

The Mormon Use of Belief Shaping Techniques

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

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The superior man understands what is right; the inferior man understands what will sell.
Confucius

Abstract

We are, generally speaking, more emotional than rational. And we usually do not recognize the personal interests that motivate both our own actions, and those of others who affect us. Hence, social interaction involves a great deal of unconscious game playing, and in fact the continued existence of society in any particular form depends upon the "real" nature of the game remaining unrecognized. Hence, once the kings' right to rule was no longer accepted as divine and unquestionable, democracy soon took over. And once the inequality of races was no longer accepted as "fact", slavery began to decline.

A significant part of the unconscious game playing in which we are involved has to do with how we are persuaded by, and persuade others. There are six primary "buttons" that psychologists have identified that are regularly used by those most adept at persuasion to get that they want. They are: Reciprocation – If I give you something, you are more likely to do what I want you to do; Consistency – If I can be caused to commit to do something, I will likely do it; Social Validation – I am more likely to do what is asked of me if I believe that many others are doing the same thing; Liking – I will be more likely to do what you want if I like you, and if you connect me to other things I like; Authority – I am more likely to do what you want me to do if you appear authoritative; Scarcity – I am more likely to do what you want if I think that the opportunity you offer is in short supply.

The Mormon Church, and virtually all other long-lived human organizations, makes extensive use of each of the persuasive techniques noted above. Within the Mormon community, for example:

Reciprocation – People are provided with activities at which emotional experiences and community involvement that they like or need are provided. They respond by being more willing to do what the Church asks of them.

Consistency – Once a person has borne her testimony in public even once, let alone many times, it is hard to behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the public position she has taken. The same thing is true of public prayer, and hence Mormon missionaries focus on getting those looking into Mormonism to pray in the presence of the missionaries.

Social Validation – The Mormon emphasis is on doing things in groups since it is easier to extract commitments from people in that context than on their own. And it is important to control

the validating messages the group sends. Hence, only those who will support the leadership's point of view will be permitted air time. And anyone who goes against that grain must be quickly silenced and then gutted from a credibility point of view.

Liking – The sharing of emotional experience creates strong bonds. These bonds make continued obedience to the norms that dominate the group that has shared this experience more likely. Hence, the trick from Mormonism's point of view is to control the dominant forces within the group.

Authority – Mormon activities are authority oriented. The leaders are prominent participants, they are usually dressed for "power", and the nature of the activities is carefully controlled. Ideas do not come up from the bottom, as is the case in organizations that are trying to maximize the creation of knowledge and growth. They come down from the top, as the case in organizations where control and execution are the goal. This is the military paradigm, for example. The content of information shared among members, including personal expressions of faith ("testimonies"). Leaders set the tone for most information sharing exchange, such as monthly testimony meetings in each congregation. In relatively small group settings (such as Home and Visiting teaching) great effort is made to control the message content.

Scarcity – Mormons are taught that the powerful emotional experiences they find so attractive are only available through Mormonism, as is the right to go to the Celestial Kingdom (the highest part of Heaven that is reserved for Mormons) after death. All other brands of spirituality are at least inferior to Mormonism, and in many cases completely counterfeit. Mormons have a monopoly on complete truth, and God's authority.

The Mormon Church's use of belief shaping techniques do not indicate that it is evil – just human. However, there are more and less ethical uses of persuasive techniques. Ethical persuasion educates and informs. Unethical persuasion is based on information and emotion manipulation. The Mormon Church's use of persuasive technique falls at the unethical end of the spectrum.

Introduction

I recently read "Scientific American Mind", a Special Edition of the Scientific American, vol. 14, no. 1, 2004. It is full of interesting stuff. One article, "The Science of Persuasion", by Robert B. Cialdini (Professor of Psychology at Arizona State) caught my eye in particular. The purpose of this essay is to summarize the six main techniques used to persuade people to do what we want them to do, as outlined by that article, and to consider how the Mormon Church uses those techniques. In conclusion, I will summarize Cialdini's views respecting the ethics of persuasion, and how my recent experience with Mormon leaders stacks up against his thoughtful opinions in this regard.

I should also note that I have read a number of books that deal with the topic of how social groups influence belief. In order to keep this essay to manageable size, I will not attempt to do more than cover the issues Cialdini raises as they relate to Mormonism. It would be possible to write a good sized book (or several) on this subject.

Reciprocation

Social Theory

If you give people something – even something of insignificant value – it is much more likely that they will do what you want them to do. This is why organizations like the Disabled Vets send out cheap address labels with their request for financial support. Their rate of donation doubles (from about 18% to about 35%) when they add those labels to their request. This is why so many products come with a "free gift". My wife was recently looking for a camera bag, found one she liked, but was told that the only way she could get it was to buy the camera – the bag came along as a "free" gift. She then found out that the camera without the bag was \$x, and the camera with the "free" gift was \$x + \$35. But she could not persuade the salesman either to sell her the bag for \$35 dollars, or even that the bag was not a "free gift". After several minutes of conversation, she left the store in frustration, feeling disgusted with the ethics of those who put this particularly advertising gimmick in place, and the intelligence of the salesman with whom she had dealt.

Many studies show how physicians' propensity to prescribe drugs is influenced by gifts from pharmaceutical companies. An odd way in which the reciprocity principle can be used is to make a huge request of someone – let's say, to act as a volunteer counsellor for two hours a week over a two year period. When that request is declined, ask for something more realistic, like a financial donation. The disappointed but gracious acceptance of the first request's refusal is a form of "gift", and makes the second, smaller, request much more likely to be granted than if it had been made on its own.

