

A Few Thoughts About Mormon Marriage

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Marriage (noun): That which turns love's speedboat into a barge.

Introduction

I recently attended a Mormon wedding reception. It was a typical Mormon reception in most ways. It was held in a cultural hall at a standard issue Mormon chapel and had a Spartan feel to it largely, I suspect, as a result of following the day's highlight at the Cardston Temple. The people in attendance were friendly and seemed happy; a feeling of good will and hopefulness filled the place. Most there were outfitted like Mormons on Sunday – men in suits and white shirts; women in their Sunday dresses. I enjoyed seeing a number of friends whom I seldom see these days. I respect and enjoy these people, despite the elephant in the corner.

The reception's unusual feature was a ring ceremony likely included because one of the newlyweds is a recent convert to Mormonism and had many non-LDS family members in attendance. I have known the bishop who officiated at the ring ceremony for many years. He is a well-educated, good-intentioned man. Both his description of Mormon marriage and words of advice to the young couple were Mormon classics, and caused me for the first time in a while to think about the basics of Mormon marriage. I deal with this at length in an essay at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/temple%20marriage.pdf> Here, I will look at this topic from a different angle and be more succinct.

I should also note that what I am about to say is full of generalizations. I do not mean to suggest that there is only one kind of Mormon marriage, or that all Mormon marriages suffer from the problems I am about to describe. However, anyone who would feel justified in saying that traditional Hindu marriages tend to differ from typical North American secular humanist marriages should not take issue with the essence of my analytical method. I attempt to use the same kind of social context analysis that would allow us to explain differences between Hindus and Americans to explain the difference between Mormons and other North Americans when it comes to behaviour around marriage. Many Mormons will be offended by my approach, and may attempt to dismiss it out of hand. I suggest that before doing so, they read the second to last section of this essay, titled "What Is Required To Understand The Mormon Experience?"

Two's Company; Three's A Crowd

My bishop friend, among other things, noted during the ring ceremony that Mormon marriage is like a triangle with the couple at the base and God at the apex. He used the analogy of a couple kneeling across the altar from each other in a Mormon temple with a beautiful chandelier above them. The chandelier, he said, represents God. Hence, the marriage is not a two party, two-dimensional, affair as are most "til death do you part" marriages. Rather, it is three party and three dimensional, and most importantly, eternal. This means that it is much stronger and better than marriages entered into without God's authority and participation. I wondered how that remark made the non-Mormons in attendance feel, for whose benefit the ceremony was being conducted.

In any event, I agree with the good bishop as to one thing – Mormon marriages are tri-partite affairs. The Mormon institution, presumed to represent God, is the third party. To use the temple or a chandelier in the temple as a symbol for this third party is appropriate, in my view. Both husband and wife are required to covenant absolute obedience to God and his presumed representatives on Earth – Mormon leaders. These promises are made in the Mormon “endowment” ceremony that is incorporated by reference into the temple marriage ceremony. The endowment ceremony is considered by Mormons to be “a gift of knowledge and power”. It is what marks spiritual maturity for a Mormon, and while it mostly repeats what Mormons learn at church each Sunday, it requires the initiate to make a variety of far reaching promises such as those just noted. No notice of this is given and the initiate is usually put on the spot in the company of a group of expectant friends or relatives who have already made the same promises looking on. It would take uncommon psychological strength to do anything but go along. And the psychological research indicates that making of this kind of promise will make obedience much more likely than would otherwise be the case.

The words used to extract the promise of obedience are as follows:

“... we should covenant to sacrifice all that we possess, even our own lives if necessary, in sustaining and defending the Kingdom of God ...”

and

“... you do consecrate yourselves, your time, talents, and everything with which the Lord has blessed you, or with which he may bless you, to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for the building up of the Kingdom of God on the earth and for the establishment of Zion.”

The “Kingdom of God” and “Zion” are both references to the Mormon Church. Mormons who go through the endowment ceremony are required to indicate that they “solemnly covenant” to accept these commitments by raising their hands, bowing their heads and saying “yes”. The words used in this regard are also worth repeating in full:

“All arise. Each of you bring your right arm to the square. [initiates do so]

You and each of you covenant and promise before God, angels, and these witnesses at this altar, that you do accept the Law of Consecration as contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, in that you do consecrate yourselves, your time, talents, and everything with which the Lord has blessed you, or with which he may bless you, to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for the building up of the Kingdom of God on the earth and for the establishment of Zion.

