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Did it Hurt When You Fell from Heaven?

An Exploration of Pick up Lines in Latter-day Saint Culture

This study focuses on the folklore of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (referred to as Latter-day Saints or LDS) surrounding dating practices. Pick up lines are the main focus of the research, but some information about folkways and preferences was also collected in the survey. The goal of this project is to address the function of pick up lines in society and then look at how the LDS use of pick up lines, as well as the lines themselves, are distinct from those of other folk groups.

Folklorists, as well as sociologists, have had surprisingly little to say about pick up lines. The topic seems to have gone unanalyzed in folklore and is lumped in with general dating or glanced over by sociologists; the topic of dating (or courtship) has been well researched and studied however. Mary Riege Laner, in her book *Dating: Delights, Discontents, and Dilemmas*, comments on the difference between what attracts people and what individuals think attracts people; the two are rarely the same (43-44). In this discussion, we find the major connection between pick up lines and dating: communication. The most obvious purpose of a pick up line is to start a conversation. In her book, Laner suggests ways to start conversations (49), but does not mention pick up lines. Rodney Cate and Sally Lloyd point out that the 'cycle of love' begins with building rapport in their book *Courtship* (37); again the idea of communication is brought forward, but pick up lines are left out. Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt address the

ambiguity surrounding dating and relationships among college women in their report *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today*; their research discusses how the definition of dating has become more flexible and how changing sexual norms have affected expectations and communication about relationships (13-19). To add to this, Martin King Whyte, in his book *Dating, Mating, and Marriage*, found that people with high levels of religiosity tend to move through the stages of relationships (casual dating, steady dating, engagement, marriage) slower than those with lower levels of religiosity (79).

Before delving deeper into the research, a little background information about Latter-day Saints and their dating practices is also in order. LDS youth are discouraged from dating until they are at least 16 years old, and they tend to engage in group dating before steady dating. A LDS pamphlet for youth states the following:

In cultures where dating or courtship is acceptable, dating can help you develop lasting friendships and eventually find an eternal companion. Date only those who have high standards and in whose company you can maintain your standards. A young man and a young woman on a date are responsible to help each other maintain their standards and to protect each other's honor and virtue. (*For the Strength of Youth* 24).

LDS youth, for the most part, conform to these standards. The eventual goal of dating is marriage, and this creates a different atmosphere than dating just for fun. The strictness of the standards can also create additional stresses for these youth. Marriage is especially important to Latter-day Saints because it is believed to be a necessary step in the process of gaining eternal life. This focus drives much of the church's programming efforts for youth and young single adults.

In order to gather data for this study, a combination of questionnaires and online information gathering was used. Originally, the questionnaires were only to be distributed among adult LDS members, with an emphasis on those who are single at the present time. The plan was

to use contacts in three geographic areas (Nauvoo, IL, St. Louis, MO, and Cape Girardeau, MO) to distribute the questionnaires electronically (through an online survey service) and to distribute physical questionnaires at a LDS Valentine's Dance for single members, which was held in Nauvoo, IL. Due to the researcher's inability to secure assistance from her contact in Nauvoo, questionnaires could not be distributed electronically to that area, or physically at the dance. In order to compensate for this lack, an event was created on Facebook, with a link to the online version of the questionnaire, and all of the researcher's adult 'friends' (Facebook contacts) were invited to participate. They were, in turn, asked to invite their friends to participate also. This resulted in a larger sample, but also in responses from a variety of religious backgrounds. An additional contact in the St. Louis area was also asked for assistance in distributing the questionnaire, in this case to respondents who were more likely to be married. The link to the survey was also posted on the discussion board for the Facebook group "You know you're Mormon if..." in an effort to acquire additional LDS responses.

In addition to surveys, websites were used to collect pick up lines. A Facebook social group ("You know you're Mormon if...") provided a plethora of posts containing LDS pick up lines, and other websites were used to collect additional non-LDS lines for comparison. These posts provide a general background and help to fill out the data gathered from the survey.

Together, these sources should provide a decent picture of LDS pick up lines.