Mormon Culture

Give away pamphlets. Give away Books of Mormon. Give away videos with respect to Christmas, Easter, etc. Give free tours of Temple Square and other tourist attractions in Salt Lake City. Invite kids to come to fun activities at Mormon chapels. Ask members for immense commitments (like serving a mission away from grandkids after retirement), and then ask for money to support building funds and the missions of young people who do not have money of their own. "Love bomb" those on the fringes. Give them attention (something all humans want), and they will be more likely to reciprocate by doing what you want them to do. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this later factor.

We all need acceptance and validation. Lots of studies show how the price for admission to different groups work. To gain entry to the druggie group, one simply starts to take drugs. To be a smoker and gain inclusion to the group that has to go outside several times a day to smoke, simply take up smoking. Lots of people acquire habits for precisely this sort of reason.

Mormonism is much more complex than smoking. But for many who find themselves on the fringes of the seemingly attractive LDS community, the process works in a fashion similar to that of the smokers and druggies – just do what we do, and you are in. If you don't behave as we do, you will not quite belong. The provision of conditional acceptance to the group creates a form of reciprocal pressure to conform to the group's standards. Break the standards, and the acceptance is withdrawn.

This is particularly the case for the children of active Mormon adults. It is a terrible thing for a child to be faced with the choice of doing something that does not make sense (obeying Mormonism's many silly rules, for example) or losing a parent's approval and causing that loving

parent great pain. And after flirting with disobedience, the relief that comes upon a return to obedience in terms of love and acceptance and a removal of guilt, is hugely influential on behaviour. In most cases, the child will obey when faced with this choice, perhaps after some experimentation with disobedience and the pain it causes.

Consistency

Social Theory

This is arguably the most important type of behavior shaping techniques use by the Mormon Church. In its simplest form (which was all Cialdini described), we can simply say that contrary to popular belief, once a commitment has been made, the human tendency is to keep it. Restaurants find a much higher call back rate prior to no-shows on reservations when they change their request for notice of cancellation from, "Please call if you have to change your plans", to "Will you call if you have to change your plans? (Then wait for the potential diner to say "yes"). However, other social theorists have developed the concept of "inadequate justification", which is another way of thinking about consistency, to explain a wide variety of behaviours that near the core of the Mormon belief and behavioural systems.

Inadequate justification, briefly, is that where we have adequate external justification for our actions (we were paid to lie, for example), we do not need to change our beliefs (create "internal" justification) to justify what we did in that regard. However, if the external justification for our actions is weak, a significant modification in beliefs related to what we have done will often result in order to justify our actions.

For example, consider what is known as the "saying is believing" paradigm. When comes to producing a lasting change in attitude, the greater the reward given for a particular behaviour, the less likely it is to produce a lasting change. As Aronson puts it:

If all I want you to do is recite a speech favouring Fidel Castro, the Marx Brothers, socialized medicine or anything else, the most efficient thing for me to do would be to give you the largest possible reward. This would increase the probability of your complying by making that speech. But suppose I have a more ambitious goal: suppose I want to effect a lasting change in your attitudes and beliefs. In that case, just the reverse is true. The smaller the external reward I give to induce the recite the speech, the more likely it is you will be forced seek additional justification for delivering it by convincing yourself that the things that you said were actually true. This would result in an actual change in attitude rather than mere compliance. The importance of this technique cannot be overstated. If we change our attitudes because we have made a public statement for minimal external justification, our attitude change will be relatively permanent; we are not changing our attitudes because of reward (compliance) but because of the influence of an attractive person (identification). We are changing our attitudes because we have succeeded in convincing ourselves that our previous attitudes were incorrect. This is a very powerful form of attitude change"(Aronson, *The Social Animal* 9th Ed., p. 165)

Other experiments were conducted with regard to certain student riots at Yale University. Various students had witnessed the riots. Students who strongly believed the police behaved badly with respect to those riots were asked to write an essay in support of the police actions. Before writing the essays, the students were paid a significant sum of money. After writing the essay, each student was asked to indicate his own private attitudes respecting the police

actions. The results showed that the smaller the reward the greater the attitude change writing the essay had effected. It is important to note that this attitude change occurred as a result of the students writing an essay which they were told to make up. They were told to pretend that their position was what they wrote, but not asked to believe anything that they had written.

In another similar experiment, a group of white college students were asked to write an essay endorsing a proposal at their university to double the amount of money available for African American student scholarships. Precisely the same phenomenon was observed in this experiment as noted above respecting police brutality. The students who wrote this essay experienced a much more significant attitudinal shift than those who did not.

And, what happens when your audience thinks you are expressing your most sincere beliefs? And how does the importance of what you are talking about play into this process? Here another quote from Aronson:

... lying produces greater attitude change when the liar is under compensated for lying especially when the lie is likely to invoke a change in the audience's belief or behaviour. A great deal of subsequent research supports this reasoning and allows us to state a general principle about dissonance and the self-concept: dissonance effects us greatest when

- (1) people feel personally responsible for their actions and
- (2) their actions have serious consequences.

