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Demographics of the Contemporary Mormon Family

Tim B. Heaton

CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF MORMON FAMILIES are consistent with the social and theological emphasis the LDS Church places on family life. For example, in 1987 I wrote about the four C's of the Mormon family: Chastity (less sex outside of marriage); Children (above average family size); Conjuality (stronger preference for marriage); and Chauvinism (the belief that men should have authority in family decision making and that traditional gender roles are best).

A more recent analysis of data from a 1987 national study confirms these differences but suggests that many other aspects of Mormon family life may not be very different from the national pattern (Heaton, Goodman, and Holman 1989). Mormon family violence, time spent with children, relationships with relatives, family stress, division of household tasks, marital satisfaction, evaluation of family roles, and frequency of sexual intercourse appear to be comparable to the national average. It appears that Mormons deviate from national norms in distinctive ways.

Two concerns motivate the analysis presented here. First, is the data used to compare Mormons with other groups really comparable? Most comparisons are based either on a single study that uses only a very small sample of Mormons, or on studies that vary in sampling, question wording, and data gathering procedures. For example, in 1985 Kristen Goodman and I compared Church members in a Church-

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sponsored study (based on mail surveys supplemented with information from membership records, interviews with bishops, and telephone interviews with Mormons) included in a national sample based on personal interviews. Church-sponsored studies might not be very effective in locating alienated or less active members of the Church, and Church auspices may bias response rates. On the other hand, the small number of Mormons generally found in national studies are insufficient samples for detailed analysis and do not yield reliable population estimates.

The second concern emerges from the dramatic changes in family life that have occurred in the last few decades. Cohabitation, premarital sex, divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and delayed marriage have altered the family life course of recent generations beyond anything we would have predicted a few decades ago. Are these changes as evident in the Mormon family as they are nationally? Or are Mormons maintaining their distinctiveness? Will the Mormon family of a permanently married couple, a traditional housewife, and many children go the way of polygamy? Because family change has been so dramatic, current data are imperative.

In an attempt to assess contemporary family patterns, I have combined three national surveys taken in the 1980s to create data that are relatively current and that also include enough Mormons for separate analysis. The three surveys are the 1982 and 1988 rounds of the National Survey of Family Growth (1982–88) and the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households (1988). Each of these surveys involved face-to-face interviews and used national probability samples. The National Survey of Family Growth included females aged fourteen through forty-four, and the National Survey of Families and Households included persons aged eighteen and over. Combining these sources is not wholly satisfactory; differences in methodology and question wording occur across the three surveys. However, because any differences across surveys are evident in each of the groups considered, we will assume that comparisons between Mormons and other groups are valid. And since two of the national surveys were restricted to women, this analysis will report only on women. Although demographic surveys often focus on women because they give more accurate information on dates of births, marriage, and marriage termination, it is plausible that male comparisons would yield similar results because reported family behaviors include each partner.

Combining several surveys has a further advantage: it yields sufficient sample sizes to compare other, more detailed religious groups. Past research has often presented only Catholic-Protestant differences, masking important distinctions within the Protestant category. In addi-

tion, racial and ethnic variations within religious categories are also substantial. Thus, our analysis includes seventeen ethno-religious groups. Together these groups account for over 90 percent of the respondents in the three surveys. The Mormon category includes only white non-Hispanics (this constitutes 86 percent of Mormon respondents) to make it racially comparable to white Protestant groups. Using these newly aligned categories, we were able to compare three general areas of family-demographic behavior.

The first area is sexual behavior. Specifically, the surveys include information on premarital sex, age at first sexual intercourse, and cohabitation. Previous studies have indicated that Mormons are less involved in nonmarital sex, which is consistent with the Church's teaching that sexual transgressions are very serious sins. Thus, we would expect to find a less than average incidence of premarital sex and cohabitation among Mormons. A pattern of early family formation, however, may result in younger age at first intercourse.

The second area of focus is marital behavior. This includes the percentage of respondents who are married, age at first marriage, and marital stability. The Latter-day Saint emphasis on marriage has been evident in previous research. A higher proportion of respondents are married, they marry at younger ages, and report greater marital stability. This stability finding has been challenged, however; the Utah divorce rate is above the national average (Goodman and Heaton 1986).

