

Mormon Polygamy, Chaos Theory and the Law of Unintended Consequences

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

Introduction

Chaos theory is used to describe many natural phenomena, such as weather systems, that are extremely complex. In such systems, tiny changes in initial condition cause massive changes in outcome. In mathematic terms, "chaotic systems are examples of unstable motion because each trajectory is identified with distinct initial conditions that, no matter how close, diverge exponentially over time. In deterministic chaos the equations of motion are deterministic, but the outcome appears random due to the sensitivity to initial conditions. The errors in chaotic systems grow at an exponential rate. So that the randomness of chaotic motion is not simply the result of our ignorance of the initial conditions, but rather is fundamental. More information must be processed to maintain the same level of accuracy and, thus, the system is truly unpredictable." See http://zebu.uoregon.edu/~js/21st_century_science/lectures/lec08.html

This is the old butterfly wing in Brazil causes tornado in Texas idea.

The law of unintended consequences is what it suggests. Adam Smith's invisible hand in economics is a classic example – the selfish behaviour of each individual creates an efficient way of distributing resources throughout society and encouraging production.

I suggest that we think of polygamy in light of these two laws. My analysis will seem disrespectful to some. To take some of the edge off that, I note that I am not sure how pre-meditated the actions of Joseph Smith (JS) or any of his "buddies", as I call them, were. I have read enough about cognitive dissonance and rationalization in the psychological literature lately to be sure that they could have believed they were doing God's will. Pierre Bourdieu and other social scientists have shown that the leaders and members of most human groups are unable to see the objective reality of their own actions. So, from my point of view it does not much matter whether JS and Co. were deluded in their belief that God was commanding them to do the things outlined below, or were conscious frauds, or a mixture of the two. The point is that their behavioural patterns are similar to others that are well known within human groups, and God or other similarly distant

and unverifiable sources of authority are typically used to justify such behaviour.

How Polygamy Got Started

JS behaves in typical alpha male fashion and gets all the sex he can from the females in his group. See Dr. John Ratey (Harvard Medical School), "Shadow Syndromes", for a summary of how certain charismatic leadership types tend toward promiscuous behaviour. He uses Bill Clinton as the archetype. This personality profile fits JS, Jimmy Swaggart et al. like a glove.

Since JS is a religious leader, he has to find an excuse for this behaviour that is consistent with that role, or he will lose his position of authority. This is a desperate situation that calls for a desperate solution. But JS is a creative guy, a great story teller and a risk taker, and so he tells at least some and perhaps all of the women involved that God ordered him to have sex with them, that that God told him that if he did not do it he and the women that turned him down would be destroyed, and that if he did it both he and the women he did it with would go to the CK. Its amazing how creative one can get in a tight spot, like with a woman who is reluctant to have sex with you. And what the hell - it's a crazy story but worth a shot.

Well, JS's story worked like a charm. Better than anything he had come up with while selling his treasure hunting services. This "God thing" really works! It gave some ladies the conscience easing excuse they needed to have a go at the "big man". And other, more virtuous, women were likely frightened into having sex. After all, the man they had been taught to revere as the Mouth of God was telling them that God commanded them to have sex with him (JS, that is - it is easy to confuse JS with God, since that conscience easing little voice in JS's head was God).

And by the way, let's be clear about what kind of a proposition JS made to these women. We are not talking about polygamous marriage as practiced by Brigham Young (BY) in Utah, or those nice folk at Colorado City. What JS asked these women for nothing as invasive as that. All he wanted was "occasional, secret sex". No other commitment was required until after death at which time "life" (such as it is after death, that is) would be unbelievably wonderful for all concerned. And by occasional, he meant only when the JS felt like it (the usual guy thing) and was in the neighbourhood and not having sex with any of the many other women in the program. In effect, this might not be more than a one nighter (or afternooner, or morningner ...) in many cases.

This sales pitch got JS under the skirts of many women. So many we don't

know who they all were. Todd Compton's book "In Sacred Loneliness" provides the most scholarly and accurate evidence available on this topic.