That is, the greater the consequence and the greater our responsibility for it, the greater the dissonance; the greater the dissonance the greater our own attitude change (See Aronson, *The Social Animal* 9th Ed., p. 170)

Other experiments have been conducted with regarding to cheating behaviour. People who are induced to cheat for a reward, which would be a form of external justification, do not show long-term changes in their attitudes respecting cheating. However, students induced to cheat for a small or negligible reward show a significant attitudinal change in that regard.

Mormon Culture

Experienced Mormons are masters of the "commitment pattern". It forms the backbone of the Mormon missionaries' teaching system, and is learned by most adult Mormons in that context. Worthiness interviews for temple recommends and other things are all about commitment. Testimony meetings, lesson teaching, talks, etc. are opportunities to make the commitment as public as possible. After a lifetime of this, huge barriers to change are erected in the lives of faithful Mormons.

Nowhere is the "saying is believing" paradigm more visible in Mormon culture than regarding the Mormon custom of "bearing testimony". A "testimony" is the conviction that the Mormon Church is "true" that is, God's one and only true Church on earth, and a large complex of other ideas go along with that concept. One of the techniques used by missionaries and members of the Church to help prospective members and young people who were raised in the Church but have not yet found a testimony, to find it, is that of bearing their testimony before they get it. A large percentage of the missionaries who enter missionary service with the Mormon Church do not have a "testimony". It is common knowledge within the Mormon community that young men are

sent into the mission field first and foremost for their own good – that is, to get their own testimony. They are encouraged to find their testimony by bearing it. That is, by saying things they don't yet believe. And this has the effect predicted by the experimental data summarized above - if a person stands up before a group often enough and say that they believe something, they will come to believe it. And this will be particularly so if they are not given a strong external justification (like a payment) for saying it. If they just say it, either it is true or they are either a liar to have been fooled. Since few people like to admit that they have been fooled or are a liar, the easiest conclusion to reach is that the statements made are true. Mormons justify the practise of encouraging people to say things that they don't believe on the basis that those things are certain to be true, so even if the person saying them does not believe them to be true, she is still telling the truth.

Testimony bearing is a fundamental part of the Mormon culture. Each meeting, class, Mormon activity, etc., is opened with prayer. Most Mormon prayers are an implicit bearing of testimony; a certification that the Mormon Church is the Mormon Church's God's true Church. From the time they are able to speak their first words, little children are encouraged to utter such prayers. They do so at their meetings on Sunday, and at home on a daily basis with their families. Those occurs both in private, with Mom and Dad initially saying the words for the child, and in public before family members in the home each day and later in larger groups at Church.

Formal testimony bearing is part of every lesson presented at Mormon Church or activity, and every speech (talks by Mormons) presented in Church services. Young people, again, begin to give these talks on a regular basis starting at age three or four. They are encouraged to bear their testimony each time they stand up and give a talk. Most adults have teaching responsibilities within the Mormon Church. They also bear their testimony each time they stand before the congregation to teach.

Once a month, each Mormon congregation has a "fast and testimony" meeting. This is a meeting held at the end of a Sunday on which food and water are abstained from for a period of 24 hours by faithful Mormons. Toward the end of that period, the testimony meeting occurs. Going without food weakens body and the intellect, making it more susceptible to emotional experiences. These meetings are intended to provoke emotional experience. Feelings are shared with regard to the importance of family, community and a part of every testimony is a formula which has been laid down by Church leaders respecting belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that the current prophet (whoever he may be) is also God's only prophet on Earth and that the Mormon Church is the one and only true Church of God on the Earth. No dissenting opinion is permitted. And a steady stream of members approach the pulpit to express their faith in public. It is thought "cute" to have small children to stand up before the congregation to utter the words "I know the Church is true; I know the Book of Mormon is true; etc."

My most recent experience with the Mormon use of the saying is believing principle comes in the form of the parade of speaking engagements my recently returned missionary son is on. Every week he speaks at least once at a ward or a fireside. He was asked a few days ago to speak at Stake Conference in a few weeks time. His mother thought it was because he is such a good speaker. Our Stake sends out a lot of missionaries. There are two Stake Conferences per year, and recent returned missionary speakers are a rarity. However, it is clear that the more times my son stands up in public and affirms his Mormon beliefs to the community, and then gets lots of pats on the head, the further into the Mormon illusion he will be drawn and the more resistant he will be to my well-known views. Am I to believe that it is a coincidence that he, among all of the potential speakers in the Stake, who is the current poster boy for resistance to Mormon apostasy, has been asked to speak at Stake Conference? The position he is being put

in is in my view like part of the Mormon Church's "warfare" mentality – "We are engaged in a battle against the Devil and his forces!" – and whether my son's speaking engagements are a conscious or unconscious plan is not important to me.

Some Mormon leaders have seriously, sincerely, suggested to me that it inappropriately interferes with my son's "agency" when I speak to him about my beliefs or suggest that he read things like "Guns, Germs and Steel" (1997 Pulitzer Prize winning book by the anthropologist Jared Diamond) and books that deal responsibly with Mormon history. And these same, seemingly sincere people, believe that my son's agency is not interfered with by anything the Mormon Church causes him to do.

As noted above, the more important the issue and whether the audience believes you really mean what you are saying have a significant influence on how powerful the "saying is believing" factor is. Think of how this would be work in the case of a typical Mormon missionary. He doesn't yet have a testimony of his own, and he's standing up in public wearing an authoritative looking suit and bearing solemn testimony in God's name with regard to the truthfulness of the Mormon Church. He knows he is encouraging the people who hear him to make a commitment that will absorb a huge percentage of their lives and will change the course of their existence in dramatic fashion. This situation is calculated to produce the maximum attitudinal change in those young missionaries.

