Family Planning Attitudes and Practices in a Mormon Community

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Introduction

A large body of literature reflects the growing effort to understand those factors which influence a couple's likelihood to have children. Studies on both national and local levels suggest a trend toward fewer children. This tendency toward fewer children seems to be increasing, regardless of social class and rural-urban backgrounds. The influence of religion on size of family, however, is not clear.

Most studies of knowledge, attitudes, and practice (KAP) in relationship to family planning have tended to focus on the major religious groups. These would suggest that fertility tends to decrease with increasing socioeconomic status among Protestants, with Catholics having more children as their economic status rises. Jewish couples consistently have fewer children than those of other faiths at comparable socioeconomic levels.[1-6]

Studying the effects of religion and education on attitudes toward U.S. population growth, Barnett[7] found a correlation between educational level and concern with further population growth. This correlation was stronger among Protestants than Catholics; Mormon attitudes were intermediate between those of Protestants and Catholics. If DeJong[8] is correct in his conclusion that a fundamentalist religious orientation is associated with attitudes which support high fertility, a study of

a Mormon population should shed additional insights on the relationship between family planning attitudes and practice and religion.

Hastings, Reynolds, and Canning[9] have suggested that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may well exert an influence on its members similar to that attributed to the Catholic hierarchy. In some ways this influence may be even greater. O'Dea[10] suggests that Mormonism is a way of life as well as a religion. At the same time, secular pressures such as education exert other forces toward the American norm.

The Church has made its position on family planning known:

> We seriously regret that there should exist a sentiment or feeling among any members of the Church to curtail the birth of their children. We have been commanded to multiply and replenish the earth that we may have joy and rejoicing in our posterity.
>
> 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.[11]

In view of this strong position, we became interested in a study of a population which would be powerfully influenced by the official Church position. Such a community was therefore selected and surveyed.

Methods

The community chosen for the survey is an autonomous suburb of Salt Lake City, Utah. It is relatively affluent and considered to be approximately 85% LDS. From the metropolitan household directory, a random sample of 201 households were identified and contacted to determine their willingness to participate in the study.

In the spring of 1972, trained women interviewed the female head of each household, or another adult female where the former was unavailable, using a pretested questionnaire. The survey collected demographic information, answers to questions from the 1967 Gallup Poll on birth control, responses to the Thurstone attitudinal scale on family planning (Form A),[12] and other material designed to measure the households' feelings about and use of family planning. In all cases not otherwise indicated, tests of statistical significance utilized the Mantel-Hanzel chi-square at the .05 level.

Results

Of the 197 occupied dwellings located, responses were successfully completed in 158 cases (response rate, 80.2%). The findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. In comparison with the 1967 Gallup Poll, our respondents favored the dissemination of birth control information more than had the national sample five years earlier. However, fewer than half of the respondents considered population growth, either of the world or the United States, as a major problem (*see* Table 1).

2. Of the 129 respondents who reported practicing birth control,* 30% were in the upper third of the Thurstone attitude scores. In contrast, only 18% of the nonusers were among those with the most positive attitudes (Table 2).

* For those beyond the reproductive years, former use of birth control was utilized.

3. The level of education of both the husband and the wife apparently had no effect on the attitude sum expressed by the wife toward birth control. In addition, the educational level of the husband had no effect on whether the couple practiced birth control. Nevertheless, the educational level of the wife had a definite effect on the practice of birth control. A full 55% of the users were women with 13 or more years of formal education, whereas only 25% of the nonusers had that many years of schooling.

4. There was no significant relationship between income and birth control practices; however, 30% of those with low attitude scores had incomes over $12,000, as compared with 50% of the medium and 47% of the high attitude scores. The percentage of users and nonusers falling into each income category was roughly equal. Neither the attitudes toward nor the use of birth control was related to the husband's occupation. The percentage of users in each occupational category was fairly constant where sample sizes were adequate.

5. The age of the respondent did not affect the birth control attitude score. The age groups were uniformly distributed in the high, medium, and low attitude groups. The age of the respondent did, however, have a significant effect on the practice of birth control. Those who reported practicing birth control were uniformly distributed between 20 and 50 years of age, but the nonusers (including those who never practiced birth control in the past) were predominantly those over 50 years of age.

6. There was no significant relationship between the number of years the respondent had lived in Utah or in the surveyed community and either the attitude sum or the use of birth control.

7. A factor which might be thought to influence the practice of birth control is the amount of time spent away from the home. Women who actively engage in either work or volunteer activities might be expected to favor limiting the size of their families. Even so, data from this study could not show any statistically significant differences in the activity patterns of users and nonusers, although three times as many users as nonusers spent 30 hours or more per week outside their homes.

8. Of the 158 respondents, 132 (84%) were members of the LDS Church. Table 3 compares the frequency of church attendance as an indication of strength of faith to the attitudes of the respondents. Among the LDS segment those who attended church most regularly had significantly more negative attitudes toward birth control. This was not true for the non-LDS who attended services regularly, although the small size of that group makes statistical statements tenuous. Comparing LDS and non-LDS respondents, the former tended to have significantly more negative attitudes.