JS probably did not bother to "marry" after the fact some of his earliest conquests, with whom he did not get caught. God, after all, knew who JS's spiritual wives were and would honour any deal without paperwork. But, after he had been caught a few times and had told his story to enough people, it kind of hardened into a tradition - he would proposition a woman in the manner indicated and then have a little ceremony of some sort to make the deal legit. Then they could have sex. But, if the ceremony came after the sex that did not matter. God is pretty flexible when it comes to details of this nature. And it sure is handy to be able to make up the rules as you go. Kind of like playing Monopoly with a six year old.

JS had one of the best pick up lines of all time, in my view. It is the same one used by Jim Jones and innumerable other charismatic religious leaders. Even some Buddhist leaders - who seem so placid - are in on this game (See <http://www.fwbo-files.com/yashomitra.htm>). Religiously inclined people will always be vulnerable to charismatic, authoritarian leaders.

As it turns out, JS's deal, when offered with God's stamp of approval, is hard to turn down - have as much sex as you can get, and as a result everyone involved goes to heaven for sure. What a Get Out of Jail card! And, it works particularly well in communities where emotional experience has become the basis for knowing. That is, if I have a powerful emotional experience, the leaders in my religious community can tell me what that means, and so I can come to know things they want me to know. Once I know these things, I am under their control to a large measure. For example, I feel something unusual and strong when I read the Book of Mormon after my Mother has tearfully told me that she knows it is true, and that if I can't find out that it is true we are going to have to go our separate ways when we die. This feeling means that the BofM really is true, and it does not matter what all those stupid scientists say about DNA, horses, steel swords, etc. I can "know" solely on the basis of the powerful feelings I have, and no evidence can shake my belief once it is firmly rooted. And, I am very proud of that.

By the same token, when as a 16 year old girl (or married woman - it does not matter) I finally am granted a personal audience with God's prophet, and feel overwhelmed and very emotional as a result of this honour, these special feelings mean that there really is a God and he does want me to have sex with the prophet when the prophet tells me that this is what God has ordered us to do. Hallelujah! I felt my temperature rise the first time I saw him, he being the alpha male of my group and all, and now God has confirmed that this is what he wants me to do! And to think I felt guilty

about my sinful feelings!

The Law of Unintended Consequences

Well, once JS has this little project nicely underway, the law of unintended consequences kicks in. News of this kind of thing inevitably spreads. So, JS had the chance to use his "God ordered me to do get all the sex I could" line on his buddies as they confronted him respecting rumours about his promiscuity. It appears that he lied to them until that would not work anymore, and then taught them the tricks of the trade and told them that God had commanded that THEY must have as much sex as they could get, and that he had lied to them before because God told him to do that too. Why? Well, obviously because they were not yet ready to hear the "truth" about all the sex they were required to try to get. This stuff was for only the most spiritually advanced, after all. And it just so happened that everyone who found out about what JS was doing, and confronted him in the right way, suddenly became spiritually advanced enough to become part of the club.

Hmmmm. This is the kind of program that is easy to sell – as much sex as you want, and you only go to heaven IF you have lots of sex. "Sign me up", said many of JS's buddies. And of course, since this was the "advanced" program it had to be kept hush hush.

There were a few guys who it appears were so obviously spiritually advanced that they were admitted to the club just because they would be cool club members. And oddly enough, Hyrum Smith seems to be one of the late entrants. He denied polygamy to near the end, because he did not know about it. This might show how dull witted – or perhaps just naïve – he was. And, it is useful in any event to have a few people around who are in the dark and hence can bear fervent, sincere testimony as to their actual belief that polygamy is not part of Mormonism when awkward questions are asked.

The real puzzling case was William Law. Oh sure, even I might get a little twisted if someone tells my wife that she is supposed to have sex with him and keep quiet about it in order to get her and me into heaven. But even after JS invited Law into the club he would not play ball, and then insisted on telling everyone about it. And that caused all kinds of trouble.

The only ones to be thrown out of the club were those who were so ham handed in their choice of women or use of the pick up line that the women they propositioned refused, and then tattled on them. What kind of an alpha male would fail in that fashion? So out of the club you go for causing problems for the rest of the club members. Kind of like a member of Augusta

writing a letter to the press saying women SHOULD be members – you just don't to that.