The same thing happens when any member of the Mormon Church bears testimony to their friends and neighbours, and it is intensified if any of those friends become Mormons as well. This is why Mormon leaders are constantly after the members to do missionary work with the friends, and to bear their testimonies.

This is perhaps the aspect of Mormonism that I find most offensive. The manner in which Mormon leaders, who are knowledgeable with regard to the real history and origins of their faith, purposely teach a story that omits so many of the important facts that it is grossly misleading, and then teach that story to innocent young people and members and send them out to bear solemn testimony that falsehoods are true, thus causing them to believe strongly that is the case. Such leadership behaviour not only deceives those who hear the testimony borne, but it conditions at a very deep level the innocents who mouth false words. It is a form of psychological or intellectual sabotage that whether committed with the best of intentions or not, is in my view an evil that should be rooted out of our society.

Many other examples of "saying is believing" or similar behavior from within Mormon culture could be marshalled. I do not accuse Mormons of consciously planning to brainwash their children and those who investigate the merits of the Mormon Church; however, the system just described could hardly be better designed for that purpose. Again, I do not accuse Mormons of dishonesty or deceit. There may be a few at the top that are guilty of this, but the vast majority are certainly not. For the most part, the Mormon behaviour just described are the product of the narrow perspective Mormonism promotes, and the intent of those who lead the Mormon Church that it continue to grow.

The philosopher Michael Ignatieff insightfully observed that powerful emotions are self justifying, and hence the checks and balances within democracy are particularly important during times of crisis such as that which followed September 11, 2001. There are no material checks or balances on the power exercised by Mormon leaders. They are not democratically accountable. They do not have to issue financial statements. Etc. And they are human beings, subject to the corrupting influence of power. They have come to define "good" with what will make the

Mormon Church grow, and not coincidentally, cause their personal influence to increase. We should not be surprised that over the course of time, they have adopted the belief shaping tools that have proven useful in many other human groups, and that they make as extensive use of them as possible.

Social Validation

Social Theory

The classic experiment involves one man standing on a crowded sidewalk looking up in the sky, at nothing. About 4% of those who pass him stop to look as well. If five men are planted to look at the sky, 18% stop. If 15 are planted, 40% stop and within a minute the streets are so clogged with people looking up in the air that traffic can't get through. So, if we want people to do what we ask of them, it helps to make them think that they are in good company.

Mormon Culture

The media campaigns show how happy and normal LDS families are. Testimony meetings and other public displays of faith illustrate what is normal – fully committed belief and obedience to Mormon authority. The public recognition bestowed on young men and women (but mostly young men) who serve Mormon missions puts a societal stamp of approval on this activity. The same applies to many other kinds of behavior. Mormons are seldom asked to do things that require individual initiative. The "choir" and the "beehive" are the paradigmatic Mormon metaphors.

While Cialdini did not note this, it is only a short hop to the conclusion that the number of people stopping to look up in the air would likely be reduced if there were groups of other people standing nearby saying, "I've looked and there is nothing there. These folks are either playing a trick on us, or they are nuts." And it is human nature, once tricked, to quickly move along instead of calling attention to the fact that we have been tricked.

The Mormon Church's program of silencing those who would warn against the folly of looking at the sky makes sense if its main interest is in seeing how many people can be persuaded to look up, and continue to look up, regardless of what is (or is not) there. If the Mormon Church is intent on having its way with as many people as possible, we would predict that anything that works against people looking up would be resisted regardless of how well researched, reasoned or substantive it is. And so it is. This is why what a Mormon believes is largely irrelevant. But if he insists on communicating beliefs that question Mormon authority to other people, that is a serious problem because it is likely to reduce the number of people who will stop and look at the sky. So, people who insist on exercising their right to talk about things that question Mormon leaders are soon removed from the Mormon community. The threat of loss of community and family relationships is enough to keep most Mormons who have concerns about the Mormon belief system silent.

Liking

Social Theory

We tend to say, "yes" to people we like. Tupperware and innumerable copycats have created hugely profitable businesses on this single fact – friends buy from friends more willingly than from sales people. It is also well known that good-looking people are more successful in the

sales professions than the less attractive. And people like us when we have something in common with them. Hence, the effort of sales people make to find a common denominator with their customers – "You're from Minnesota?! My Mom was raised in ..." "You lived on a farm!?" "When I was a kid, ..." The addition of connecting factors of this kind (whether real or contrived) dramatically affects the probability of a sale being closed or the desired cooperation being offered.

Mormon Culture

Mormon missionaries are well trained in "liking" based and many other sales techniques, including simple indications that the salesman likes his customer, which engage the reciprocity response noted above.

The way in which the Mormon community lavishes attention on those who are new or on the fringes is another use of this button. We all want attention; to be loved and accepted. We are inclined to do what those who provide us with those important goods ask. And for the faithful Mormon, the prospect of being recognized within the Mormon community as a non-believer is daunting. The more tight-knit and dominant the community is in his life, the more difficult a prospect this is. That is, the "not-liking" factor is as significant as the "liking" factor. The idea that community and family respect and acceptance, not to mention business and social opportunities, may be withdrawn if disbelief is expressed often motivates the maintenance of a comfortable façade.