Each of you bow your head and say ‘yes.’” [initiates do so]

Mormons who have been through the temple are reminded of these covenants in many ways. In particular, Mormons are reminded that disobedience to temple covenants disqualifies them for what the temple promises – life after death in the “Celestial Kingdom” more wonderful than they can imagine. If they are worthy of the Celestial Kingdom, they will live forever in God’s presence with the faithful Mormon members of their families, endlessly procreating in the physical, sexual sense of that word while creating, organizing, populating and governing “worlds without end” as “kings and queens; priests and priestesses”.

I note as an aside the way in which Mormons are encouraged by their beliefs to bargain the present for what the far distant, likely non-existent, Celestial Kingdom offers. For example, it should be expected that married Mormon sex life would be less than stellar given the body shame Mormon's are taught; endless pregnancies in many cases; the time and financial demands of large families; heavy Mormon community responsibilities; etc. But don't worry about that; endure to the end and there will be sex forever in the Celestial Kingdom.

"Queens"; "Priestesses"? What is that about? Well, in the Celestial Kingdom women in some hard to understand way will finally get the real authority they are not permitted to have on Earth. So don't worry about not having authority now. And time will no longer exist in the Celestial Kingdom, so don't worry about being run off your feet now. And if you are not taking care of yourself as you should, or are depressed, or are physically ill, the Celestial Kingdom will take care of that too. It will be a world of physical and spiritual perfection, all you have to do is ... endure to the end ... of this life.

Fear and Desire

Fear and desire are two sides of the same coin. The Celestial Kingdom concept harnesses both of them to motivate a great deal of Mormon behavior. If Mormons stray too far from the path of obedience to Mormon authority, they will be shut out of the Celestial Kingdom. The stronger the belief in the Celestial Kingdom, the more fear will result from the possibility that one might not have been obedient enough to god's commandments (as communicated and interpreted by Mormon leaders) to make it there. Hence, a great deal of Mormon effort throughout life is dedicated toward qualifying for the Celestial Kingdom by obeying Church authority.

This means that in a marriage between faithful Mormons, if one falters in obedience the other may with justification point to their marriage covenant of faithfulness to Mormon authority and cry foul. That is the one of the most important parts of the brief Mormon temple marriage ceremony. Hence, the institution of marriage itself becomes a primary Mormon defence against the questioning of Mormon belief.

No wonder young Mormons are encouraged in many ways to marry as soon as possible and to immediately start their families. Making sex illicit until marriage is enough to do the job in most cases. Explicitly stigmatizing men in particular who make it to age 25 without marring is also helpful, not to mention how women who are not married well before then are made to feel. And the deeper the family roots go down through the mutual dependence of spouses on each other as children arrive, debt is incurred to purchase cars and houses, etc. the better the marriage acts as a defence against any information that might cause the questioning of Mormon beliefs.

And in an odd way, Mormons who are not too wealthy are the better followers because wealth weakens the dependence of the spouses on each other and both of them on their family, employers, and local community. This is a subtle point, because Mormon leaders tend to be wealthy and to say that Mormonism discourages wealth is inaccurate. On the contrary, Mormonism encourages wealth by equating it with God's blessing, as long as the wealthy person is also obedient to God (that is, Mormon authority). But the result of this is that many Mormons struggle financially while Mormonism has no trouble finding positions of authority for a large percentage of its small percentage of wealthy members.

So, Mormonism encourages early marriage and pregnancy, the payment of tithing, and a “wealth equates with God’s blessings” and “build it and they will come – fake it til you make it” mentality. This seems to contribute to Utah’s nation leading personal bankruptcy statistics and keeps many Mormons on the financial edge. At the same time Mormon leaders regularly wring their hands while speaking eloquently about the importance of frugality and “living within our means”. There is immense irony in this. Mormon leaders are in some ways like a coach who has trained his players to play so aggressively that many other teams think they are dirty, and then goes ballistic when they foul and are heavily penalized.

Mormon financial and emotional problems (see Utah’s nation leading anti-depressant consumption and spousal abuse stats as well) are in my view related to the Mormon idea that there is one “eternal” way to live and be – the Mormon way. As currently interpreted by Mormon leaders, this is the all-American way circa 1960. The family is large. Mom stays at home. Dad is financially successful and a Mormon leader. The kids are preppy and well-behaved.

