"Thy People Shall Be My People": Assimilation and Diffusion among Modern Day Missionaries

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Abstract

Social science has long been interested in understanding culture and the spread and influence of one culture to another. In the modern era with advancements in travel and communication, the rapid rate in which culture is diffused is unprecedented. This study examines the recent interactions between 682 former missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and the countries in which they once served and finds that meaningful diffusion and assimilation took place among these missionaries. Although many studies have examined the influence of Christian missionaries on different cultures and the affect these cultures had on the missionaries, these studies focused on earlier times and with missionaries serving longer than LDS missionaries. With approximately 85,000 LDS missionaries currently serving throughout the world, it is important to understand what affects their experiences with different cultures and people will have on them and on the people they serve.

Keywords: Cultural diffusion, cultural assimilation, missionaries, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Introduction

Culture is the defining characteristics of a civilization. Culture develops over time with various customs, ideas, and values being introduced and developed into society and the normative structure by which society attempts to govern itself is established. Parts of a culture endures for extended periods, but other parts are ever changing - some quickly and others very slowly or at such a slow pace that it seems to be constant.

Much of the change that occurs in a culture can be explained by diffusion, a social process through which ideas, technology, practices, and parts of the normative structure are spread from one group of people to another (Ogburn, 1922; see Rogers, 1995). Historically this diffusion moved from one group of people to a contiguous group, or one that was nearby geographically (Brown, 1989; Rogers, 1995; Tolney, 1995). As these groups interacted for purposes of trade, conquest, or travel, change took place within each (Burt, 1987; Fliegel, 1993; Rogers and Kinkaid, 1981; Rosero-Bixby and Casterline, 1994).

In earlier times, such contact took place with groups that lived close to each other. Other contacts came about only with conquest, long marches, or dangerous sailing, which usually had accompanying hardships, cost, and danger. Over time, travel and communication became easier and more frequent and thus the influence of diffusion can take place more often and more rapidly in today's world.

The development of jet aircraft, for example, has permitted frequent travel among members of different societies around the world, and the development of computers, and its offshoots such as the Internet, email, and Facebook, has brought about almost instant communication and more frequent contact among different peoples.

Although increased interaction may at times give rise to contention and conflict, studies indicate that more frequent contact and familiarity tends to increase positive feelings among societies and people (Dewar and Dutton, 1986; Rogers, 1995). Thus, the more the interaction among individuals from different societies, the more the attraction process increases, resulting in the people in one society liking the others and adopting at least some elements of their culture.

Over centuries, one of the groups in which diffusion and assimilation took place was among Christian missionaries. Some of those missionaries traveled to *save the heathen* with the goal of making Christians of the non-Christian, while others attempted to ameliorate the problems individuals faced or to uplift society as a whole. Historically these encounters resulted in changes in the missionary and in the host society who was the target of the effort. These interactions yielded assimilation of some parts of the culture by the other society, although not necessarily as the missionaries would have liked (Barber, 1995; Bourne, 2002; Brockey, 2007; Hackel, 2005; Kidwell, 1995; Lightfoot, 2005; Martin and Nicholas, 2010; McLoughlin, 1995; Natarajan, 1977; Stamps, 2002; Taylor, 1984).

To gain a better understanding of diffusion and assimilation, particularly among modern day missionaries, this article examines recent encounters among former missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and the countries in which they served. Using data from 682 former Mormon missionaries, this study examines diffusion and assimilation by looking at how many of these former missionaries have returned to their missions to visit or live, married someone from their missions, continue to speak and read the language they learned on their mission, and evaluates the interchange of customs and mannerisms between the missionaries and the natives.

Missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

For decades the LDS church has taught boys at an early age to prepare to serve a two-year mission when they are 19 years of age. Girls are also taught they can serve missions, but it is not emphasized and they are not necessarily encouraged to go on missions. The relative number and percentage of missionaries by sex has varied over time but now, as in the past, there are far more missionaries who are young men than young women (Walch, 2014).

The LDS church has missionaries throughout the world and chooses where each missionary will serve. After submitting their mission papers, the prospective missionaries and their families eagerly await where they will spend the next two years of their lives. Most often the missionaries and their families pay for the mission and are not paid or reimbursed for their service.