The goal of Mormonism (which it largely achieves) is to establish such a strong cultural connection among its members that "Mormonness" in and of itself is an important connecting – or "liking" – factor. This is what tribal and blood loyalty is all about. "We are of the same group, and so we can trust each other more than other people because of all that we have in common." It amazes me how this works within Mormonism, even across cultures. In the past when I met people in Latin America or Asia while doing business and found out that there was a Mormon in the group, I tended to bond much quicker and more thoroughly with that person than the rest of the group.

In modern Mormonism, the common denominators most often used to find converts are the human universals. "You love your kids?! Let me tell you how to REALLY love your kids!" "You love your family? Let me tell you how you can be with your family after death!" etc. Those targeted for Mormon missionary efforts are first and foremost those who have had a death in the family; those recently married; those who have recently had a baby; those who are new to the community; the young who are choosing their life's pattern; etc. In short, those who have been destabilized by life's big events, and hence are more likely willing to consider a change in religious belief because they feel a need for something Mormonism offers (clear answers to unanswerable questions, and hence temporary comfort from existential angst; a close knit, ready made community; etc.)

What is not to like about what we see in the MormonAds? Good looking people of all races who love their families and seem to always be deciding not to do things that take them in different directions, and instead go hang out and have fun together as a family. It is a great picture. And purely the creation of Madison Avenue. If there is one thing that the Mormon Church's general leaders understand, it is marketing.

Reality, however, usually has little to do with the picture advertising presents, and that is the case with Mormonism. For example, the couples and families that come closest to achieving

the Mormon ideal are often so busy with Mormon meetings that they spend less time together than does a typical North American family. And, the time Mormon families spend together is much more structured than the time most North American families have with each other. That is, Mormons tend to do things while together that are designed to bolster Mormon belief, like study the scriptures, bear testimony to each other, pray together, etc. It is hard to get to know what the people you love the most are like if a large percentage of your behaviour together is controlled by religious ritual.

Authority

Social Theory

It is well established that people respond positively to those who have an authoritative appearance. Just by changing the dress of a person making a request from casual to formal, the positive response rate increased by 350% in some cases.

We tend to equate authoritative appearance with expertise. "Four out of five doctors recommend ...". A highly successful ad in the 1970s featured the actor Robert Young (Dr. Marcus Welby, M.D.) proclaiming the health benefits of decaffeinated coffee. His apparent authority had a significant impact. Such are the foibles of the human decision making process, and the nebulous nature of the boundary between reality and fantasy in our lives.

Mormon Culture

Why do 19-year-old pimply-faced boys wear those silly polyester suits while riding bicycles, etc. during the course of serving Mormon missions? Why are all Mormon priesthood holders (even in foreign cultures where this seems to make no sense) strongly encouraged to wear white shirts and ties? Why are little Mormon boys trained to do things in this way? Why do the Mormon authority figures sit on a platform raised about the masses? Why are Mormons encouraged to constantly refer to the wisdom, goodness, reliability of their leaders in their public expressions of faith? Why is it taboo to question the wisdom of Mormon leaders? Why do Mormons emphasize the academic nature of those who write articles about the Book of Mormon and other religious matters, while claiming that the truthfulness of that Book is a matter of faith in any event? I have heard it said the Hugh Nibley has sold more unread books than almost any other author, and believe that there is an element of truth to that. That fact that he wrote the books and is revered by other "smart" people is a kind of security blanket for many Mormons.

If there is one thing that the Mormon Church has down pat, it is the use of persuasive leverage that comes from the creation and exercise of authority.

Scarcity

Social Theory

Anything that is perceived to be scarce is more desirable than it would be were it perceived to be commonly available. For example, the rating of cafeteria food on campus goes up dramatically before the temporary closure of the cafeteria. This is why the "limited time offer" has become so common as to be meaningless. It is why (by my observation) the most successful money raisers for business projects are those who subtly and with credibility (but often falsely) indicate that they don't really need the money they are asking investors for, and that so many others want in that if the investor does not hurry she will not have the chance to

participate. People like this fascinate me. They have the ability to believe the story they tell others, while to an objective observer like me who knows most of the story, it seems incredible. And these folks are not dumb. They are at the bright, articulate end of the spectrum.

Mormon Culture

This "scarcity" concept is near the backbone of religious cultures of all kinds. It is impossible to test drive a religion and decide on the basis of reliable experience that one afterlife is better than another. However, if the public can be convinced that one religion has a monopoly on divine contact and knowledge (the "prophet" concept), nothing else has to be proved.

During times when there was little cultural interaction, the idea that one religion was "right" and all others were "false" was unknown. This idea became part of human culture as peoples intermingled and the religious "professionals" had to differentiate themselves from each other in a competitive environment. The Hebrews or Zoroastrians seem to be the first to have used this concept. Thus, the idea that one god was more real or powerful than others, and hence one religion was better than others, came into being.

Within Mormonism we find many "scarcity" ideas. One of the most powerful is that if you want to live after death with your family in a place too wonderful to describe (something most people would want), there is only one way to get that – by being a fully obedient Mormon. This is a very scarce good. Mormonism has a complete monopoly over it as a result of being god's "one true church", the only church that has a prophet who still communicates directly with god as a result of exclusive authority that has been handed down from prior, authorized representatives of god, starting with Joseph Smith. Countless religious leaders in many different communities have told variations this story innumerable times since the Hebrews or Zoroastrians first discovered how useful this idea was in the competitive marketplace for religious services.