Sure, some women are not good sports at all about this kind of thing. But with a few questions you can weed them out, especially after those special and secret School of Prophets lesson on this interesting topic. So, a few losers had to be turfed. Some of them were mad enough about this that they wrote books about their experience with JS and this club, which was obviously against club rules. Another club rule was that all accusations of former club members who broke their oath of secrecy must be denied regardless of accuracy. This is because all non-club members (by definition of not being club members) were not yet ready to hear about God's new sexual code of conduct, because it was for only the most spiritually advanced. The spiritually underdeveloped people had to be protected from information that would be dangerous to their spiritual health. As long as all club members kept that rule, and only a few of the really clumsy ones were thrown out, most people would believe the club members and disbelieve the clumsy ones. But even at that, there were awkward moments, like when JS propositioned Orson Pratt's wife Sarah, and Orson almost committed suicide when he found out. That shook a few people up. But, he got over it and so did almost everyone else.

And, if there was one thing JS was really good at it was rationalization. The ends justifies the means was his favourite rule. He made that very clear to one young lady who he propositioned and turned him down. She was Sidney Ridgon's daughter, and so JS had to be careful with her. He wrote her a nice letter that clearly explained that there are no absolute rules, and that things (like sex) that are not permitted by God in some cases are permitted in others. And since he was God's prophet, he could advise her of what was what in that regard.

Finally, it was obvious that keeping the club going was more important than the truth as told by some club-rule-breaker. In fact, keeping the club going was more important than just about any truth, because keeping the club going had become critical to keeping JS in control. If the club goes down, he probably goes with it.

JS never really went public with this program even though many people can't keep secrets, even after giving oaths (in some cases several times). As a result, the heat got pretty hot. So, JS wrote D&C 132 which made polygamy "official", and tried to use that to get Emma onside. Sincere Hyrum, finally in the know, even tried to help him out. But Emma was one of those real poor sports. She would likely not even have participated in club activities even if she were not JS's wife, and no one would have been dumb

enough to ask her. She hated the club, so much so that for many years she denied its existence even though she caught JS deep in the middle of important club business on at least one, and likely several, occasions.

So, JS and his buddies put D&C 132 in the bottom drawer. By then enough of the buddies were involved that they backed him up. JS was good at building coalitions like this – would just make his interests lined up with their. "You have lots of sex, and that means you and me are in the same boat!" Kind of like the Council of Fifty – all they had to do was help him become Ruler of the World and each of them (former Danites mostly and all blood-oath-to-secrecy bound Masons) would be Princes. Old JS had a real knack with people!

Things eventually got very hot - so hot that the club lost its president, treasurer, CEO etc. and had other much more serious things to deal with than regular club business. And there were so many rumours about the club. But the people were still not ready for the truth, so the club members just laid low. And good thing they did. JS was right about the people not being ready for the truth. A whole bunch quit being Mormons because of the "rumours" and some things JS did about them. Not that that justified the people who then killed him, but what with his destruction of the newspaper and all of those wild rumours about his having sex with all kinds of women, that is kind of understandable. And that English gal (another serious poor sport) who actually signed an affidavit describing her invitation from first BY, and then JS (she was so lucky, and good looking! Right to the top!) to join the club did not help matters. So, a lot of the "less spiritual" members got out.

The Move to Utah – More Unintended Consequences

Things got so hot that BY decided that it was best to just get the faithful out of town. A few states away, actually. To the middle of a desert. With no way back. Those who went were committed – spiritually, philosophically and existentially. There is nothing quite like having no alternative to get one over the messy details of things like theology. It is likely not a coincidence that the sociologists tell us that for a new religion to reach critical mass, it needs a monopoly environment to build its strength. BY was one smart, or dumb lucky, or inspired, guy.

Anyway, things calmed down in Utah. Construction was underway on a great new clubhouse, and so many rumours were circulating about the club that it was time to go public. And just what could the "less spiritual" do now? Walk back to Nauvoo? By themselves? Things went much smoother this time around.

A lot of people wanted in. This was a popular club, for all the good reasons noted above! So, D&C 132 was pulled out, dusted off and JS's story was told. Sort of, anyway. Since he wasn't around to tell it, BY told it for him. And, as you know, that BY was quite a story teller! He might have screwed up a few ... details (that was the word I was looking for), but he got the gist of the story out. Oh, and by the way, BY also reminded us that JS said that the blacks were never to have the priesthood. That Elijah Abel guy slipped through (several times it appears) while JS was not looking - probably had his eye on some club business. But that Abel was damn sure not to be let into the club!