This picture runs counter to the cultural mainstream in countless ways, and hence produces many tensions within Mormon families and marriages, thus contributing to the poor statistics just noted. That is, many people who are not suited for the Mormon life as it is described above try to make themselves fit into it. They overwork; overspend; over-commit to Mormon volunteer work; make unreasonable behavioural demands on their teenagers; and as a result suffer immensely. They are encouraged by Mormonism directly in some cases and indirectly in others to engage in these behaviours. And since a Mormon life is a happy life, they must find ways to rationalize the belief that they are happy in the midst of all this. “Where’s my Prozac!?!”

Talk about enduring to the end.

The Man’s On Top

A number of the bishop’s and MC’s jokes at the wedding reception made the implicit Mormon relationship between man and woman clear – the man is an often rough gem who acts like he is in control while the woman puts up with him and over the long haul, with much trial and tribulation, gets the job done. This reminded me of the relevant portions of the Mormon marriage ceremony. After a few brief words of advice respecting married life, the man performing the marriage would say to the groom:

“Brother _____, do you take Sister _____ by the right hand and receive her unto yourself to be your lawful and wedded wife for time and all eternity, with a covenant and promise that you will observe and keep all the laws, rites, and ordinances pertaining to this Holy Order of Matrimony in the New and Everlasting Covenant, and this you do in the presence of God, angels, and these witnesses of your own free will and choice?”

The groom then says, "yes". The officiator then turns to the bride and says:

“Sister _____ do you take brother _____ by the right hand and give yourself to him to be his lawful and wedded wife, and for him to be your lawful and wedded husband, for time and all eternity, with a covenant and promise that you will observe and keep all the laws, rites and ordinances pertaining to this Holy Order of Matrimony in the New and Everlasting Covenant, and this you do in the presence of God, angels, and these witnesses of your own free will and choice?”

The "Holy Order or Matrimony" and the "New and Everlasting Covenant" are references to the endowment, where the heavy lifting with respect to Mormon marriage is done as already noted. The New and Everlasting Covenant in the endowment means, among other things, polygamy. Mormons are taught that polygamy will be the law of the Celestial Kingdom, and by marrying in a Mormon temple the couple is presumed to have agreed to this, though few understand the implications of the ceremony in this regard.

The officiator then says:

“By virtue of the Holy Priesthood and the authority vested in me, I pronounce you _____, and _____, legally and lawfully husband and wife for time and all eternity, and I seal upon you the blessings of the holy resurrection with power to come forth in the morning of the first resurrection clothed in glory, immortality and eternal lives, and I seal upon you the blessings of kingdoms, thrones, principalities, powers, dominions and exaltations, with all the blessings of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and say unto you: be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth that you may have joy and rejoicing in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All these blessings, together with all the blessings appertaining unto the New and Everlasting Covenant, I seal upon you by virtue of the Holy Priesthood, through your faithfulness, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.”

That is the entirety of the official part of the ceremony, and there is very little window dressing permitted around it.

The only substantive difference between the two paragraphs above is that the groom "receives" the bride, and the bride "gives herself" to the groom. The groom does not "give himself" to the bride. This reflects Mormonism's patriarchal orientation. The man is in charge. The woman has "given" herself to the man. This language also harkens back to the day when the female of the species was a type of property, to be transferred by her father to her husband whom she would then serve for the remainder of her life. It is also consistent with the manner in which men and woman promise obedience during the endowment. The men are required to obey god. The women, in the current ceremony, are required to promise to obey god and:

“... to hearken to the counsel of her husband, as her husband hearkens unto the counsel of [god] ...”

Until the last round of changes to the ceremony were made a few years ago, this passage used to say that the women would,

“... obey the law of their husbands and abide by his counsel in righteousness ...”

Again, the patriarchal orientation of the ceremony is visible, as are the changes that are slowly being made to bring it into line with early 20th century (if not 21st) sensibilities.

Is The Mormon Marriage Ceremony About Love?

Note that during the Mormon marriage ceremony itself says nothing about the love the couple has for each other; nothing about their commitment to each other; and nothing about their hopes, dreams, the challenges they may face, etc. The ceremony's emphasis is twofold: first on

the eternal nature of the covenant made, and second, through the reference to the New and Everlasting Covenant, on obedience to the Mormon Church.

