

## Why Some Leave Mormonism and Others Stay: An Explanatory Hypothesis

By Steven Garff

The question of why some people become disaffected with Mormonism while others do not is the source of frequent, heated debate. Most common attempts to answer this question draw on personal narrative or partisan assumptions and are usually unhelpful and often offensive when applied to others and to groups generally. I want to contrast many of these most common explanations with an alternate explanatory hypothesis inspired by contemporary scientific research on relationship stability. Specifically, I draw on the research of psychologist John Gottman which devised an effective method of predicting and describing marital stability through direct observation and mathematical analysis.

With what appears to be unprecedented and rising numbers of Mormons becoming disaffected in recent years, questions and explanations concerning the ultimate causes of this disaffection have value to a broad range of people interested in Mormonism and Mormon studies, including scholars, apologists, critics, church leaders, and ordinary Mormons and former Mormons.

The question of why some people stay and are able to make Mormonism work while other people can't and abandon the faith has puzzled me for over ten years now, when I first became involved with online Mormonism and believer/ex-believer dialogue. I wanted to know, "what makes the difference." And every explanation that I examined failed. About a year ago, I came to the conclusion that there is no overarching explanation that can account for any significant percentage of the cases, that this process is just too individual and unique from person to person to come to any meaningful conclusions as to people gradually. I have changed my mind.

What an explanatory hypothesis would look like

This is in the realm of social science, so I am looking for something with the explanatory power of a social science theory. It does not have to be a universal, iron-clad law of physics that fully accounts for every case. However, it cannot be something that is limited to just a few individuals. Rather, it must be something that can explain enough data that we can see it as a trend.

An important caveat at this point is that when it comes to disaffected and exmormons, I am examining a particular kind of exmormon. This is the person who is vocal about their disaffection. It is important to remember that, while these individuals are the face of exmormonism. They actually represent a fairly small subset of exmormons. Most exmormons are people who simply drift away from Mormonism as teenagers, college students, or new converts. Though my explanatory hypothesis is not explicitly geared at these "drifters," I believe that it actually accounts for most of them as well. We'll get to that later.

Failed explanations

Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate what an explanatory hypothesis must accomplish is to look at some explanations that are commonly proffered on this question and why they fail to measure up.

Just a reminder and caveat: Most, if not all, of these explanations are likely true for some individuals. And all of them are used by some specific individuals to explain why they left the church or stayed in the church, or by others to explain why specific individuals besides them stayed or left. However, though you may find something that is true for an individual or individuals, it does not mean that it is a trend that holds across the group.

In addition, I am somewhat suspicious of individual narratives because people tend shape them to make themselves look good and justify themselves. For example, an exmormon for which #6 (below) is actually the true explanation may be likely construct a narrative around #1 and a believer for which #1 is true may likely construct a narrative around something like #6 instead. We all don't want to blame ourselves or look bad, even to ourselves.

1. Exmormons became exmormons because they learned the facts about Mormonism, believers stay believers because they have not learned the facts. There are just too many counter examples to allow this explanation to account for a broad trend. I don't think the difference between Richard Bushman and Richard Packham or between Dan Vogel and Dan Peterson is how many facts they know about Mormonism, including the troubling ones. There are so many people who stay in the church who are aware of all or most of the troubling facts, people from scholars (like Bushman, Mauss, Givens, and Barlow), to some NOMs, to apologists, to ordinary members who are interested in accurate history. On the other hand, there are many people who decide to leave the church without knowing much of the details, which leads into 2.

2. Exmormons study church history a little; believers study it a lot. This is basically the reverse of 1 and fails for the exact same reasons. There are too many counter examples. Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe come to mind.

3. Exmormons think critically about their faith, believers have not, they may know the facts, but they lack the capacity to assess what they mean. The problem with this theory, besides insulting people's intelligence, is that there are too many counter examples. There are so many believers in Mormon Studies programs and publishing who think critically about Mormonism for a living.

4. Exmormons see things in black and white; believers see the nuance. I will admit that a long time ago, this was the explanation I believed. It is so tempting to accept. There are just so many exmormons who see and assess Mormonism in bivalent simplistic terms (to be fair many of them can give sophisticated and nuanced arguments for why Mormonism should be viewed that way). The problem is that there are also many, many believers who see things this way as well. But, what destroyed this explanation for me was my dialogues with exmormons in which I encountered many people who do in fact see Mormonism from a nuanced perspective.

5. Mormons are brainwashed; exmormons have overcome this brainwashing. First off, brainwashing is strapping someone to a chair with those *A Clockwork Orange* eye thingies and forcing them to watch garbage until they are completely mentally broken down. Teaching kids primary songs and missionary discussions are not brainwashing; they are propagandizing. Regardless, the problem is that, even if true, it does not explain why some people overcome "brainwashing" and others do not.

6. Exmormons just want to sin; Mormons stay true to righteousness. Again, there are too many counter examples. There are so many good, upstanding, honest, moral people who

are leaving. Furthermore, explanations that go to someone's character are unfalsifiable and meaningless.