A total of 74 complete questionnaires were collected in this study. Of these, 36 were from LDS respondents¹. More than twice as many females responded as males (53 to 21), and more than half of the respondents were single (45). Of all of the respondents, only 37 provided at least one example of a pick up line in their answer to either question 11 or question 12. Several additional respondents noted that they had heard pick up lines, but could not remember them. As

mentioned before, additional pick up lines were collected from the discussion boards of the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...” Younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to list pick up lines, and singles were more likely than married, widowed, or divorced people. There is some variation in the text of lines, but there is also a significant amount of conservation. What variation exists among the LDS lines is most likely due to regional variation and the adaptation of lines to fit particular situations.

The next step in the process was the classification of pick up lines. Lines with obvious religious elements or that were noted by respondents as having religious aspects were separated from those without any kind of religious aspect.

Interesting patterns emerged at this point. LDS respondents knew a variety of pick up lines, and were likely to report completely secular lines in addition to or rather than religious lines. In comparison with other groups, LDS lore also contained very few transgressive lines. But aside from both of these, another pattern became very clear. Whether the informant was LDS or not, pick up lines were often accompanied by a disclaimer of sorts, indicating that they were only, or most often, used in a joking way between friends, rather than as an actual means for starting a conversation with someone. Some lines were even accompanied by a warning, discouraging the use of the line (these tended to be the more transgressive lines). This led to an unexpected path for the analysis of pick up lines.

The first consideration in the analysis is the function of pick up lines in their traditional role as conversation starters. The most obvious function of a pick up line, as indicated earlier, is for communication. Pick up lines signal to potential dates that the speaker is interested in them; the line also provides an opportunity for the speaker to demonstrate some degree of cleverness (a characteristic usually held to be attractive). However, most pick up lines also include some

element of humor; if the only purpose is to signal interest, this seems extraneous. However, when we consider the risk of approaching a person and expressing interest, the role of humor becomes clearer. In this case, humor acts as a type of mask; it provides the speaker some protection. Should the line be ill-received, the speaker (and listener) can “laugh it off” and pretend like it was all a joke, thus avoiding most of the awkwardness that would normally result (Davis).

However, if pick up lines are not being used for their obvious purpose as conversation starters, as is indicated by the survey respondents, what purpose do they serve? Further investigation into the common contexts for pick up lines provides some insight. Often, pick up lines, already containing humorous elements, are shared in a manner similar to jokes. They are told back and forth between the members of a group, and the telling tends to start spontaneously from conversation, rather than being planned. In the case of LDS pick up lines (and likely any other folk group specific lines), they can also serve a purpose similar to that of riddles: they can help to define the in-group and identify outsiders who lack the background information or cultural knowledge to understand them. Pick up lines also facilitate an indirect discussion (often in the form of a complaint) about the issue of dating. These lines can convey the social tension and anxiety associated with asking someone for a date, and this may be why they are often discussed or told in groups. This discussion also provides an explanation for the knowledge of both secular and religious lines by LDS respondents: they face both secular and religious pressures and anxieties concerning dating. Based on these explanations, it also makes sense that the survey showed pick up lines to be more common among the younger, single respondents, since they are the ones most likely to be exposed to these pressures.

As mentioned earlier, specifically LDS lines show a distinct lack of transgressive material, although some secular lines reported by LDS informants were transgressive in nature.

This suggests that there is a knowledge of the transgressive lines among Latter-day Saints, but not an assimilation. Contrasted with this, the majority of pick up lines collected from non-LDS online sources were at least mildly transgressive in nature. The reasoning behind this divide makes sense if we return to the consideration of pick up lines in their original function as conversation starters. As dating has changed over time and sexual norms have shifted, the purpose of pick up lines has shifted somewhat also. Rather than simply signaling interest, pick up lines have come to signal sexual interest. This may be linked to the sense of contempt expressed in multiple questionnaires (mainly from females) toward people who use pick up lines. But why is this shift toward transgressive lore not echoed in the LDS pick up lines? The answer is simple: because it would be counterproductive for LDS youth. The transgressive elements of standard pick up lines would be offensive to LDS youth, rather than attractive or enticing. The very cleanliness of these lines reflects, and signals to other Latter-day Saints, that the speaker is aware of and observes the group's norms concerning what is and is not acceptable conversation material (Davis).