The Mormon Use of Emotionally Charged Experience

It is well established that the emotional range of human experience often dominates the rational. This is thought by some scientists to be due to the fact that there are many more neural pathways leading from the brain's more primitive, emotional equipment (the hippocampus, amygdala, etc.) to its more recently developed, rational equipment (the cerebral cortex, etc.) than the other way around. Hence, when subjected to stimuli that ignite the brain's emotional structures, reason struggles to be heard. (See "Fear Not" by Rudiger Vaas, in "American Scientific Mind" vol. 14, no. 1, 2004, p. 69). This is particularly the case when dealing with phenomena that are not well understood. The feedback system from the rational to the emotional structures in the brain can calm us down if we are confident that we "know" what is going on. Think, for example, of the terror an eclipse of the sun at one time caused. But when our emotions are excited, and we don't "know" what is going on, we are engineered so that emotion usually trumps reason.

Mormon group activities provide many opportunities for sharing emotional experience. This, in effect, supercharges the belief shaping mechanisms described above. That is, if I can influence your beliefs by having you stand up in a sterile university classroom and say some things that you don't really believe, I have a much greater chance to radically influence your beliefs if I can get you to link a statement of belief with something like the powerful feelings related to the love you have for your family, and then have people cry and hug your afterward and assure you that your expression of belief is "true". This marriage of run of the mill belief influencing machinery with powerful emotions is used in many ways by Mormonism.

For example, Mormon testimony meetings are particularly effective belief shaping tools as indicated above. And at the top of that spectrum are testimony meetings held at youth activities such as Stake and Regional Youth Conferences, and particularly those held at the Church sponsored Especially for Youth ("EFY") camps that run each summer. For my take on this kind of experience, see "The Missionary" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20missionary.pdf>. The EFY experience is orchestrated by people who adeptly create a highly charged emotional atmosphere.

Other opportunities for emotional sharing and experience include the following: Teaching Sunday and other classes and bearing testimony (as is required as part of each lesson); Home and Visiting Teaching and the testimony bearing and sharing of personal experiences that are usually part of that process; leading youth and other activities (with its accompanying testimony bearing); daily attendance at Seminary for high school students with its exposure to emotive testimony bearing and other sharing activities; weekly (at least) attendance at Institute for university age young adults; and informal activities with friends that often involve the reinforcement of LDS values.

One of the common denominators of the above emotional experiences within Mormon culture is that the emotions are created respecting one's family, friends, gratitude for life in general, reverence for the beauty of nature, etc. and are then used as evidence that the LDS Church is god's one and only true church. For example, you love your family and have an emotional experience at a youth conference when you are helped to understand why they mean so much to you, and are told that you are feeling the "Spirit", which means that "the Church is true". You meet a girl and have powerful feelings toward her while at a Church activity, and are told that this is because you may have been connected to her in some way in before you both came to Earth, which means that the "Church is true". The same thing is used to explain the close connections that sometimes develop between Mormon missionaries or members and people who they persuade to become Mormon.

You read the Book of Mormon and something in it helps you to gain an insight into human behaviour. Despite the fact that the same thing happens regularly when you watch the Simpsons, you are told that this is evidence that the Book of Mormon is "true", each word in it is inspired by god, etc. and hence that "the Church is true".

You feel anguish and excitement – a powerful combination – when your friends leave on their missions, and then feel relief when you decide to follow their example and go yourself. You are told that this is the Spirit communicating god's will to you and confirming that "the Church is true". Three years later when you are finally reunited with your friends after your own mission, you feel great joy and are told that these feelings certify the divinely inspired nature of what you have done, and hence that the Church is true.

You spend some time with a loving man who happens to be the Patriarch in your Stake, and he says nice things about your potential and you personally while giving you're a Patriarchal Blessing (See my views respecting this experience in general at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.patriarchal%20blessings997829.pdf>). This makes you feel good, and you are assured these feelings are evidence that the Mormon Church is "true" and that its leaders must be obeyed.

The good ladies of the Ward Relief Society bring your family a meal while your wife is sick, so the Church is true. The Prophet tells you to be a good father and husband, and tells a cute story about his walnut tree to make the point memorable, so the Church is true. You are stressed

because it seemed that you are the only one of your family or friends who is not certain that "the Church is true", and so when you follow your church leaders' advice and in public bear your "testimony" that you know "the Church is true", even though you do not yet know or even believe that statement, you feel immense relief and joy, and that means the Church is true.

The above list is potentially endless, so I may as well stop here. The point is that the Mormon Church creates many environments in which strong emotional experiences are likely to occur, and then uses classic magicians' misdirection cues to cause us to interpret these experiences to mean something – the Church is true! – that has nothing necessarily to do with the experiences in question. This process, in essence, provides experiences to us that we need and/or like, and then uses a combination of the psychological buttons noted above, as well as many others, to persuade us to interpret those experiences to mean that we must obey Mormon authority if we want to continue to enjoy them.

What Does the Mormon Use of "Belief Shaping" Tools Mean?