7. Mormons just stay because their family is being held hostage. This fails to account for the many exmormons who leave in spite of family members who stay, often at great and terrible cost. Furthermore, this assumes, problematically, that those who stay are not believers, or are not genuine, or are engaged in self-deception (see #3).

8. Believers are engaged in "mental gymnastics." this one is very similar to #3 and fails for the same reasons. Furthermore, we all have to engage in complex thinking to make sense of whatever sophisticated worldview we hold. These points aside, this explanation fails because, even if true, it does not account for why believers go through the trouble of mental gymnastics in the first place.

9. Exmormons were offended. Believers were not. Again, too many counter examples. Many of the greatest injustices committed by people in the church have been committed against those who remained its most ardent supporters. Perhaps the biggest problem is that it is a "blame the victim" mindset.

10. It's a choice. I choose to believe. I choose to leave.

I actually believe that this is ultimately true, at least in some cases. However, my personal take on doxastic voluntarism aside, this explanation fails as an explanatory hypothesis because it is not an explanation. The question remains *why* do some choose one and some choose the other. Even if people ultimately do decide, there should still be patterns that manifest in their choices based on the surrounding environment. Unless you want accept that it is totally random that there is no way to predict who will leave and who will stay, you cannot end inquiry with this explanation.

I will reiterate that in most cases one or more of these numbered explanations probably apply. However, they do not explain why some people leave under them while some people in the same circumstance do not. I am looking for a "why" that is deeper than all of these explanations and explains why people do 1-10 in the first place. That is a question I will finally address in the next part.

Background on the Gottman Ratio and positive/negative sentiment override

John Gottman is a professor of psychology known for his work on marital stability and relationship analysis through scientific direct observations and mathematical models. Beginning in the 1980s, he and his team of researchers began interviewing married couples in a laboratory on the campus of the University of Washington. What Gottman and his team discovered is that based on just one hour of observation, they can predict with 95% accuracy whether the couple will still be married 15 years later.

How are they able to do this? Gottman observes the couple's interactions and determines whether each one is a positive interaction or a negative interaction and adds up the total (with all sorts of special encoding and weighting which I am oversimplifying). What he found is that in cases where the positive interactions outweigh the negative interactions by a ratio of 5 to 1 or more, the marriages are extremely stable. Less than that, and the marriages become unstable and are likely to end in divorce. He explained why this ratio is so predictive in an interview with Malcolm Gladwell (*Blink*, at 29-30):

People are in one of two states in a relationship. The first is what I call positive sentiment override, where positive emotion overrides irritability. It's like a buffer. Their spouse will do something bad, and they'll say, "Oh, he's just in a crummy mood." Or they can be in negative sentiment override, so that even a relatively neutral thing that a partner says gets perceived as negative. In the negative sentiment override state, people draw lasting conclusions about the other. If their spouse does something positive, it's a selfish person doing a positive thing. It's really hard to change those states, and those states determine whether when one party tries to repair things, the other party sees that repair as hostile manipulation. For example, I'm talking with my wife and she says, "Will you shut up and let me finish?" In positive sentiment override, I say "sorry, go ahead." I'm not very happy, but I recognize the repair. In negative sentiment override, I say, "To hell with you, I'm not getting a chance to finish either. You're such a bitch, you remind me of your mother."

The application

I was using this passage in a lesson I was teaching on marriage and the insight hit me that a person's relationship with the church is, at its heart, exactly that; a relationship. And it will follow the same patterns and rules as any other relationship.

My explanatory hypothesis is simply that those who stay in the church are in a state of positive sentiment override and those that leave are in a state of negative sentiment override in their relationship with the church. And the reason that they are in one of these two states depends largely on the ratio of positive to negative interactions they have with Mormonism.

Interactions with the church can be anything from personal interactions with members and leaders, to watching conference, to the church's political stances, experiences in church culture, or to researching history and theology. They are in your Sunday school class, in your PPIs, with your visiting teachers, alone on your computer as you browse the internet, in the books you read, in the news you follow.

As I have browsed lds related forums, the positive sentiment override in believers and the negative sentiment override of those who are disaffected jumps out at me as clear as can be. This is well illustrated in many comments responding to articles about the church doing good things, like building hospitals and museums. To the disaffected, the church is, in Gottman's words, just "a selfish person doing a positive thing." Thus, you see comments like, "not the best use of tithing money," "they are only doing it to boost their nearby developments," "they are only doing it to be seen by men," etc. The church is selfish person, so everything it does, even if it appears positive, must be selfish. You see this go the other way with believers. Every bad thing about the church is countered with: "that was a rouge bishop," "a man of his times," etc. Some are willing to look past the flaws because they see the church as a good person who happened to do some bad things. The bad things are aberrations.

Believers are often perplexed when they hear disaffected Mormons talk about visits from the relief society bringing cookies as if they are bad thing. What many believers do not realize is that disaffected Mormons will often tend to see the attempted repair to the relationship as hostile manipulation, a conclusion that a believer in a state of positive sentiment override can hardly fathom. The believer will see it as repair.