The conservation of pick up lines in general among Latter-day Saints is due to the fact that this folk group, like most other folk groups, needs a way for its members to signal interest to potential dates; the near lack of transgressive lore is a variation in this pattern which shows the adaptation of the lore to meet the particular needs of the LDS folk group. The biggest overlap in pick up lines was seen between LDS sources and sources belonging to or identified with other religious (specifically Christian) groups. This overlap indicates somewhat similar attitudes toward matters of sexual activity, as well as a common historical background which provides the material for pick up lines.

As mentioned previously, LDS pick up lines are part of an in-group conversation. In order for an outsider to understand the lines, explanation is necessary. The next part of this paper will discuss several examples and attempt to make clear the meaning behind these lines.

Some of the LDS lines collected contain an allusion to, or the quotation of, a verse of scripture. This in and of itself is not that unusual, but the fact that Latter-day Saints have an expanded canon of scripture complicates the matter. An example will help to illustrate this: "Is your name virtue? Cause you're garnishing my thoughts unceasingly."² This line comes from Doctrine and Covenants³ 121:45, which reads "...let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven." This scripture is familiar to most LDS youth and adults, but is virtually unknown outside of the LDS faith. The general sentiment being expressed in this line is "I cannot stop thinking about you" – the same sentiment expressed by "You must be tired, because you've been running through my thoughts all day."⁴ The LDS line however contains important in-group information that separates those who understand from those who do not. Other LDS pick up lines allude to events in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

"I sure am glad for Martin Harris...."

"Why?"

"Cause if it weren't for him, there'd be another 116 pages between us."⁵

Understanding this line requires knowledge of LDS history and unwritten LDS rules about personal space. Martin Harris was a scribe for Joseph Smith during the translation of the Book of Mormon in the early 1800s. Harris asked if he could take what they had translated (116 pages) home to show his wife. He was insistent and was eventually allowed to take the pages home. The pages were lost, and that section of the Book of Mormon was not retranslated, since the same

information was covered again in later chapters. Because of these events, the Book of Mormon is 116 pages shorter. Among LDS youth and their leaders, there is an unwritten rule that, when slow dancing, a couple should have at least enough space between them that a set of scriptures would fit between them. Thus, the line indicates a sentiment of “I enjoy being physically close to you,” but only for people who know the background information. Other lines contain simple puns combined with distinct LDS elements, such as a man asking a woman, “Want to hold the priesthood?”⁶ Here the pun is on the word “hold.” LDS men have the priesthood⁷ conferred upon them as a responsibility, and are said to “hold the priesthood.” Women do not receive the priesthood. The use of the word hold, here implying to physically hold or hug, can be amusing because of the fact that women do not “hold the priesthood” in the LDS church.

Still other pick up lines do not utilize any specifically LDS elements, but include ideas which are particularly important to Latter-day Saints. Two examples⁸ will help to illustrate this. First, “What’s your favorite temple?...Cause you are mine.” This line is another example of a pun; it uses the word ‘temple’ in more than one way. While temples are not unique to Latter-day Saints (they are seen in the Old and New Testaments, as well as in several non-Christian religions), they hold a very important place in the Latter-day Saint religion. The understanding of this pick up line comes when you know that Latter-day Saints consider the body, as a gift from God and the container of the soul, to be a temple, and treat it with a similar kind of reverence and respect as they do the buildings which are also called temples. These buildings are believed by Latter-day Saints to be the literal house of the Lord. The sentiment of this line is hard to explain, but a simple version would be that the person being addressed is very beautiful, physically and/or spiritually. Another example of a not-so-LDS-specific line refers to genealogy: “You know what? You'd look great growing on my family tree!” Enthusiasm for genealogy is in no way

limited to Latter-day Saints, but the church and its members place an importance upon doing genealogical work because it is tied to other religious beliefs. This includes the belief that families can be sealed together forever and that marriages can last for ‘time and all eternity’ rather than just ‘until death do you part.’ The idea communicated in this line is that the speaker is interested in the listener as a potential marriage partner.