Missionaries are assigned a companion and are with that companion 24 hours a day until the companionship is changed, which usually occurs after serving together between one and three-or-more months. As with the mission assignment, missionaries do not choose the companions with whom they will serve. Missionaries who are sent to foreign countries usually have to learn another language, and it is not uncommon for American missionaries who are serving outside the United States to serve with missionaries who are not from the United States, many of whom do not speak English.

In October 2012, at the church's semi-annual General Conference, Thomas S. Monson, president of the LDS church, announced the church was lowering the age for young men from 19 to 18 years old and for young women from 21 to 19 years old. The result was an immediate influx of young men and young women entering the mission field, increasing the number of missionaries from about 58,000 when the announcement was made to over 85,000 in 2014 (Walch, 2014). There have never been more LDS missionaries in the field than now.

Method and Data

To learn more about the cultural assimilation among missionaries and their host missions, students in introductory sociology classes at Brigham Young University were asked to obtain information from individuals within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who had completed their missionary service. These general education or core classes were selected because students from various fields of study were enrolled.

The students were instructed to obtain information from five returned missionaries, three of whom were to be at least 50 years of age. Some of these individuals (returned missionaries) were other students attending Brigham Young University, some were family members, and others were acquaintances or others whom the students found cooperative with the project. It was assumed that many of the respondents would be young university students and therefore would not have had enough time to visit their mission field following their mission. On the other hand, those over fifty years of age would have been off their missions for decades, which would facilitate finding out more about possible long term ties with people in their mission field, and to examine whether the possible assimilation that may have occurred had made any permanent changes. Respondents were asked whether they had returned to visit their mission area, married someone from the area in which they served, retained customs and mannerisms from their mission areas, were aware of missionaries transferring customs and mannerisms to the people in their mission area, whether they still speak and read the language of their mission, and how many returned to live in the area of their mission.

Usable information was collected from 682 returned missionaries. This is an accidental sample for purposes of illustration and is not representative of all returned missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Recent scholarship suggests that "LDS missionaries are perhaps the best type of subjects….to testing intercultural theories," such as assimilation and diffusion (Callahan 2010, pp. 4-5). As a result, LDS returned missionaries have increasingly been the focus of research, particularly those studying social and cultural processes (e.g., Aaby and Hvalkof, 1981; Alves, 1985; Bastian, 1985; Camaroff, 1985; Camaroff and Camaroff, J. 1986; Flora, 1976; Harding, 1987; Knowlton, 1982; Knowlton, 1988, Knowlton 2001; Kogan, 2009; Numano, 2006; Numano, 2010; Stoll, 1991; Underwood, 2000).

LDS missionaries live in the assigned country for at least 22 months for men and 16 months for women (they train the first two months in a Missionary Training Center, which is sometimes in the country in which they will serve) and are fully enveloped in the culture and people. Although willing to serve where they are called, they do not choose where they serve and thus likely have had little knowledge and interaction with a country and its culture before they are sent on their missions. They learn the language of the country in which they serve and have dinner in people's homes, preach the gospel in the streets, shop in the stores, often have companions from another country than theirs, and in many other ways are divorced from the comfort zone of home. Even missionaries who serve in their native country are sent to different parts of their country, and live with companions and associate with people who may be different from themselves in cultural characteristics, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other background and personal characteristics. Regardless of where they serve, the missionaries are exposed to other types of people, and in turn, they are exposed to new ideas, customs, and mannerisms.

Findings

Table 1 show that missions had a profound effect on returned missionaries and suggest that diffusion and assimilation took place. When asked whether they had visited their missions subsequent to their release from their mission, 55 percent said they had visited their mission area. There were a total of 818 visits made to the mission area in which they served, ranging from those who had only made one visit to a high of 50 visits. Most of the visits were by older returned missionaries and many of the missionaries who had not visited volunteered that they planned to visit in the future.

Most former missionaries want to return to their mission fields because they love the people, the food, the beauty of the place, among other reasons, and often want to share their experiences with their spouse and other family members. A return to the mission field provides additional reinforcement or perhaps even introduction of new elements of the culture to assimilate, as well as an opportunity for family members who have traveled with the returned missionary to be introduced to the culture. In addition, the fact they make return visits to their missions is a likely indicator they have already shared their experiences and love of their missions through the years with family members, and perhaps even those they associate with outside their families. This additional exposure indicates positive feelings toward the people and land of their mission.

