

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: A POSTSCRIPT

Our three LDS sociologists—Harold T. Christensen, Wilford E. Smith, and Armand L. Mauss—have agreed to continue the dialogue begun in their articles.

Dialogue: Your studies have covered different facets of the same subject. Do you find your results to be in agreement?

Mauss: I see some interesting differences. In Wilford's studies, level of approval for various secular activities runs quite consistently ahead of levels of participation. In general, this is just the opposite of Harold's findings.

Smith: This difference, I think, is due to the phrasing of the questions. In my study, students were asked if they considered an act immoral regardless of the circumstances. My goal was to pin the students down to a specific and encompassing judgment. Some, however, would not be pinned down, and declined to judge an act in which they themselves did not participate.

Christensen: Wilford asked respondents if they thought behavior was "immoral," while I asked if they "approved" of it. Since disapproval may exist for reasons other than immorality—like fear of pregnancy—one would expect my "approval" percentages to be lower than his "moral" percentages. Wilford also reported on present participation, while I reported cumulative experience.

Mauss: The generalization still seems to be that Wilford's students are more likely to abstain than they are to disapprove, and that this tendency has increased recently. Might this not mean that the students simply have not had enough *opportunity* to indulge? Or, might they be less willing to admit misbehavior than to admit approval? Isn't it premature then to "deal us out of the sexual revolution?"

Christensen: When sexual attitudes are more liberal than behavior, it is usually because some respondents accept sex in the abstract, or later on—when they are older or closer to marriage—but not *now*. It is difficult to explain Wilford's findings. Maybe the more extensive strictures—like denying temple recommends, disfellowshipping and excommunicating—are controlling *behavior* more effectively than they are controlling *beliefs*.

Smith: The remarkable fact is that so many *are* willing to make all-inclusive condemnations of the acts in question.

Dialogue: Armand's data showed quite a difference between Mormon youth in Utah and those on the coast. Why is this?

Smith: The percentage of inactivity is probably higher away from Utah. I reached the conclusion in 1956, after interviewing several hundred families in Arizona, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake City, that Mormons who went to Church and were actively involved were the same—no matter where they lived.

Christensen: My subjective impression is that active Mormons outside of Utah are more—not less—orthodox and committed. I assumed this was because they are exposed to greater opposition and worldly influences which may serve to heighten commitment.

Mauss: Terms like “orthodox” and “committed” have to be defined in measurable terms. By measures such as reported belief, coastal Mormons are not less orthodox than those in Salt Lake City. Statistics on attendance, tithing, and home teaching suggest that they may even be more committed. The key is in what orthodoxy and commitment mean to different Mormons. It’s hard to generalize, but it does seem that coastal Mormons are more at ease with their commitment—though not complacent—more open to gentile friendships, more inclined to tolerate various kinds of non-conformity.

Dialogue: Is there any conflict between Harold’s claim that there seems to be a convergence between Mormon and non-Mormon attitudes and behavior, and Wilford’s finding that active Mormons are resisting the sexual revolution?

Christensen: I don’t believe there is any basic conflict between our findings on this point. The apparent discrepancy between our two studies may be accounted for by the proportions of active or inactive Mormons.

Dialogue: Why should the active Mormons be more successful now in withstanding the sexual revolution than in previous years?

Smith: Mormonism is becoming an ever stronger influence on its adherents. The Word of Wisdom is much more influential now than it was fifty years ago. It’s logical to expect other Church requirements to become more institutionalized. The moral revolution has made it easier for Mormons to be different—to develop their own ethnocentrism. In addition, the Church is becoming a more effective socializing agent—as in the youth programs—and it is becoming more conservative as its doctrines become more accepted.

Dialogue: How about future trends?

Mauss: My data certainly do not speak of “trends” unless we can argue—and I have—that Coastal City Saints may represent the “modal” Mormon of the future, at least in direction, if not in extent—if only because the modal Mormon of the next generation will not be living in the Mountain West.