As I have reflected on my own feelings and views to the church, I have concluded that this is probably why I stay. I have been blessed to have so many positive interactions with the church that I love the church. It is a great force for good in my life and the parts of it that are not

great in my life or that I see as wrong, I am willing to look past, because the positive overrides the negative.

I am not saying that this explanatory hypothesis fully accounts for every individual case. It does not. No single theory can. But I think that it likely accounts for a very large bulk of the cases. It also serves as a deeper explanation behind the other proffered explanations (which I will discuss more in a minute).

A brief note about the role of belief and Fowler's stages

One obvious objection to the explanatory hypothesis is, "Aren't faith crises all about belief? Which the hypothesis completely ignores." It does not completely ignore belief. Beliefs that conflict with Mormonism would count as negative interactions which would be added into the ratio. However, I do think it is true that in most cases, belief is of secondary and even minimal importance. One of the upshots of Fowler's Stages of Faith is that someone can still be committed to their religion or uncommitted to their religion in any of the stages, including Stage 4. Thus, the real question is not whether people doubt or even disbelieve. Rather, it is why some people with doubt and disbelief are able to maintain hope or faith in Mormonism. I submit that the sentiment override state is what makes the difference in most cases. I am willing to have faith and hope in something that I see as positive, but not something that I see as negative.

What I see as the advantages to the explanatory hypothesis:

It is faith, truth claim, and morality neutral. The hypothesis does not assume or require either the truth or falsity of the church. It holds as an explanation regardless of truth, value, or morality of Mormonism.

It incorporates and explains the significance of all the other possible explanations in Part 1. Essentially, this is the *why* behind those 10 and many other explanations. It is why some people see the facts as fatal to the church and others don't. It boils down to whether the positive overrides the negative. It is why believers are willing to engage in "mental gymnastics" in the first place to maintain their belief. It is why some people who have every cause to be offended by something the church does to them choose to look past it, while others don't. It is why some people make the choice to stay and some make the choice to go.

It is objectively measurable. Like the real Gottman ratio, the explanatory hypothesis can be measured solely by looking at empirical data, the interactions between a person and the church. Not that this would be easy, but because the ration is consistent, it could possibly be teased out in short interviews or questionnaires. At a minimum, this is something that people should be able to get a sense of.

The hypothesis is also applicable to the vast majority of people who leave, who are not vocal about it. Most people who leave the church do not take to the internet to discuss Mormonism. Most of them simply drift quietly away. They do not see the church as important or relevant in their lives and they do not see it as worth the time, effort, and commitment. I believe that this is simply another manifestation of negative sentiment override. It just is not as pronounced or as acute, because these people had a less significant relationship with Mormonism to begin with, kind of like a break up that occurs after just a few dates.

It does not blame those who decide to leave or those who decide to stay. Those who are in situations where the bulk of their interactions with the church happen to be negative are going to have a hard time keeping positive sentiment override. It is entirely understandable. And believers should be able to sympathize. Likewise, for those who experience overwhelmingly

positive interactions with the church, it is entirely understandable that they would have no desire to leave or even consider leaving. And exmormons should be able to sympathize.

It still leaves room for choice. In fact, like any relationship, the ratio is jointly determined by each party, part by the church in how chooses to interact with the individual, and part with the individual, in how they chose to interact with the church. Those that have a higher proportion of positive interactions are going to tend to choose to interpret the church from a positive sentiment override position and those who have a lower proportion of positive interactions are going to tend to interpret things from a negative sentiment perspective. However, by understanding the explanatory hypothesis, you get to choose your interactions with the church and whether they are going to be positive or negative and, thus, which override state is likely to form as a result. You get to choose this as you interact with people at church. You get to choose it in the books you read, the blogs you follow, the forums you engage in. This, I also submit, is the real danger of anti-Mormon literature, if you want to maintain your faith. It's not that it teaches you the real facts or that it "drives away the Spirit," necessarily. It's that it adds to the negative interactions that you are having with Mormonism and could potentially tip the scales, if it is not compensated for with positive interactions.

The hypothesis accounts for the fact that emotion is usually the driving force in our decisions including whether someone falls away from their faith.

It explains why it is so rare for people that leave the church to come back. As Gottman points out, once someone is in negative sentiment override, it is almost impossible to change that. Once there, people will tend to see any interaction (even positive ones) as negative, it is hard to change that, because you are no longer going to actively seek out positive interactions.

It can be used to predict those who are likely to fall away. I think I sensed this hypothesis unconsciously for some time, because I could see disaffection coming others. I would see them post something to facebook about the mall or something and think, "here it comes." I did not realize it at the time, but what I was seeing was quite probably the transition to negative sentiment override. They were no longer looking at things in a positive light. We can also predict based on looking at the quality of people's interactions with Mormonism, which leads me to my final point:

It can be changed. The ratio can be changed. We can keep people in positive sentiment override by changing the way they interact with the church and the way the church interacts with them. In helping people through a faith crisis, it is not about explaining things so they all make sense, it is not about getting them to repent, it is not even about getting them to pray for answers and a testimony. It is about shifting the balance of negative interactions they are having with the church by adding positive ones and by doing whatever we can to make sure that we do not ourselves contribute any negative interactions to the precariously tipping scale.