The third focus is on childbearing. This includes the mother's age at the birth of her first child, premarital birth, and number of children desired. Although religious group differences in current family size correspond closely with differences in desired family size, desired family size is used because many families are not yet complete. On the basis of the Church's stand against premarital sex and the Mormon tendency to marry young, we might predict that Mormon women are less likely to give birth premaritally, even though a mother might be comparatively young at the birth of her first child. Perhaps the most salient demographic feature of the Mormon family has been its size. We expect to find the same tendency toward larger families in these data.

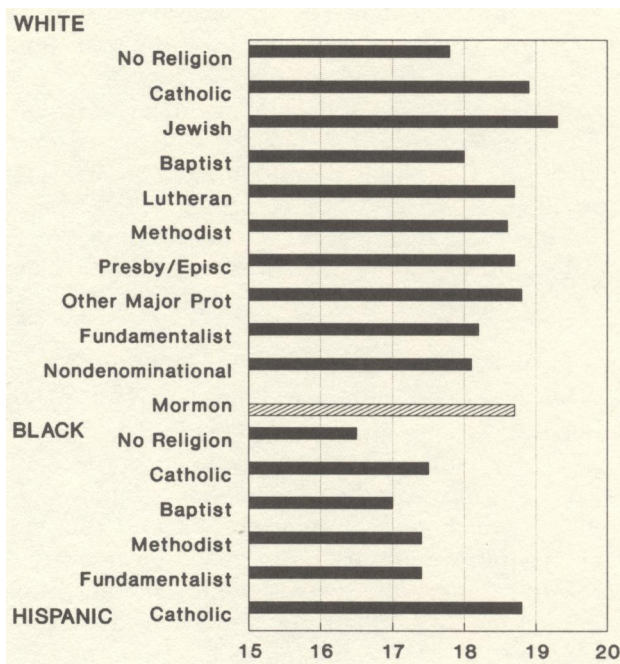
When we find Mormon difference, we also need to ask why the difference and whether the difference has been increasing or decreasing. I will make a very modest attempt in this study to compare correlates of family demographics such as the year subjects were born, whether they lived with both parents at age fourteen, frequency of their church attendance, level of education, and their current employment status. We will also include age at marriage and occurrence of a premarital birth as correlates of marital stability.

RESULTS

Sexual Behavior

Mormon females report an age at first sexual intercourse somewhat above the average for all groups considered (Figure 1). Blacks, in particular, report comparatively young ages at sexual debut, but several white religious groups also tend to initiate sexual activity at younger ages than do Mormons. Only Jews have a median age noticeably higher than do Mormons.

FIGURE 1
MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST SEXUAL INTERCOURSE

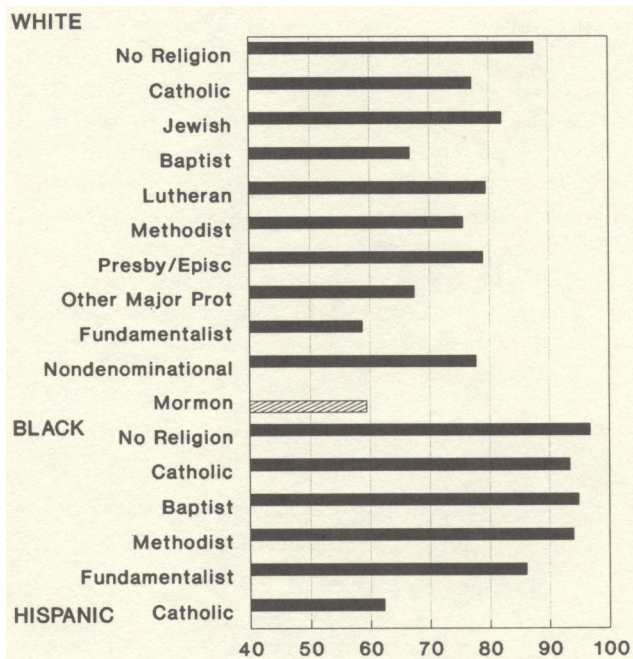


A comparison of correlates of age at first intercourse suggests that the LDS age has been declining at a faster pace than is evident in most other groups. However, growing up in a two-parent family, attending Church frequently, attaining higher education, and being employed are associated with a later sexual debut, and these statistical relationships are stronger for Mormons than for most other groups.

It is helpful to consider age at first intercourse in conjunction with premarital sex. These data indicate that 60 percent of LDS women

will have had sex before marriage (Figure 2). This percentage seems very high given the emphasis on chastity and indicates that a majority do not measure up to the Church's standard. The increase in premarital sex appears to have been greater for Mormons than for most other groups considered here.