9. Table 4 compares these subgroups in terms of their reported use of birth control, either currently or in the past. No significant differences were found to link either frequency of attendance or religious preference with the practice of birth control. There was a slight tendency for the more frequent attenders to utilize birth control

less often than the less devout. There would thus appear to be a discrepancy between the attitudes and behavior of the LDS subsample. Although 40% belonged to the lower third of attitudes toward birth control, only 17% reported themselves as nonusers, whereas the non-LDS respondents were more consistent in attitudes and use.

10. LDS respondents tended to hold the traditional view that unrestricted availability of birth control leads to a breakdown of morals, and that parents, friends, and religious leaders have a great influence on the formation of their opinions about birth control.

11. The LDS respondents had more negative attitudes toward birth control and expected to have more children than the non-LDS women interviewed.

Discussion

The study findings suggest a paradoxical relationship between attitudes and practices of birth control among LDS respondents. Although the latter were more negative in their attitudes than non-LDS respondents, there was no difference in the rate of use of birth control in the two groups. In fact, the LDS group tended to be slightly more likely to use birth control.

This apparent contradiction in attitudes and behavior among the LDS sample is mirrored in the attitudes expressed toward population growth as a personal opposed to a national or world problem. More of the respondents in this LDS-dominated study approved of the dissemination of birth control information to both married and single adults than did respondents to a national Gallup poll five years earlier, but fewer of the present respondents saw population growth as a national or world problem. While the indifference to problems of population growth may be related to the relatively low population density of Utah, when taken in conjunction with the attitude-practice discrepancy found in this study, it suggests a tendency to express opinions condoned by the LDS Church but a reluctance to adhere to its prescriptions in actual practice.

Comparing the current attitudes of the study population to a sampling of national opinion taken five years earlier should, if anything, act to minimize the lag between the sample and the rest of the country. Spicer and Gustavus[13] have suggested that Mormons respond to the general American fertility patterns, but generally at a higher overall rate. It may be that this lag phase is applicable to attitudes as well. Certainly there has been a very strong trend toward more positive attitudes about the need for birth control in the nation as a whole over the past ten years.

The discrepancy between expressed attitudes and reported practices with regard to birth control may represent a general reluctance to express attitudes about how others should behave. This feeling of "I don't intend to tell others what they should do and I don't expect others to tell me what to do" was repeatedly expressed by respondents to our survey.

Finally, it must be recognized that Mormons' attitudes toward birth control are changing. Hastings *et al.*[9] suggest that there is a growing acceptance of planned parenthood among Mormons. Under secular pressures of changing life-

styles, members may be shifting their behavior and, to a lesser degree, their expressed attitudes more rapidly than is the official position of the Church.

TABLE 1

Attitudes of Sample as Compared to 1967 National Survey

Item	YES		NO		DON'T KNOW	
	Gallup Poll 1967	Mormon Community Survey*	Gallup Poll 1967	Mormon Community Survey	Gallup Poll 1967	Mormon Community Survey
Do you support dissemination of birth control information to married persons?	86%	98%	9%	1%	5%	1%
Do you support dissemination of birth control information to single adult persons?	51%	71%	43%	25%	6%	4%
Do you consider the rate of growth of world population as a serious problem or not?	69%	47%	22%	43%	9%	9%
What about the rate at which the U.S. population is growing? Do you feel this is a serious problem or not?	54%	34%	40%	58%	6%	8%

*N=158

TABLE 2

Attitudes Versus Practice of Birth Control

Attitude Score	Birth Control Practice	
	Users (N=129)	Nonusers (N=28)
Upper third (most positive)	30%	18%
Middle third	42%	21%
Lower third (least positive)	28%	61%

$x^2=6.88$, $p < .01$

TABLE 3

Church Affiliation and Attitudes Toward Birth Control

	LDS			Non-LDS		
Attitude Sum	Weekly or more (N=102)	Monthly or less (N=31)	Total LDS (N=133)	Weekly or more (N=8)	Monthly or less (N=17)	Total Non-LDS (N=25)
Upper third	14%	48%	22%	50%	65%	60%
Middle third	37%	42%	38%	50%	29%	36%
Lower third	49%	10%	40%	-	6%	4%

LDS weekly vs. monthly
$x^2=20.88$
$p < .005$

LDS total vs. non-LDS total
$x^2=19.50$
$p < .005$

Non-LDS weekly vs. monthly
$x^2=.12$
$p > .5$

TABLE 4

Church Affiliation and Use of Birth Control

	LDS			Non-LDS		
	Weekly or more (N=101)	Monthly or less (N=31)	Total LDS (N=132)	Weekly or more (N=8)	Monthly or less (N=17)	Total Non-LDS (N=25)
Users	81%	87%	83%	75%	82%	80%
Non-users	19%	13%	17%	25%	18%	20%

LDS weekly vs. monthly
$x^2 = .57$
$p > .5$

LDS total vs. non-LDS total
$x^2 = .39$
$p > .5$

Non-LDS weekly vs. monthly
$x^2 = .17$
$p > .5$

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