Compare this to a typical Anglican ceremony, which most Mormons I know consider to be a terminally unimaginative religion to the extent they think about it all. The Anglican ceremony notes that marriage,

“... was ordained for the mutual companionship, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”

The core of the Anglican covenant is to love your spouse. It includes the following language:

...will you have ___ as your wife/husband, to live together, as God has ordained, in the holy state of matrimony? Will you love her/him, cherish her/him, honour and protect her/him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her/him, as long as you both shall live?

Note that this does not say that the marriage ends at death. Rather, it emphasizes the energy with which we should love our spouses as long as we are alive. It limits the marital promise to that which can be reasonably known – this life – and remains silent as to what comes after that.

And the Anglican ceremony is crowned with this marvellous phrase:

With this ring I wed you, with my body I worship you; with all that I am and all that I have I honour you: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This, in my view, is uplifting, inspiring, encouraging – all that the guiding principle of marriage should be. I cannot think of a better concept to use at the apex of the marriage ceremony, although I would not dress it up with theistic language were I using it.

The comparison between the Anglican and Mormon marriage ceremonies bring an essential aspect of Mormon marriage into focus yet again. The Anglican ceremony really is about the couple and their marriage. God and the social context are mentioned, but play a limited role. The Mormon marriage, however, has God (played by the Mormon institution) in a leading role. Hence the ceremony's emphasis is on what happens after death and by implication, the importance of obedience to Mormon authority.

In addition, the Mormon ceremony packs huge amounts of baggage by being tied to the Mormon endowment where the highest promises of obedience are made. So if you love a faithful Mormon, or a Mormon who can't imagine getting married anywhere but in the temple because that is how it is done in her family, you are in a tight spot. The entry price is enormous, and most importantly, there is no way to know what it is until years after the ceremony.

That is, when a young Mormon makes the promises in the temple, she has no idea what kind of obedience may be required of her by Mormon leaders. And she does not understand the arcane language of the ceremony itself. “New and Everlasting Covenant”? Who would guess that this means a promise to live the law of polygamy if and when Mormon leaders ever bring it back, and after death. And it is now at least theoretically possibility that it could be brought back since it is legal in many places, like Canada, and may soon be in the US as a result of constitutional law developments related to gay marriage.

In a host of ways, the promises made by Mormon initiates in Mormon temples are inappropriate. The initiates lack understanding of what they are promising, cannot ask meaningful questions and are surrounded by their loved ones when they are asked to make these promises. Promises made without reasonable knowledge of their consequences (“I did not promise to live the law of polygamy!) and extracted under circumstances amounting to duress are in my view not morally binding. Our legal system voids contracts (legally enforceable promises) in similar circumstances for the same reason – the bargain or promise made was not fair; it was extracted in way designed by one party to take advantage of another.

One might ask why a ceremony would be constructed in this fashion. It would seem that if you want people to obey their promises, it would be best to make sure they understand and really commit. In fact, that is often not the case. The Mormon temple ceremony is a classic initiation rite in many ways, as indicated at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/temple%20marriage.pdf> at page 20. By extracting commitment as it does, it binds Mormons to the Mormon institution in ways that have been used by social groups from time immemorial. And it works. So Mormons can be counted on to continue to use it until they are so embarrassed by it, and its mechanisms become so well known, that it begins to do Mormonism more harm than good. This essay is a small step in that direction.

Mormonism Takes Undue Credit

Back to the reception. The bride and groom were both radiant and effusive in their assessment of their experience at the temple and the wonderful day they had just enjoyed. The Cardston Temple is located in the foothills of Canada’s Rocky Mountains, and offers spectacular views from the highest hill in a down-on-its-luck small town. The marriage occurred on an Indian summer day in October. My wife and I were married on a near identical day at the same time of year just over 25 years ago, and probably looked and sounded at that time a lot like the young couple whose life together we were celebrating at the reception. I have known the groom since he was a baby, and teared up a little at some of my memories of him and his family as the evening progressed, as well as while writing this.

“Isn’t that nice”, I thought to myself after listening to the bride and groom gush over how wonderful the temple was. “Once again, the third party to the relationship has taken most of the credit for what is a wondrous and universal human experience – the intertwining of two lives through marriage. Most couples are euphoric on their wedding day. Their families usually are too. So here we have a bunch of people who have been helped along toward being conditioned as surely as Pavlov’s dog to feel good about Mormonism whenever they think about this wedding day.” I know the groom’s unorthodox Mormon history, and this is the kind of experience that will likely keep him headed in the “right” direction from a Mormon perspective for a while at least, and perhaps one thing (including marriage to a faithful Mormon) will lead to another and he will become a lifer.