FIGURE 2
PERCENTAGE HAVING PREMARITAL SEX

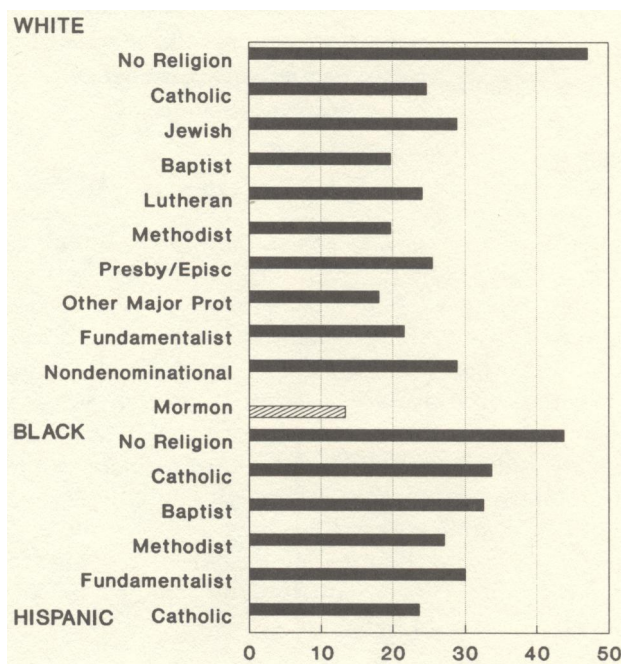


Sexual sins have always been considered grave offenses, although a distinction is usually made between fornication (sex between unmarried people) and adultery. Adultery is an even more serious offense when compounded by breaking of temple covenants. Mormon beliefs would place adultery “next to murder” in gravity. It seems unlikely that Church leaders would place a majority of adolescents in a category next to murderers. Rather, it appears that Church leaders are becoming increasingly aware of deviations from sexual standards, but that they feel somewhat frustrated in knowing how to deal with immorality. Changes in sexual norms may have also created a generation gap between the youth and their leaders or parents. These trends could make it more difficult to deal with the discrepancy between official codes of conduct and actual behavior.

The other side of the coin is that most religious groups have a higher incidence of premarital sex than do Latter-day Saints. Only the white Protestant fundamentalist group has a percentage comparable to Mormons. Church attendance is also more strongly related to a lower incidence of premarital sex for Mormons than it is for most other groups. Religious involvement does seem to play an important role in discouraging premarital sex, especially among Latter-day Saints.

Mormons are noticeably less likely ever to have cohabited than the members of any other group considered (Figure 3). Only 13 percent of Mormons report having cohabited compared to 26 percent of the total sample and to 47 percent of whites with no religious preference. Moreover, the increase in cohabitation is lower for Mormons than for most other groups, and the tendency for religiously involved members to avoid cohabitation is stronger for Mormons than for many other groups. In short, the LDS emphasis on chastity is evident in reported behavior, even though a substantial group fails to comply completely with Church standards. The above-average increase in premarital sex contrasted with below-average increase in cohabitation suggests that even though Mormons are changing, they remain reluctant to establish living arrangements that deviate from the Church's sexual code of conduct.

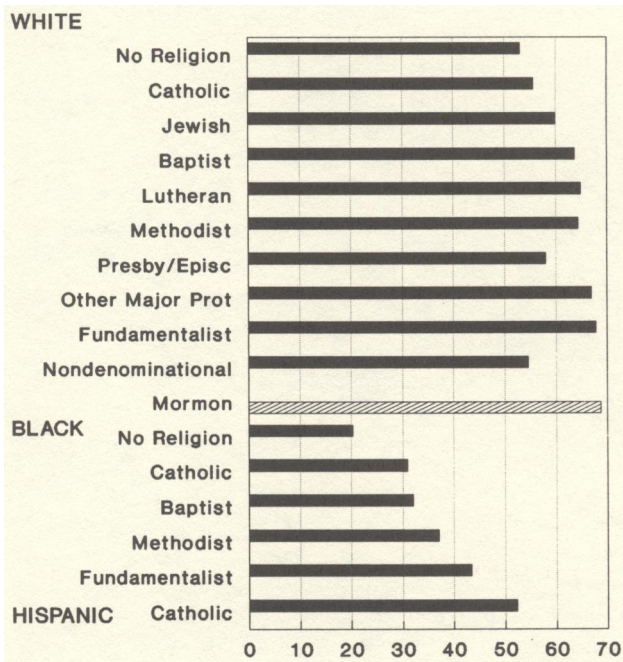
FIGURE 3
PERCENTAGE WHO HAVE EVER COHABITED



