasis on the religious motivation of this tradition. Moreover, the Mormon family is one of the factors which work to maintain "eternal marriages."

Whether or not a Mormon eventually gets a divorce seems to be a function of how closely he or she follows the church's preference for religious endogamy in marriage. The divorce rate for Mormons who marry out of the faith is 38%. When they marry other church members but not in an L.D.S. temple, it is 20%. The divorce rate for temple marriages is only 6%, surely one of the lowest rates for any type of population group. This is not to say that all of the remaining 94% represent good marriages -- some of them are doubtless poor marriages staying together because of the church pressure that exists to maintain "eternal marriages."

Nonetheless, the statistics are impressive, and indicate serious effort on the part of many Latter-day Saints to uphold their church beliefs about marriage and divorce. In the United States, only about one-third of L.D.S. marriages take place in a temple, indicating that many members either do not take this goal seriously or do not meet the church's worthiness standards to qualify for it (Christensen & Cannon, 1964).
Table 3 Average Number of Children by Religious Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Average Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestants</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Protestants</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FERTILITY

Even though the Latter-day Saints have given up polygyny, they still hold large families to be an important goal. The preceding table from the Heaton and Goodman study (1984) indicates that Mormons do have higher fertility than other groups. This has been substantiated in other research as well (Thomas, 1983).

It is estimated that temple-marriage Mormon couples of today will have about four children on the average. Even today's church leaders are only averaging 4.33 children per family (Thornton, 1979). While these numbers are impressive when compared to other groups, it is clear that fertility has declined significantly across time for Mormons from the previously mentioned average of about 7 children per wife that existed at the turn of the century.

While L.D.S. church leaders have always been pronatal, a precise number of children has never been dictated, so the membership is permitted to decide what a "large family" means. It is clear from the following figure taken from the Spicer and Gustavus (1974) study that most Latter-day Saints are affected by the same social and economic forces that affect fertility among the rest of the U.S. population. It appears that Mormons look at how many children everyone else is having, and then they have about one more!

Early church leaders took strong stances against the use of birth control, but that position has progressively softened until now the membership is counseled to make its own decisions (Heaton & Calkins, 1983). Members have been encouraged to control fertility only for "unselfish reasons," such as the health of the mother, and to avoid the more worldly excuses, such as finances (Burr, Yorgason, & Baker, 1982). The most recent official pronouncement from the First Presidency of the church was sent to the local church leaders in April, 1969. It said in part:

Where husband and wife enjoy health and vigor and are free from impurities that would be entailed upon their posterity, it is contrary to the teachings of the Church artificially to curtail or prevent the birth of children. We believe that those who practice birth control will reap disappointment by and by.

However, Mormons are just as likely as the national population to use birth control to space their children, though they use it less frequently and start later (Heaton & Calkins, 1983).
Even though Utah leads the nation in having large families, this does not necessarily mean that Mormons are better than other groups in rearing and controlling those children. More ritalin, the drug used to calm hyperactive children, is received on a per capita basis in Utah than in any other state in the Union. Idaho, which also has a high Mormon population, ranks fifth (Jones, 1987). Either there is some connection between family size and the incidence of hyperactivity, or those with larger families are more likely to feel overwhelmed and seek medical solutions for normal childhood activity.

FAMILY PROBLEMS AND STRENGTHS

There are two current perceptions of Mormon families in general. One is that they are fairly traditional, in the sense of men having authority over women; and the other is that they are exemplars of healthy and happy family life.

Studies do indicate that Mormons tend to view family life through a conservative lens. Mormons are twice as likely as others to favor motherhood over outside employment for wives, and have less egalitarian ideas as to who should fill the roles of provider, housekeeper, and childrearer than do other religious groups (Heaton, 1988). However, their actual behavior is fairly egalitarian.
A documentary by a Salt Lake City television station (Mormon Women and Depression, 1979) found that while Mormon women are no more likely than the rest of the female population to become depressed, there are some stressors in the L.D.S. religion which help push some toward depressive episodes. L.D.S. wives often feel they should have large families and be "perfect" mothers and homemakers. They end up having too many small children at home while being over-involved in church activities, and not getting the help they need from a patriarchal husband. They then become depressed because they see themselves as failing in comparison to other, presumably better L.D.S. women who often are referred to in the culture as "Patti Perfect" or "Molly Mormon." These mythical women bake bread, quilt, raise nine ideal children, and are always happy.

Many Mormons, of course, do have strong and effective families. In one major study, Dyer and Kunz (1986) surveyed two hundred L.D.S. families that had been identified by their church leaders as successful and the best in their area. The results provide relief for those who suffer from the perfection syndrome in the church, because these families did have problems. However, they also had many strengths and coping strategies that other families might find useful (Swinton, 1987). Effective Mormon families tended to exhibit the following traits:

1. Church activity and gospel values were the foundation of their home life. For instance, 99% paid church tithing, and 93% always accepted calls to church positions. However, only 66% generally held a weekly Family Home Evening (a highly stressed church devotional) and only 29% always had daily prayer and scripture study.

2. Love and unity characterized these families. They had very high rates of doing things together, discussing problems, and showing affection.

3. They believed that good discipline comes from proper example and high expectations rather than a host of rules. In fact, the majority of these families had fewer than five rules, the most common of which were: treat every family member with respect; tell us where you are going and when you will be back; and be a person of integrity, dependability and honesty.

4. Finally, the importance of work is high-lighted in these families. Some household chores were expected, but most older children had jobs outside the home and only received small allowances.

Dyer and Kunz concluded that Mormons do not have a corner on the strong family market. The good families tend to share the same characteristics that have been found in strong families elsewhere (Stinnett & DeFraise, 1985). Except for church activity, it is difficult to conclude that religion is making a difference in the quality of Mormon family life.

CONCLUSION

In the early decades of church history, Mormon families exhibited the following characteristics: polygamy, high marriage and fertility rates, moderate divorce statistics, and family relationships that probably were similar in quality to that of the larger society. There was particular gospel emphasis on the practices of plural marriage and high fertility.

In the Mormon church of the 1980s, polygyny is not only gone, but is now grounds for excommunication from the church. While the L.D.S. fertility rate is still twice the national average, it is only half of what it was a century ago. Finally, even though many
Latter-day Saints believe that the quality of their family life is significantly better than that of non-church members, there is no evidence to support that contention.

Thomas (1983) and Heaton (1988) indicate that the Mormon family is distinct from those in the general society and that its members are remaining true to their particular beliefs concerning family life. I have to conclude, along with Bahr and Forste (1987) that in some key areas at least, Latter-day Saints are influenced by social pressures in ways that offset their religious beliefs and practices and lead to social accommodation.

REFERENCES


Mormon Women and Depression, Salt Lake City: KSL-TV 1979.