In my view, the Mormon "misdirection" of the run-of-the-mill emotional experiences performs a good part of the "misrecognition" function to which Pierre Bourdieu refers. As noted by David Swartz:

Bourdieu takes his argument to a more general level by arguing that not only is all action interested [as in motivated by concerns related to advancing the personal or group interests of those who engage in the actions] but that much action can be carried out successfully only if its interested character goes "misrecognized". He argues that a great many practices [behaviors required by social custom] could not be performed if they were recognized as emanating from the pursuit of self-interest. [Bourdieu wrote:] "The operation of the gift exchange [a social custom in a primitive group he studied that involved the regular giving of "gifts" that in the aggregate performed within this society the function of the market economy in ours], for example, presupposes individual and collective misrecognition of the ... objective reality of the [gift] exchange. (See David Swartz, "Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu" p. 91).

He went on to note that on the basis of the work of sociologists who calculate the statistical regularities of behaviour, it appears that the action of the gift exchange and other social practices occur on the basis that actors pursue their self-interest, although they will assure the sociologists and each other that self interest has nothing to do with their gift giving, for example, and will provide elaborate reasons for their behaviour that are unrelated to self interest. He then concludes:

It is as if the actors conspire to conceal from their own eyes the self-interested character of their actions." (David Swartz, Culture and Power - The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, p. 91)

Much the same could be said of many aspects of Mormon culture. Mormon behaviour only makes sense if the reality of the foundations of Mormonism, and the reasons for many behaviors required by Mormonism, are misrecognized.

Swartz also says:

Bourdieu understands ideology, or "symbolic violence", as the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic

and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms. Symbolic systems exercise symbolic power "only through the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it". In using the term "symbolic violence" Bourdieu stresses how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination. But symbolic power is a legitimizing power that elicits the consent of both the dominant and the dominated. (David Swartz, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, p. 89)

A full apprehension of Mormon foundations causes questioning in most cases of at least the connection of current Mormon leaders to the posited source of authority (god and his communication to Joseph Smith), and in many cases also causes questions respecting the nature or existence of god him/her/itself. And most importantly, it causes a questioning of the reasonableness of the exchange of present time, effort and other resources for a future good (life in the Celestial Kingdom, etc.) the existence of which depends wholly upon the word of one man who has a long history of deceptive, manipulative behavior when trying to elicit the cooperation of his followers, neighbors and peers (See "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf>).

So, the fact that Mormonism deftly touches all of the persuasion buttons does not indicate that Mormonism is evil. Rather, it is more evidence of the misrecognition pointed to by Bourdieu, and that Mormonism simply another human organization that does not have many checks within its structure on the exercise of power, and so that power is used by the leaders to take advantage of the members in a way that is increasingly unusual in our democratically oriented world.

Cialdini notes that we are dealing with evolutionary phenomena when considering how persuasion tricks are used over time. Successful sales people tend to use these tricks well. If they did not, they would not survive in the long term unless their product were so superior that it sold itself. This is seldom the case in the long term with any organization.

Interestingly, Mormons claim that their success as a church is the result of a superior product, not the use of the persuasion tools described above. How often have we heard something like, "If the Church weren't true, the missionaries would have destroyed it long ago!" That statement misses the point respecting missionary work. Its primary purpose is to commit the missionaries, and their families and other acquaintances (to the extent possible), to "the cause". For such a commitment to exist, there must be a cause. The profile missionary work is given within Mormonism creates just such a cause. This is like the annual "mega trip" for a scout troop. It is the "big tournament" for the ball team. It is the "takeover", "strategic alliance" or "new corporate vision" in the business world. Without such unifying focal points, organizations die. The duty to convert the entire world through the use of 19-year-old kids, and the energy that is created through the mere attempt to do this (no matter how objectively futile it is), is much of what keeps the Mormon church humming along from one generation to another.

Organizations that have survived for a long time must have done what was necessary to persuade many of the legitimacy of their position. Mormonism has been around for a long time. There are two possible explanations for that, with a continuum between them. The first is that what the Mormon Church teaches is true. The second is that the Mormon Church has become adept at using the techniques of persuasion and modifies its stance from time to time to remain relevant to as many of its members and potential members as possible. And this is done largely under the guise of Bourdieu's misrecognition.

As should already be clear, it is my view that the Mormon Church adeptly uses the psychology and sociology of persuasion. And it is also clear to me that the Mormon Church's main foundational claims are have a high probability of being false. See again "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?" <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf>)

Nonetheless, the Mormon Church has become a large enough social force in many places that it meets the human needs for community interaction, support, encouragement, meaning, etc. Mormon communities are supportive, loving places for those who conform to the Mormon way. In effect, obedience to the Mormon rules (including perhaps most importantly that the leadership not be questioned) is an entry price to be paid for inclusion in a warm, inward looking, and in many ways comfortable, community. And Mormonism provides clear, superficially understandable, answers to many of life's most vexing questions. The more uncertain the times and poorly informed the people, the more attractive this is likely to be. And I will admit that in some cases, Mormonism has lifted people from a worse place to something better. This may, however, be a Faustian bargain since the Mormon Church's apparent objective is not to help its members seek the best possible connection to reality and the individual improvement this will bring over time, but rather to become a stronger organization. This often places it at odds with its followers' interests respecting the distribution of information about itself and the reality of which it is part.

And hence, the question of the legitimacy of the Mormon Church's use of persuasion techniques is fairly called into question. In his recent book, "An Insider's View of Mormon Origins", Grant Palmer (a former director of an LDS Church Education System Institute of Religion), for example, indicated that it was well past time that Mormons stopped telling each other fairy tales about their religious foundations. Palmer also questioned the morality of inducing anyone to join the Mormon Church based on the misleading half-truths contained in the missionary discussions. And Cialdini offers some comments respecting the legitimacy, or ethical quality, of differing approaches to the use of the persuasive techniques he described.