Marriage

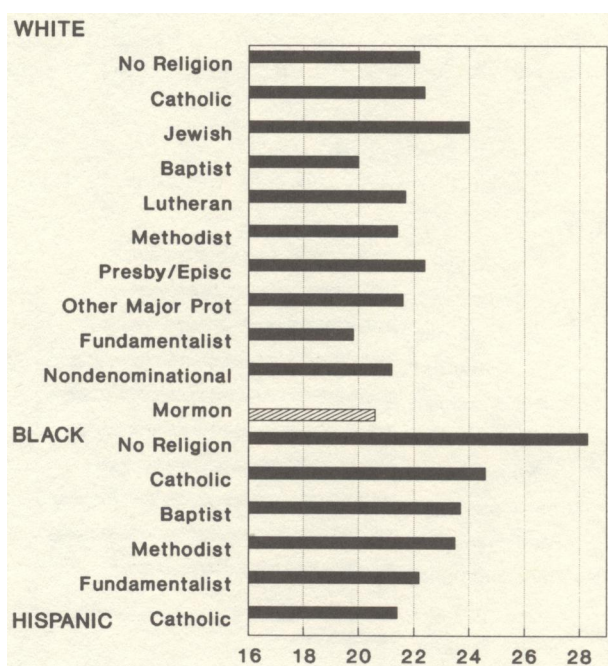
The reluctance to cohabit is consistent with the LDS emphasis on the desirability of legal marriage. No other group has as high a percentage of members currently married as do Mormons, although white Protestant fundamentalists and some other Protestant groups are nearly as high (Figure 4). More detailed statistical analysis (not shown) indicates that the recent decline in the percentage married is also less evident for Mormons than for most other groups. As with many other groups, higher education is positively associated with the percent of Mormons married. Being gainfully employed is negatively associated with being married, especially among Mormons. The high percentage married is consistent with the LDS emphasis on family life. But the study also shows that for every two married women there is one single sister. An overemphasis on married couples by Church leaders and programs could overshadow a substantial percentage of singles.

FIGURE 4
PERCENTAGE CURRENTLY MARRIED



Marriage age among Latter-day Saints, lower than in most other groups (Figure 5), also indicates a strong emphasis on marriage. Half of LDS women are married before their twenty-first birthday. (Only white Baptists and Protestant fundamentalists marry younger.) Early marriage helps account for both the high percentage married and the low rate of cohabitation. Although the recent trend has been to delay marriage, the longer term trend for Mormons is to marry earlier. Not only is higher educational attainment associated with later marriage, but interestingly, so is Church attendance, especially among Mormons.

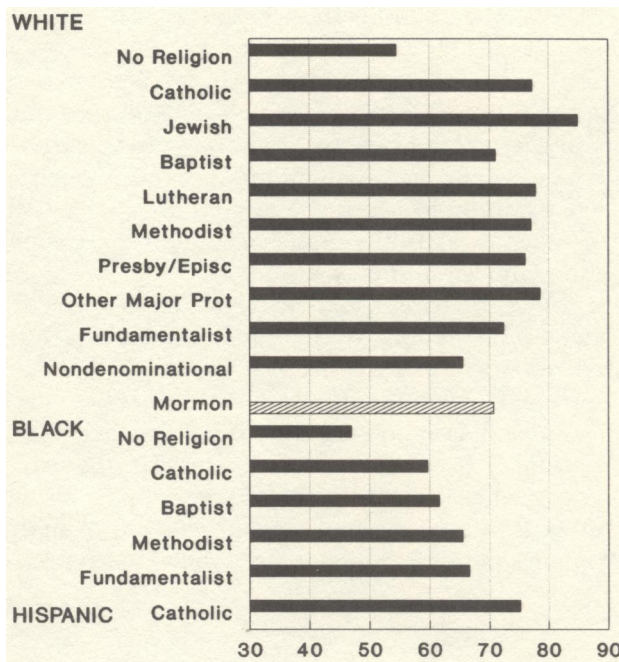
FIGURE 5
MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE



Contrary to previous research findings, these data indicate a relatively high level of marital instability among Mormons (Figure 6). White Catholics, Jews, and several major Protestant groups have greater marital stability than do Mormons. It is somewhat difficult to reconcile this finding with that of previous studies that showed relatively low divorce rates among LDS members (Heaton and Goodman 1985).