So re polygamy - Yup, BY confirmed that God really had commanded the club members to have as much sex as they could persuade the good women of their community to give them. But, being a member of the club was not as much fun as it used to be. There was a new rule - or maybe it was an old rule that JS had not really enforced. To be a member of the club, you had to make it appear that you were really obedient to any and all rules the club president laid down. And BY was much more of a drag than JS was with the rules. JS was so busy with club business that he didn't have a lot of rules. But BY! Rules, rules, rules. Being in the club was still pretty cool though, and lots wanted in. It was, by far, the best club in Utah, except perhaps for one. And being in the polygamy club often meant that you got to be in the other one - the Council of Seventy - which was way cool, and secret. Sort of, anyway.

When a club gets to a certain size, it kinds of just keeps going under its own momentum. So the club soon had branches in Canada and Mexico, and people were coming from all over the world to be part of the club - and get a chance to start life in the New World as well. That did have something to do with their coming too. Pretty soon being in the club was mixed up with so many things that it was hardly a club anymore. And it certainly wasn't secret. It turned out that keeping the club secret was a lot more important than most club members realized. JS understood this. But, when something is a good deal as this club was, it is just hard to keep it quiet.

Prophetic Leadership

So, the Church struggled along while the club became a social institution. Finally, those hypocritical asses back East (they have mistresses - people they secretly have sex with - how immoral is that!) came down hard on Utah and forced polygamy to be abandoned. Well, the club members fought that one tooth and nail. They lied about it; they cheated; they keep performing secret marriages and shacking up with the their polygamous spouses

whenever they could get away with it; and finally they said that they were disbanding the club and they "really meant it" this time, and tried to stop. But they couldn't. The club's roots were so deep, and they had lied so often that it was impossible for those who find truth in emotion to tell what was true and what was not. And besides, you can't underestimate what a good deal polygamy is, for some people. The sex part of it was not that great anymore, because all kinds of responsibilities go along with the sex. Damn lawyers! But, if you like being head honcho - having people jump when you say jump - this is still the deal for you. And, oddly enough, some people like being told what to do. Especially if they believe that they will be saved in heaven if they obey.

And, the most amazing thing happened! After God's prophets fought, lied, etc. for years to save the club, and finally let it go, the Church prospered. It went mainstream, where it could never have gone before. A miracle happened! People started to like Mormons! Imagine that. As soon as the Mormons started to behave like everyone else (sort of, at least), except they made it look like they were doing even better than the rest of America at the things Americans say are important (like being patriotic, loving parents), the rest of America start to like the Mormons! Isn't God amazing! He inspired the prophets to fight, and lie and crawl over broken glass to save the club, and swear that as soon as they could they would bring it back, and then when they abandoned it the Church takes off like a rocket! All we have to do is trust in God, and he will guide us!

So, how is that for unintended consequences. One guy wants to get laid and has willing partners, but because he get caught and everyone thinks he is a prophet he has to make up polygamy, and away we go from there. You end up the Lafferty's, Colorado City, and countless "regular" folk like me who have polygamous grandparents or great grandparents. Not to mention the unbelievable roller coaster in between. Go figure.

Chaos Theory

And chaos theory? What if Emma had blown JS's head off when she found out about Fanny Alger or whoever came before her? Or what if something else of a merely painful nature occurred relative to his early encounters that discouraged him from continuing? What was the name of the guy who had his wee wee cut off again? Or what if the first woman JS propositioned reacted as did William Law's wife, and had a husband like William? What if Sidney Rigdon had been more like William Law when JS propositioned Rigdon's daughter? What if JS and Emma had sex every night, as superhuman as that would have been for a frontier woman? I can think of any number of relatively small changes to conditions near the beginning of

the process that would radically alter the conclusion, not just respecting polygamy but the entire Mormon movement. It could have been nipped in the bud. However, I am not certain that the degree of these changes is small enough to meet the standards of chaos theory. If not, the analogy is in any event useful.

Conclusion

It is my view that the story of Mormon polygamy is one of the most fascinating Mormonism has to offer from many points of view.