Temple Building As An Investment Strategy

“What is the present value of the tithing these young people can be reasonably expected to pay?” I wondered. “Helluva”, I thought as I roughed out the number in my head and worked out more or less how many temple marriages that are done in a typical Mormon temple each year. “No wonder they keep building temples even though not many people use them for proxy work-for-the-dead.”

And then the penny dropped. “What about the present value of all the tithing paid by family members, and particularly parents and grandparents, who want to attend the temple to be with their kids and grandkids when they are married? And the bigger the Mormon family the longer this game keeps going.” The huge number I had calculated on the basis of the brides and grooms on their own rocketed into the stratosphere. “These temples are the best investment imaginable! And to think that N. Eldon Tanner, from my home town, was the financial genius likely responsible for all of this ...”

Tanner was a respected businessman (he built the “TransCanada” pipeline system) and politician in my home Canadian province of Alberta before being called to full-time Mormon leadership service, and is generally credited with taking Mormondom “corporate”. I had thought before about the connection between temple marriage attendance requirements and LDS revenues, but had never worked through the numbers in the clear fashion I just had.

Divorce

On the way home my wife and I talked about our observations. We both enjoyed the company of old friends and agreed that we should make more of an effort to stay in touch with them. Conversation turned to what makes marriages happy, and why in my view so many Mormon marriages under-perform in that regard.

We started out talking about something I read a long time ago, and ran across again recently that has to do with why people divorce – an appropriate topic of conversation on the way home from a wedding reception. One stream of research reports that as people move from marriage number one, to two or three, that their expectations decline. A high percentage of people who divorce and remarry report that the problems in their first marriage followed them to their second or third, and that they eventually accustomed themselves to these. This would suggest that personal fulfillment through marriage is so elusive that we should not bother to chase it.

However, another fascinating set of studies show how predictable divorce is on the basis of a mere 30 minutes of video footage of a couple talking about routine matters. Each bite of their communication is determined to be either positive or negative using sophisticated criteria developed by Dr. John Gottman (see <http://www.gottman.com/research/abstracts/section.php?id=10>), on the basis of which Gottman has a prediction rate of 95% as to which couples will be married for a certain period of time after the interview. Using the first 15 minutes of the interview, his batting average drops to 90%.

The key to Gottman’s formula is that positive to negative communication (as he defines both) must be better than 5:1 for a marriage to have a good long-term survival prospect. And most important of all is the degree to which what he calls “contempt” is displayed. This is a hierarchical behavior – verbal or non-verbal communication that shows that one spouse considers him or herself to be above the other. That is, it is not necessary that what we would usually think of as contempt be shown. Accordingly to Gottman, marriages can successfully deal with much more anger, deception and other obviously toxic behavior that a little polite indication of “who’s who”. If much of that is detectible, the marriage probably has a short life expectancy.

This line of research persuasively questions basic notions about what causes marital dysfunction and how hard it is to predict and in some cases correct, either within a marriage or by choosing a new life partner. And in particular, it points out that the problems people will tell

us broke up their marriage are often red herrings. Gottman lucidly explains that we have problems, and more importantly solutions, of which we are unaware.

After kicking this around with my wife for a few minutes, I wondered out loud whether Mormon marriages under-performed because Mormons are simply prepared to settle for less from a personal point of view as a result of that important third party in their marriage, the Mormon institution. That is, Mormon marriages with which I am familiar are often hierarchical in orientation, and so accordingly to Gottman should be more vulnerable to divorce. However, Mormon marriages end in divorce a little less frequently than the North American average. However, absence of divorce is a poor measure of marital quality. There are not many divorces among the Older Order Amish or traditional Hindus, but few of us aspire to their kind of marriage.

This made me think again of “enduring to the end?”, the phrase that comes up in both the Mormon temple ceremonies and Mormon discourse with discouraging frequency. You can even get “endure to the end” jewellery that is made for Mormons (see <http://www.1on1.net/1valor/catalog1/temple-ornaments.htm>). For many Mormons, I suggested, life in general and marriage in particular becomes an exercise in enduring to the end in order to have the blessings promised by the Mormon institution. Mormons, of course, would not be able to admit this. Most people who study human interaction, such as John Gottman, do not pay as much attention to what people say as how they say it and what they do.

The fact of the matter with regard to Mormon marriage is that Mormons are kept so busy attending to the needs of the third party in their marriage – the Mormon institution – that their marital relationship itself does not need to be much to survive. In this regard, Mormon marriage in some ways more resembles marriage in traditional societies than North America.