Divorce may be underestimated in Church-sponsored studies, which may have some difficulty locating single or less active members. Perhaps divorced members who were raised on the idea that failure in the home is the only real failure may be reluctant to admit to a failed marriage when the Church sponsors the surveys. Moreover, the increase in instability appears to be greater for Mormons than for most other groups.

FIGURE 6
MARRIAGES INTACT AFTER TEN YEARS (%)



Frequent explanations for the increasing rate of LDS divorce are first, that since Mormons tend to marry young, we can expect a higher rate of divorce, and second, that the doctrine of eternal marriage may create unrealistic expectations of what an acceptable marriage should be. These studies offer no evidence of what expectations before marriage might be, but when we analyze age at marriage, an intriguing pattern emerges. For Mormons, age at marriage actually shows a negative relationship with marital stability. Apparently, some Mormon women who marry relatively late (that is, after age twenty-two) terminate their marriages within a short time. This tendency is not evident

in several white Protestant groups. Perhaps the LDS singles feel great pressure to marry as they get older, pressure that could lead to poor judgement in the choice of a partner. Previous studies of older singles show a substantial mismatch in the numbers and characteristics of males and females. Mismatched couples are more likely to divorce. Although most divorces and separations occur with couples who marry earlier, this does not completely account for the relatively high LDS divorce rate. It could be that the Church's encouragement of marriage may influence some persons to enter into difficult and potentially unstable marriages.

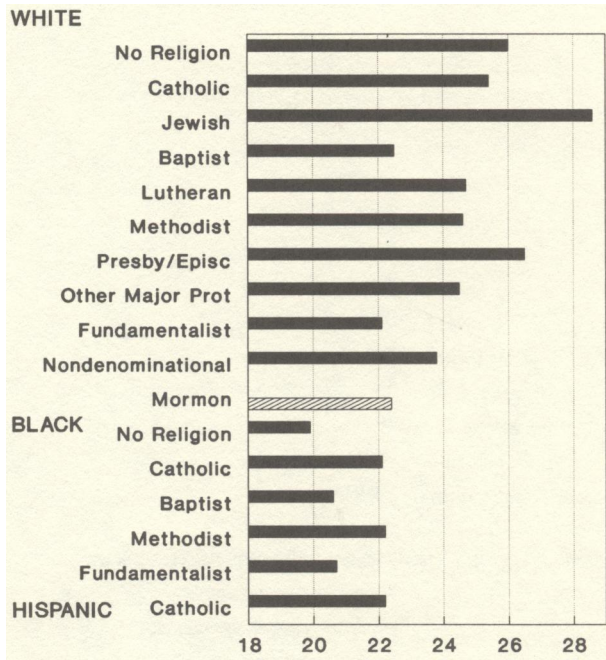
Whatever the explanation for the LDS divorce rate, these findings suggest a need to consider the quality of LDS marriages. It appears that the Church's emphasis on chastity and marriage is more effective in shaping Mormon behavior than it is in promoting marital commitment and quality. If projections are accurate—that nearly two-thirds of recent marriages in the U.S. will end in divorce or separation—and if these projections apply to Mormons as well (and these data suggest they do), then marital disruption will become an increasingly important issue for the Church and its members.

When we observe that high marriage rates are coupled with relatively high rates of dissolution, we may also expect to see remarriage becoming even more common. Indeed, if the Church is to encourage the state of matrimony, then it will also need to encourage remarriage. For example, gender-biased policies which make it easier for men than for women to remarry in the temple could stand in the way of a positive remarital experience for women. Balancing support for the divorced and those who wish to remarry with encouragement of marital stability in first marriages poses a challenge for a marriage-centered church.

Childbearing

Mormon women begin having children when relatively young (Figure 7). Half of LDS women have a child before their twenty-third birthday. While black religious groups tend to begin having children at a lower age than do Mormons, they are more likely to do so before marriage. Of the white religious groups, only Baptists and Protestant fundamentalist groups begin parenthood as early as do Latter-day Saints. The mother's age at the birth of the first child has also declined somewhat more for the Mormon group than for most white Protestant groups, suggesting that Mormons continue a pattern of early family formation. However, women who were raised in a two-parent family, who have higher educational attainment, and who have a job delay childbearing.