Cialdini notes that in most cases it will be in our interest to deal with people who like us, to keep our word, to respect authority, to carefully consider the opinion of the majority, etc. He posits that evolution will hence have built the psychological buttons described above into us for good reason. And if those who use the media and other means to provide us with messages do so ethically (focusing on legitimate, scientific or other data to persuade us to use a drug, for example), all participants in the exchange will be better off. The ad agency will be paid for creating an effective ad. The drug company will sell a useful drug. Many people who can benefit from the drug will use it, etc. However, what about the many cases in which people around us touch our buttons in ways that will work in their interest, but not in ours? What about those whose product is of dubious utility, but through the use of authoritative spokesmen, ingratiating and good looking salespeople, etc., manage to take large amounts of our time and money in exchange for something that does not work?

Cialdini tells us that "knowledge is power". He indicates that as we understand more about how our buttons work, and become more sensitive as to when and how they are pushed, we will become less susceptible to manipulation by others. Our duty is to look behind what we are told; to ask for proof of claims made; to be suspicious of those who would push our buttons without providing credible justification of their actions. The question we should constantly ask ourselves when faced with those who want to touch our psychological buttons, is whether they are putting us in a position where we will know more and have more agency, or whether they are limiting

our access to information, using emotional forces to cause us to make decisions that will benefit them, or otherwise reducing our agency.

Cialdini suggests that we should punish those who we find to have unethically used the techniques of persuasion by at a minimum withdrawing our support from them. The better we become at playing this game, the less often we will be tricked into saying yes, and the more often we will be informed or educated to the point of making decisions with which we are likely to be happy in the long term.

Cialdini concludes with this beautiful, tongue in cheek, illustration of emotional button pushing:

Surely, someone with your splendid intellect can see the unique benefits of this article. And because you look like a helpful person who would want to share such useful information, let me make a request. Would you buy this issue of the magazine for 10 of your friends? Well, if you can't do that, would you show it to just one friend? Wait, don't answer yet. Because I genuinely like you, I am going to throw in – at absolutely no extra cost – a set of references that you can consult to learn more about this little-known topic.

Now will you voice your commitment to help? ... Please recognize that I am pausing politely here. But while I am waiting, I want you to feel totally assured that many others just like you will certainly consent. And I love that shirt you're wearing.

As I typed that last paragraph I was reminded of a letter I received not long ago from Jeffrey Holland in reply to a letter I sent to him. (See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.first%20holland%20lt.pdf> for my first letter to him and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.second%20holland%20lt.pdf> for my second). Holland's letter was warm, complimentary, full of emotion, and completely non-substantive. It adroitly touched most of the buttons referenced above, and so drew the second. I do not expect a response to it.

I do not doubt Holland's sincerity or his good nature. But he is a product of an institution that is virtually sure to overcome the puny efforts of any one man, no matter how good or well intentioned. And his words can only be understood in their institutional context, which I have attempted to describe in part above. Unfortunately, I must conclude that the heavy use in his letter to me of techniques of persuasion was illegitimate – even immoral. He unwittingly (I will grant him that) sought to cause me to suspend my request for legitimate reasons for the Mormon Church's poor behaviour across a wide range of issues by pushing my emotional buttons. He did not address the substance of my concerns.

In my dealings with others respecting the Mormon Church and in all other ways, it is my goal to follow Cialdini's advice with respect to the ethical use of persuasive technique. He concluded his article with these words:

... as long as we [distinguish between manipulation and principled persuasion in] our own attempts to influence others, we can legitimately commission the six principles. In seeking to persuade by pointing to the presence of genuine expertise, growing social validation, pertinent commitments or real opportunities for cooperation, and so on, we serve the interests of both parties and enhance the quality of the social fabric in the bargain.

There is an objective worth pursuing. Regrettably, most Mormons do not know enough about their faith to discharge this burden. This is one of many fundamental flaws of the Mormon

missionary and "perfecting the Saints" systems. The members, as well as the missionaries, are ignorant of the real story, and so are capable of giving emotional testimony to misleading half-truths, and incapable of making appropriate use of authority, validation, etc. when they communicate their message to others. In short, they are utterly unreliable sources of information about Mormonism. Grant Palmer is, in effect, calling the Church to repentance in this regard.

The examples set by the Mormon Church's leaders' are discouraging on this front. Mormon Apostles Boyd Packer and Dallin Oaks have been on the record for many years to advocate the telling of misleading half-truths. See "Should the Mormon Church Come Clean?" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/come%20clean.pdf> for a summary. And I have already expressed my opinion regard Holland.

Conclusion

The better our connection to reality, the better off we are likely to be both in terms of avoiding deception ourselves, and ethically using our persuasive powers with others. If the Mormon Church will not help its members to connect to reality, they will have to look elsewhere for that assistance. This is what I have done. And now that the Mormon Church is subjected to the same scrutiny in my life that any potential provider of goods or services would be, I have found it to be at the far end of the unethical part of the spectrum in its use of persuasive techniques. This is not because Mormons are bad, or their leadership evil. It is because the Mormon Church has been allowed for far too long to operate without being called to account for its deceptive practices, and so many Mormons – both leaders and followers – "misrecognize" the nature of their experience.

As Mormons become more connected to reality, some have begun to call for an accounting from their religious leaders. I am a member of that growing chorus.