Table 1: Engagement of Return Missionaries by Percentage and Total Number

Sample Size	682
Gender	
Males	84 (574)
Females	16 (108)
Location of Mission	
Foreign, Non-English Speaking	35 (237)
Foreign, English Speaking	6 (42)
United States	59 (403)
Return to visit mission area	55 (378)
Married someone from the area in which they served	11 (74)
Still have customs and mannerisms from their mission area	17 (116)
Aware of missionaries transferring customs and mannerisms to the people in their mission area	24 (164)
Foreign Speaking Missions (N=237):	
Still speak the language of their mission	93 (220)
Still read the language of their mission	54 (128)
Returned to live in the area of their mission	19 (44)

Another factor that would impact the inter-cultural contact would be marriage to a person from the mission field. We found that 11 percent of the missionaries married a person from their mission, and some of the respondents were not yet married and may still enter into such a marriage. Such a commitment would place former missionaries in a position to be more permanently exposed to these cultural influences, perhaps resulting in couples speaking to each other in languages other than English, leading to more trips to the mission area, and, if nothing else, having a shared experience of a different culture. In addition, the children would have increased two-culture exposure compared with those whose parents were not from different cultures. Former missionaries who served in a foreign-language speaking mission were asked if they still spoke or read the language of their mission. Ninety-three percent reported that they can still speak the language and 54 percent of them still read in the language occasionally. Many said they seek people to speak with so that they can use the language they spoke on their mission. Language is a critical factor in diffusion among people. Language takes people beyond their immediate experiences and environment and allows culture to develop. A shared language helps people better understand the past and develop a shared perception about the future, which leads to social change, diffusion and assimilation (Tiemann, McNeal, Lucal, and Ender, 2010).

Gestures and mannerisms are another important way in which individuals communicate with one another. Gestures and mannerisms at times facilitate communication but also can lead to misunderstanding, embarrassment, or worse, because they vary so much around the world (Rogers, 1995; Tiemann, McNeal, Lucal, and Ender, 2010). This study found that even though most returned missionaries speak the language, have visited their mission fields, and clearly have an affinity and love for the area in which they served, only 17 percent indicated that they still had mannerisms, customs, and behavior that they had acquired in the mission field. These included eating different foods, cooking differently, removing shoes when in the house, snapping fingers, kissing on the cheek, crouching on the knees, learning to like different music, burping, rapping, breathing in as one speaks, pointing with the lips, using decorations in the home like they saw on the mission, using slang from their new language, and dressing in different styles. It seems the missionaries adapted while on their missions, but once they returned home they resumed the customs and manners they held the first 19 years of their lives and never lost when they were on their missions.

Interestingly, more returned missionaries (24 percent) thought the natives in their mission picked up some customs and mannerisms from the missionaries. These included missionaries teaching the natives to use different foods (such as popcorn and pancakes), shaking hands, using different phrases of slang, getting married instead of cohabitating, having better hygiene habits, giving each other *high fives,* and hugging. Some reported that infants were named after missionaries, thus introducing new names into the culture. Such diffusion is unlikely with limited contact among cultures. The instances returned missionaries thought of were likely from converted members of the LDS church who typically would have frequent contact with American missionaries, ranging from Sunday church services to missionaries visiting their homes to teach lessons or have dinner.

The constant interaction with American missionaries is likely needed for the transmitting of American customs and mannerisms (Rogers, 2014).

Conclusion

This study found that diffusion seemed to have taken place at many levels. It is significant that it occurred in a group that spent no more than two years in an area and did not have a choice in going to the mission they were assigned. They volunteered to go without knowing whether they were going to be assigned to Paris, Texas or Paris, France, and very likely did not grow up wanting to go to the area they ended up being assigned to. Rather, their purpose was to spread the gospel in whatever corner of the world the church would send them. Although most of them would have seen their goal as the spread of the gospel, they immersed themselves in the area, the language, and the culture, and returned from their missions in love with the people, the country, and their missions. This affection for their missions is manifested in their retaining their language skills, traveling back to their mission areas, and even marrying those they met on their missions, among other things.

These findings should be considered by countries that host missionaries. Some countries are reticent or do not give visas to Americans to serve missions in their countries. They do not want the religion spreading in their country, and relatedly, fear losing their cultural identity to what many identify as an American church and American culture. Given that 25 percent of the returned missionaries believe that missionaries did transmit parts of their culture and customs to the natives, this is perhaps a valid concern. However, this study also shows the tremendous goodwill that develops between missionaries and the people they leave behind. Returned missionaries become effective ambassadors when they return home for the countries in which they served (Stamps, 2002, 110).

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