FIGURE 7
 MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST CHILD'S BIRTH

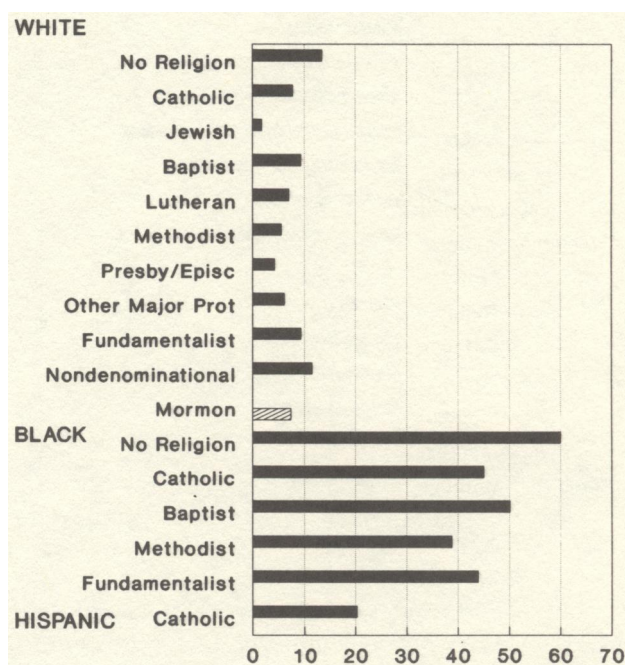


Despite relatively low rates of premarital sex and high rates of marriage, Mormons are not particularly low on premarital births (Figure 8). The 7.4 percent of Mormon women who have their first child before marriage is roughly comparable to several other white groups including Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists, but is notably higher than that for Jews. Black groups, in particular, have a high rate of premarital childbearing. Mormons have also experienced a relatively high increase in premarital births.

One explanation for the frequency of premarital births is that Mormons are less likely than others to prevent births. Mormon young people may be more reluctant to use birth control measures because of normative pressures discouraging sexual behavior. Parents and other adults in the community may be less willing to provide access to birth control information and products, and the young men and women themselves may prefer to let a sexual encounter happen than to consciously plan ahead. Once pregnancy occurs, abortion may not be an acceptable option, since the Church condemns abortion for all but exceptional cases and Mormons generally favor a Pro-Life position

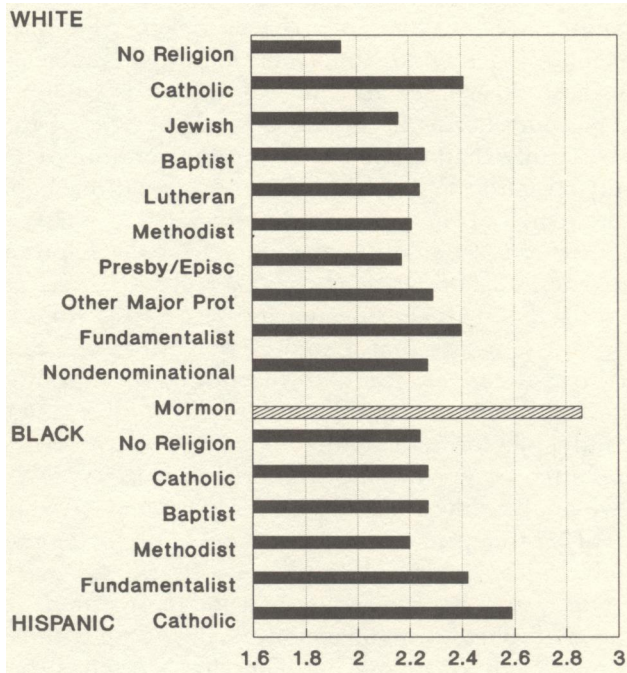
(the abortion rate in Utah is about one-third the national average). Whatever the explanation, unwed parenthood is as salient an issue for Mormons as it is for most other religious groups.

FIGURE 8
PERCENTAGE GIVING A BIRTH PREMARITALLY



These data also confirm the LDS preference for large families (Figure 9). No other group comes close to the LDS average of nearly three children per woman. Although a family size of three is small when compared to the size of nineteenth-century Utah families, or even with the size of the baby-boom families in which the mothers were children, it is still about 40 percent higher than for many white Protestant groups. The positive association between frequency of church attendance and family size also shows the connection between religion and family size; this association is greater for Mormons than for most other groups. It is also interesting to note that women who work prefer smaller families than those who do not work, and this difference is larger between Mormon women than for the women in other groups. In short, Mormon women who are not employed and who attend church regularly are especially important in creating large families.