As discussed before, very few LDS pick up lines would be considered transgressive by outsiders. This is due, in part, to the strong emphasis on morality, chastity, and ‘clean thoughts’ in the LDS faith. However, a few of the lines reported can be interpreted as transgressive. The following line (or a variation of it) was reported more than once: "Are you the promised land? Because my Liahona points to you."⁹ Most readers can probably guess the nature of the transgressive element in this line; “Liahona” could be taken here as a euphemism for male genitalia. However, this only applies if the line is spoken by a man, and with a particular inflection. If this line were spoken by a woman, it would lose its transgressive nature completely. In explanation, the Liahona is an object in a story from the Book of Mormon¹⁰. It was given to Lehi (a Book of Mormon prophet) and his family by the Lord as a compass of sorts, to give them directions and help them to travel through the wilderness. Knowing this background takes away from seemingly transgressive nature of the line even more.

There are, however, other lines which seem benign to outsiders, yet stir a sense of discomfort within LDS listeners. A prime example of this is the line: “So I read about you today... in my patriarchal blessing.” This line tends to make LDS respondents uneasy; a patriarchal blessing¹¹ is very personal and is not commonly discussed openly. The implication of this line is that you should be considering this person as a marriage partner. The casualness of this line is unsettling to LDS listeners, who hold marriage in high regard. The suggestion that

you are mentioned specifically in someone else's patriarchal blessing is also unsettling because it goes against the principle of agency which is so important to members of the LDS faith. Other lines which would cause similar reactions in LDS listeners, for similar reasons, include "Is the spirit telling you what it's telling me?" and

"I think I recognize you from somewhere? Have I met you?"

"Ummm... I don't think so..."

"Wait... I actually recognize you. We dated in the pre-mortal existence!"¹²

All of these lines¹³ indicate some sort of spiritual connection between the speaker and listener, the feeling of which may or may not be shared. When the interest is not mutual (or even when it is) these types of lines can cause discomfort for LDS listeners. Unlike the first line discussed, the transgressive nature of these lines can only be fully understood by a person who is on the inside of the group.

Through this exploration, it can be clearly seen that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have their own distinct folklore and that pick up lines are an important part of it. This investigation of pick up lines has shown that they can have multiple functions: as conversation starters, as a means to comment on a social situation, or as a means to define group boundaries and reinforce group norms. When one considers the emphasis placed on dating and marriage among Latter-day Saints, it is not surprising that a distinct subset of pick up lines has developed to meet the needs of this folk group and address the anxiety or discontent felt about these topics.

Notes

¹ Several responses to the question regarding religious affiliation were coded as LDS, including ‘Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’, ‘Latter-day Saint’, ‘LDS’, and ‘Mormon’, as well as other variations in spelling and capitalization.

² This line was collected from the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...”

³ The Doctrine and Covenants is part of the LDS canon of scripture.

⁴ Collected multiple times in questionnaires, from both LDS and non-LDS respondents.

⁵ Collected from the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...”

⁶ Collected in questionnaires and from the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...” A variation of this line, which is initiated by a female rather than a male, was also collected:

Girl: "Do you hold the priesthood?" Guy: "Yes" Girl: "Mind if I?"

⁷ Priesthood is defined by www.lds.org (the LDS church’s official website) as “the eternal power and authority of God.” It further clarifies that “Priesthood holders can be authorized to preach the gospel, administer the ordinances of salvation, and govern the kingdom of God on the earth.”

⁸ Both were collected from the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...”

⁹ Again, collected from the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...”

¹⁰ The story of Lehi and his family traveling through the wilderness and being directed by the Liahona is told in 1 Nephi.

¹¹ www.lds.org defines patriarchal blessings thus: “Patriarchal blessings are given to worthy members of the Church by ordained patriarchs. Patriarchal blessings include a declaration of a person's lineage in the house of Israel and contain personal counsel from the Lord. As a person studies his or her patriarchal blessing and follows the counsel it contains, it will provide guidance, comfort, and protection.”

¹² Latter-day Saints believe that all people lived with God as spirit beings before being born on the Earth. This part of our existence is referred to by Latter-day Saints as the pre-mortal existence.

¹³The first and third pick up lines discussed in this paragraph were collected from the Facebook group “You know you’re Mormon if...” The second line was reported in a questionnaire.

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