Marriage In Traditional Societies v. Modern Societies

There is a huge difference between marriage in traditional societies and modern democracies. The notion of “romantic” love is a recent invention to which many traditional societies still do not subscribe. Hence, in traditional societies such as the Hindu and Muslim many marriages are either entirely or largely arranged, and the expectation is that the couple will form a family that will be a social building block, and that they will make it work. Individual self-fulfilment or happiness is not a primary marital objective, and divorce is not an option. That is, there is a third party to the marital relationship – the social group – and its interests are more important than the other two parties’. Sound familiar?

There is a high correlation between this kind of arrangement and bad societal deals for women in general, since the men often find a way to make things work from their point of view through having affairs, and running the social and financial show while the women remain behind the scenes in a carefully limited world and few rights. The men, after all, are usually the ones in charge of the social group and so tend to ameliorate to a degree how it impacts their role in the marriage by having a greater influence over how the social group itself functions.

In western democracies, women have more rights and the idea that marriage is about romantic love and self-fulfilment is generally accepted. This means that divorce is accepted as a necessary evil. I would say, however, that the frequency of divorce is the natural consequence of the western realization that individual freedoms of many kinds, including those related for forming and dissolving marriages, can be granted without causing the kind of chaos that is still used to justify much of the social control that is exercised by traditional societies over their

members. And people are now prepared to exercise this freedom more than ever. This wind brings both good and ill.

Another way to understand the marital difference between traditional and modern societies is to think about expectations. It is ancient wisdom that much of our unhappiness results from differences between our expectations and reality. The further reality falls short of expectations, the more stressed and unhappy we tend to be. Hence, people with low expectations tend to be more satisfied with life than those with high expectations. This is one of the less than stellar outcomes of some aspects of Buddhist philosophy. If you expect and want nothing, you will not be disappointed. But I digress.

Expectations fundamentally affect the factors used to choose marriage partners. In traditional societies where marriages are arranged, the focus is on what will build a strong society. Hence, inter-family relationships and social stability of various types are of primary importance and if the happiness of the couple is considered, it is a minor factor. On the other hand, where personal happiness is the primary marriage objective that is where emphasis is placed. Countless books and magazine articles have been written to help the western public understand how this works. New breeds of the traditional matchmaker are now regularly paid large fees to help potential mates understand their psychology and the kind of person who will likely complement them. Sophisticated markets of various kinds now function where people who are looking for relationships can digest information about possible mates and make dating choices. People typically wait much longer to marry than in traditional societies, and the research indicates that the older a couple are when they marry the more likely the marriage is to last and flourish within the Western paradigm. Recent research also indicates that the quality of life of a couple's children tends to increase if the mother's age when she has her first child is more than 30 years, thus indicating on average a better-educated, more prepared mother whose attention will be lavished on fewer children (see <http://www.freakonomics.com/>)

In traditional societies less is expected of marriage from a personal point of view in order to make room for the social group's larger marital role. Hence, husbands and wives are routinely satisfied with situations that would be intolerable for most people in the West. And in the West, for the most part, the expectations are higher, dissatisfaction is more common and so is divorce as individuals try to find a match that works for them. The idea of "starter marriages" is gaining currency – a marriage that like a small first home is used to get one's toe in the water and find out what is important before moving on to something expected to be more permanent.

How Does Mormon Marriage Stack Up?

So, I wondered, perhaps we can think of marriage in some sense as being on a scale of one to ten in terms of personal expectations of happiness and self-fulfilment. Marriages within the most traditional societies still encourage very low personal expectations in this regard, and so will be put at one. And at ten we will put the most individualistic of the western tendencies to look for self-fulfilment through personal relationships of a marital type. And between them we can plot all other marriages. In that case, where would Mormon marriages fall?

After some discussion, my wife and I agreed that Mormon marriage is closer to one than ten. My best guess was around three. More importantly, this line of thought raises some interesting ideas about Mormon marriage in light of what I wrote above.