If this is true, and if other factors remain constant, Mormons will gradually follow national trends toward greater permissiveness, but more slowly. If the policy of the Church hardens and becomes more punitive, we can expect an increase in excommunications to accompany the trend toward permissiveness, so that, *by definition* those remaining in the Church will comprise a less permissive population.

Christensen: It can surely be said that contemporary Mormonism is extremely vocal on the chastity theme, perhaps more so than at any other period in its history. As part of this new emphasis, excommunications for sexual reasons have been stepped up, and any open dealing with sexual issues—including such things as sex research, public sex education and even publications such as this special issue—have been subtly and not so subtly discouraged.

Mauss: I was interested in the comments toward the end of Harold's article about the apparent implications of Church policies on sex-related infractions, especially the evidence that the policies may have more of an alienating effect than a healing effect.

Christensen: I would have preferred a fuller discussion of these negative effects. They are relevant to the findings on both the chastity of active Mormons and the inactivity of the sexually experienced. And they must be studied carefully if we are to reduce the undesirable effects while still reinforcing chastity.

Mauss: There is surely something in our culture that overreacts to sexual misbehavior, or even intimations of it. One need only look at the relative apathy characterizing the official and modal Mormon reaction to murder and violence in the media, compared to the hard campaigning against pornography, prostitution and the like.

Of course, when asked, the good Mormon will say that it is better *not* to watch shoot-outs on the television, but he does little to keep his children from watching depictions of cold-blooded murder, presumably the cardinal sin. By contrast the sin "second only" to murder can scarcely be hinted at on the screen without bringing a condemnation. I find a paradox in that.

Christensen: I could not agree more. It *is* paradoxical that contemporary pronouncements seem to stress sexual sin more than the sins of violence.

Smith: When comparing the propensity of the Church to be more condemning of sexual deviation than of violence, I think that we must remember that these two differ greatly in risk. Sexual sin is so much more prevalent than child abuse, aggravated assault and murder—terrible as these things are. The Church *is* concerned about violence. Consider the stand on abortion. But it has to put the emphasis where it is most needed.

Dialogue: Many Mormons wonder why anyone would choose to study sex in the first place.

Smith: I began my studies because I wanted to test assumptions about "ethnocentric sub-cultural influences"—if you don't mind the jargon. Stories about the wayward children of bishops and other aberrant conduct among the "religious" intrigued me, and I wanted to know what the facts were. It was clear that sex was not a safe subject, but what subject is safe when emotional and moral judgements are involved? I also could see what my students were struggling with, and I thought I owed it to them to get them some of the facts of life!

Christensen: My point of view is that sex is a God-given aspect of life, and that the idea that “the glory of God is intelligence” applies as much to sexual matters as to other aspects of living and progressing. Intelligent and responsible behavior requires understanding. And understanding depends on inquiry and research—whether the issue is earning money, avoiding conflict, or living together in harmonious marriage.

Dialogue: What is the most important finding of your research?

Smith: The dramatic difference in both attitude and behavior between the active and inactive Mormon.

Christensen: Certainly that is one of the most important. And it has a happy ending. It points to a workable way out of the sexual dilemma. If chastity is the goal, stress religious values; if religious activity is the goal, strive for virtuous living.

Mauss: I think the studies also point up the important fact that punitive responses won’t serve our needs in the long run. We are going to have to get into the sex education business. The youth must be shown the positive outcomes of LDS values and standards. We must not be so wary of addressing this crucial subject. Ambivalence, we must remember, can be every bit as subversive of moral commitment as permissiveness, and far more conducive to pain, guilt and anxiety. If we really believe that sex is good, that it brings joy and happiness in the right context, we must start teaching unambiguously, with honesty and openness.

God is the Author of sexual or conjugal love, the same as He is of all other kinds of pure love. . . . God has ordained that pure and virtuous love should be incorporated with sexual love; that, by the combination of the two, permanent union in the marriage covenant may be formed, and the species be multiplied in righteousness.

Orson Pratt

The Seer, 1:154–5 (Oct. 1853)