FIGURE 9
DESIRED NUMBER OF CHILDREN



SUMMARY

National surveys taken in the 1980s indicate that Mormons have maintained their distinctive family demographics. When we perform a summary analysis of the several characteristics reported here, we find that most groups fall within a triangle. The three groups defining the extremes of the triangle are blacks with no religious preference, Jews, and Mormons. Blacks with no religious preference mark the extreme of low marriage rates and less traditional sexual behavior. Jews are characterized by late family formation and smaller families, but also by low premarital births. Mormons have the largest desired family size, the highest percentage of marriages, the lowest percentage of cohabitation, and are near the extreme for several other characteristics.

It is not easy to summarize trends in LDS behavior as indicated by age of the women surveyed. Some behaviors, such as engaging in premarital sex, appear to be converging toward the national average. Other trends, such as increasing cohabitation and decreasing marriage, are less pronounced for Mormons than for most other groups.

LDS rates of marital dissolution may be shifting from a position below that of most other white groups to one of *above* average divorce and separation. Finally, since for Mormons age at marriage and large family size are changing at about the same pace as for other groups, Mormons continue to maintain their distinctiveness. Simple generalizations do not capture these diverse trends. For example, it is wholly inaccurate to assume that Mormons merely lag behind the rest of the country. Nevertheless, family demographics are in flux, and any characterization of family structure at a given point in time will probably provide an inaccurate model of the past or the future.

Although Mormon demographics do reflect the Church's promotion of marriage and family life, behavior still falls short of ideals in several respects. Even though premarital sex is less common among Mormons, it still appears that a majority of Mormons did have sex before marriage. Relatively frequent marital disruption indicates that Mormons have their share of family problems. Emphasizing the importance of family life from the pulpit does not spare Mormons from confronting family issues that face the broader society.

When we analyze the correlates of family behavior, some distinctive features of Mormonism emerge. Frequent church attendance relates more strongly to less divorce, less premarital sex, delayed marriage, and larger family size for Mormons than for most groups, suggesting the importance of religious involvement. Growing up with two parents also has a more traditionalizing influence for Mormons than for several other groups, which suggests the importance of socialization into a particular family lifestyle. Mormon women's employment is more strongly associated with smaller families, being single, and delayed family formation than is the case with many other groups. Perhaps female employment has some tendency to reduce commitment to a more traditional LDS family lifestyle.

The data presented here must be interpreted with caution. I have combined results from several surveys and have noted a potential response bias on sensitive questions. Assessment of trends is also problematic. All these considerations make it impossible to make exact conclusions about any particular statistic. Rather, we should look only for a general sense of how LDS family behavior compares with that of other groups. A second problem that could skew results in ways difficult to determine is the retrospective nature of several characteristics. Converts could have been sexually active, married, or have given premarital birth before they became converted. Unfortunately, information regarding conversion is not available. Thus, the behaviors reported describe people according to their current religious affiliation rather than their affiliation when the event occurred. Finally, we must be

cognizant that relationships among characteristics do not necessarily imply causation. For example, the close relationship between church attendance and marital stability for Mormons could occur either because religiously involved members are less likely to divorce or because those who go through divorce become less active.

Given this demographic data, the first problem is usually deciding if there is a problem. Some would become alarmed or disenchanted at a mismatch between codes of conduct and behavior, and with changes in patterns of family formation. They would claim that cultural patterns such as hasty entrance into marriage arising from fear of staying single, a mission president's advice, or a desire to legitimate a birth could easily create a rocky marriage. High expectations for an ideal marriage or overly structured role expectations may get in the way of forgiveness, negotiation, and change. On the other hand, we may find evidence in these data to show that Mormon family life is less troubled than that of most Americans. We may emphasize the LDS belief in the eternal nature of families and the norms of fidelity and chastity which strengthen marital commitment and a willingness to work out family problems. In short, these data suggest that there is much in Mormon family orientation that should be valued and preserved, but there are also expectations and folkways which may actually detract from the quality of family life. To those more interested in improvement than in polemics, the obvious question is, which aspects of Mormon belief and practice strengthen and which aspects diminish the quality of family life?

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