Mormonism is a relatively traditional culture in the Western context that places social controls above individual rights far more than the majority of the democratic western culture within which

Mormonism exists. Hence, in many ways Mormons are torn between what they are taught by their dominant Mormon sub-culture and the messages they receive from the broader culture to which they are also exposed. The Hutterites, Amish, FLDS, some Hindus and Muslims and other traditional cultures that exist in the West deal with this by isolating themselves in large measure. Mormonism did that for a long time in Utah, but eventually the Mormon mainstream decided to integrate with the secular forces that moved into the area by being “in” but not “of the world”. Mormon mental isolation is now accomplished to a degree by Mormon leaders telling Mormons to avoid information that threatens their belief, and to allow emotional experiences (“warm feelings in the heart”) to override information collected through rational means. That is, “I felt really good at the Temple, therefore Mormonism must be true despite what I know about Joseph Smith’s deceptive tendencies ...”.

This business of being in but not of the world is tricky, and in many cases merely means that Mormons adopt social trends a few decades or generations after the broader culture does. The various brands of fundamentalist Mormons, on the other hand, have retreated from modernity and with justification accuse their mainstream cousins of having been “corrupted” by secular forces.

By attempting to both function as an integrated part of modern society and retain tradition values, Mormonism places a heavy psychological burden on its faithful. For example, young Mormons like my friends whose reception we attended carry both the Mormon expectation that marriages will be made to work no matter what – marriage is “eternal” – and the western secular notion of romantic, self-fulfilling love. Hence, they have high expectations with regard to the personal satisfaction they will receive from marriage while at the same time trying to meet their obligations to that important third party to the marriage. That would be tough to do in the best of circumstances. But are they in the best of circumstances? For starters, have they gone about choosing their marriage partners, and will they likely live, so as to make those expectations realistic?

Most young Mormons who marry are attracted to each other. But how hard is that bar to clear? The mere fact that they cannot satisfy themselves sexually prior to marriage without experiencing a great deal of guilt makes it likely that their hormones will be screaming for them to find an acceptable mate.

A big problem for Mormon marriages in my experience is that young Mormon couples who take their religion seriously place a lot of emphasis on how likely it is that a potential mate will help them get to the Celestial Kingdom. Questions like, “What kind of a mother/father is she/he likely to be?”; “How faithful to the Church is she/he likely to be?”; “Does she/he have the Spirit with her/him?”; “Does She/he study the scriptures and pray each day?”; tend to play a dominant important role in the decision-making process after the initial, and easy to satisfy, “Does he/she turn me on?” test is unconsciously passed.

The factors I just noted are much more relevant to the marriage making concept in a traditional society than in the contemporary western world because they focus on the ability of the relationship to accomplish societal goals within a particular context (the Mormon social group) instead of how well the couple gets along; the extent to which their interests overlap; how they will spend years enjoying themselves alone together before starting a family and after the children leave; how they will provide for themselves; etc. The faithful Mormon is taught that if she has sufficient faith to be obedient to Mormon authority God will take care of the rest, so don’t worry about it too much. Many young Mormons rely on this fantasy to their detriment.

And how do young married Mormons tend to behave once married? First, they tend to be very young, and so the research indicates that the deck is stacked against them because they have not finished developing (the brain does not finish the basics until the mid-20s in most cases), don't know themselves well yet and are not established in the way that tends to make for successful marriages. If they are like most young Mormon couples, they will start their family quickly and so be on the wrong side of the research that indicates that the children of mothers who begin their maternal career after age 30 do better than others. They are burdened with the patriarchal notions noted above, and the wife in particular is likely to have a hard time ignoring the voices around her that empower women thus creating tension in the marriage and/or self esteem problems for her. This in many Mormon marriages encourages the kind of hierarchical communication that Gottman says breeds divorce. Young Mormon couples are often called upon to give heavily to their church community in terms of time in ways that will prevent them from spending time together. They are required to pay tithing. They go from two incomes to one as children begin to arrive, and yet have both the Mormon ideal of the financially comfortable, righteous family and their non-Mormon (mostly two income) peers to contend with. This often results in husbands who had demanding jobs, or more than one job, again limiting the amount of time this "family first" couple will spend together. Frequent pregnancies often take a toll on both the mother's health and the marital relationship.

In short, there are lots of reasons for which to expect that Mormon marriages in Western society will be under significant pressure. As noted above, the personal bankruptcy, anti-depressant use and other troubling statistics from Utah (70% Mormon and hence a reasonable proxy for Mormonism), are not surprising in this context. But as also noted above, the Mormon divorce rate is close to the North American norm.

This all leads me to believe that Mormon marriages, on average, tend to survive more because of lower expectations and determination to "make it work" somehow than because they are well chosen and have been properly nurtured. In this regard, Mormon marriages are more like those of traditional societies than most of those in the democratic west – the presence of the third party absorbs a lot of the couple's attention and justifies a different kind of relationship. And the tension between this reality and the romantic expectations that North American couples tend to have produces psychological problems within many Mormon families.

As noted above, anyone who asks a married Mormon if he is happy in his marriage will probably hear that he is. This is a requirement of Mormon belief – that you be happy and that your marriage be happy. To admit that this was not the case would be itself evidence that things were likely not right in your life. And many Mormon, including most of the friends with whom we spent some pleasant time last night, give the appearance of having well-adjusted, compatible marriages. I do not suggest that they, in particular, have anything other than that.

What Is Required To Understand The Mormon Experience?

The way in which the ideas that control our ability to understand ourselves and those around us is a source of continuing fascination for me. In that regard, I have been reading lately more along the cognitive dissonance, cognitive bias and heuristics line (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_bias; http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/gigerenzer03/gigerenzer_index.html). That is, humans consistently misperceive reality on the one hand (cognitive dissonance, bias etc.), and on the other make incredibly efficient decisions on the basis of scant information (heuristics). These

behaviours show up consistently relative to certain types of phenomena. Both are nicely explained on the basis of their survival value within evolutionary theory. Heuristics of the type I am speaking, for example, are usually related to the most basic elements of getting along physically (hitting moving objects; catching moving objects; etc.) and socially (judging trustworthiness; etc.). And cognitive dissonance, bias etc. are mostly related to going along with the dominant social forces in our environment which it is reasonable to assume had a high survival value when our biology was developing.

In my view a strong case can be made that the instinct to go along with the group that truncates our perception of evidence that would likely disconfirm the group's foundational ideas is now profoundly maladaptive. We are not as dependant on the group as we once were, and yet our instincts blind us to much data so that we will not fall into conflict with our group. And to make matters worse, the mental mechanisms that do this are largely based in fear and the adrenalin response that it causes. This makes aggressive, tribal behaviour regrettably likely. The Mormon story is full of this.

So contrary to Mormon belief, if you want to understand Mormonism or any aspect of it such as Mormon marriage, you've got to do much more than ask a Mormon or have lived a Mormon life. The Mormon point of view (as is the case with any culture specific viewpoint) is far too narrow to grasp its own nature and hence identify its weaknesses. What we need is access to the kind of data John Gottman collects – data that penetrates the facades we all put up and shows the stresses underlying ordinary communication. We need to understand a broad base of other cultures and behaviours as they really are instead of as Mormonism tells us they are. And finally, we then need to understand the base of values and expectation on which Mormon and other cultural behaviour is built. Until we understand the background against which Mormonism is set, we cannot understand it. And if the point of the exercise is to decide how “Mormon” one wishes to continue to be, an understanding of other value systems and the outcomes they are likely to deliver is of course crucial.

In short, in order to assess the validity of fundamental Mormon values (like “the Celestial Kingdom is real and one must be obedient to Mormon authority to go there”), one must somehow get outside of Mormonism – find a perspective that is both broader than Mormonism, and within which Mormonism can be seen relative to the largely reality of which it is but a miniscule part. And we must acknowledge that this is as difficult for faithful Mormons as it is easy for most Westerners who approach Mormonism from the “outside”.

Conclusion

Oh, I almost forgot a couple of other wedding reception highlights.

During his toast to the bride, the groom first said that she was the most important thing in his life, “except for his family ...”. After some laughter and an embarrassed silence, he said, “Let me start over ...” and affirmed that she was “the” most important thing in his life, period. This probable slip of the tongue nonetheless nicely illustrates Mormonism’s ambivalence with regard to the importance of personal relationships. They are put on pedestals on the one hand (“eternal” marriage), and yet play a clear second fiddle once one looks closely.

And at the conclusion of the reception’s program there was the typical computer generated slide show of the couple’s lives from babyhood through the cute kid, ugly duckling and blossoming swan stages. Throughout, the bride’s name appeared with her pictures in the upper left hand corner of the screen, and the groom’s name appeared in the lower right hand corner with his. At

the conclusion of the slide show, in a nice musical crescendo, a picture of the Mormon temple appeared on the screen and the two names began to move toward each other and obvious union at mid-screen. "Nice touch", I thought. Then, to my amazement, the names kept moving after coming together until the groom's name was for the first during the presentation on top of the bride's.

Freud would have a field day with both of these.