

# **Social Dilemmas: What Principles or Practical Applications We Can Learn from The Early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Efforts at Creating a Unified and Cooperative Society**

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## **Abstract:**

As stated by Kollock (1998) “The study of social dilemmas is the study of the tension between individual and collective rationality” This review seeks to highlight some principles and practical applications related to these dilemmas through a case study of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the 1800’s; as they tried to establish a unified and cooperative people by applying theology through organizational structure and practice. Social dilemma studies often involve scenarios or situations analyzing cost versus benefit decisions between individuals and groups, the analysis of the processes by which those decisions are made, and the influences, both external and intrinsic, that effect the probabilities of the choices made. The analysis of this historical group is instructive in several ways. First, the stated goal of the group was to create a “united” and “equal” society, which is at the heart of the “dilemma” involved in social dilemmas. Second, the group adjusted its approaches to achieve these goals over time with varying degrees of success. Third, the group itself admits that they were unable to meet these goals and has spent considerable time and energy analyzing and attributing the outcomes of these efforts. And finally, this group has a distinctive propensity for record keeping and documenting their own history allowing for a more complete picture of the events being studied.

**Keywords:** Unity, Cooperation, Social Dilemma, Society, Cooperative

**Introduction:**

Social Dilemmas: What we can learn from the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints efforts at creating a unified and cooperative society.

As stated by Kollock (1998) “The study of social dilemmas is the study of the tension between individual and collective rationality” This article seeks to study some of these dilemmas by analyzing the efforts of a religious group, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the 1800’s, as they tried to establish a unified and cooperative people by applying theology through organizational structure and practice.

Social dilemma studies often involve:

- scenarios or situations analyzing cost vs benefit decisions between individuals and groups.
- The analysis of the ways or processes in which those decisions are made
- and the influences, both external and intrinsic, that effect the probabilities of the choices made.

Often research involving social dilemmas utilizes college students who are given questionnaires; or are placed in situations where their behavior is studied. This is understandable as they are easier to recruit and have a lower cost associated with administering these surveys, and scenarios. (Arnett, J. J. (2016). This research is often criticized for being narrow in its representation of the general public. (Hanel, P. H., & Vione, K. C. (2016).

The analysis of this specific historical group is instructive. First, the stated goal of the group was to create a “united” and “equal” society, which is at the heart of the “dilemma” involved in social dilemmas. Second, the group adjusted its approaches to achieve these goals over time with varying degrees of success. Third, the group itself admits that they were unable to meet these goals and has spent considerable time and energy analyzing the outcomes of these efforts, admittedly from an ecclesiastical and theological perspective. And finally, this group has a distinctive propensity for record keeping and documenting their own history allowing for a more complete picture of the events being studied.

**Background**

A brief background of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints’ efforts in the early 1800’s to establish a united and cooperative society will be given. Afterwards different elements, processes and interventions of this group will be analyzed in the context of recent social dilemma research.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a Christian church headquartered in the Western United States. Founded in the early 1800’s in the Eastern United States its adherents sought to establish a united and unified society, or “Zion”, that would care for the poor and

provide opportunity for all its members. During the early 1800's efforts were undertaken to establish this society through organizational and structural means as well as through religious practices.

This group was instructed to “consecrate”, or donate with religious purpose, all they had to the group. These consecrated properties would then be distributed back to members of the group by a local ecclesiastical leader according to their “wants and needs” (Smith,1835) With any surplus of property or goods being made available to benefit other members of the group locally or sent to help members of the group in more distant geographic areas. This distribution of properties was designed to allow members of the group who were poor or less able, to take advantage of opportunities that would allow them to improve their situation through the consecration of properties by those who had more property, equipment, etc.

The church membership was the divided into “wards” or congregations. This division was based on a geographical area or location. These would or could be adjusted as the group changed in its membership numbers with additional wards being created as the membership in that area grew. No specific criteria with regards to numbers of members or necessary geographic area to determine these divisions was established.

The ecclesiastical leaders of these congregations were/are called Bishops. The Bishop is chosen from among the congregation itself and is to perform this role voluntarily. With regards to the consecrations of property and the role of the Bishop in this process the following guidance was given by the first president of the church, Joseph Smith to Edward Partridge; one of the first members called to be a Bishop in the church:

The matter of consecration must be done by the mutual consent of both parties; for to give the Bishop power to say how much every man shall have, and he be obliged to comply with the Bishop's judgment, is giving to the Bishop more power than a king has; and upon the other hand, to let every man say how much he needs, and the Bishop be obliged to comply with his judgment, is to throw Zion into confusion, and make a slave of the Bishop. The fact is, there must be a balance or equilibrium of power, between the Bishop and the people, and thus harmony and good will may be preserved among you.

“Therefore, those persons consecrating property to the Bishop in Zion, and then receiving an inheritance back, must reasonably show to the Bishop that they need as much as they claim. But in case the two parties cannot come to a mutual agreement, the Bishop is to have nothing to do about receiving such consecrations; and the case must be laid before a council of twelve High Priests, the Bishop not being one of the council, but he is to lay the case before them.” (*Roberts, 1902*)

## Social Dilemma Analysis

The efforts of the early 1800's Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints will be evaluated looking at how they tried to manage the problems inherent in the different versions or types of social dilemmas through various motivational, strategic and structural approaches.

Social dilemmas may be beneficially categorized into two actor(dyadic) vs. multiple actor dilemmas(N-person) and then further distinguishing between situations/dilemmas that a) incur an individual cost and group benefit and those that b) offer an individual benefit but incur a cost on the group.(Kollock,1998)

One of these two actor dilemmas which has been modelled is known as an Assurance game. In this scenario "mutual cooperation leads to a better outcome than unilateral defection". (Kollock,1998). This differs from the Prisoner's Dilemma where the value of defecting is greater than a strategy of mutual co-operation if the other player cooperates. In modeling these dilemma situations there is some attempt to create actors within the models that act and interact the way real people do. In many ways, the situation(s) in real life are influenced not primarily by the situation itself, but on the actor's perception of the "game" and the values individuals place upon certain actions.

## Perception and Trust

We might instructively use the early members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Days Saints as an example of how these perceptions influence behavior. There no doubt were individuals who joined the group who viewed and valued the situation from a Prisoner's Dilemma perspective. That "defecting" or acting selfishly and pushing the costs of membership onto others was more beneficial to them than incurring the cost themselves and sharing the benefits. Others viewed it through the lens of an Assurance Game where the cooperation between actors would provide a greater benefit to the actors involved than would come to either should they choose to defect. These perspectives and trust between members of the group become the elements on which cooperation or defection hinges. If trust and a beneficent cooperation perspective exists, then cooperation is perceived as the more desirable option. Trust becomes the main probabilistic determinant for those involved. As two the three postulated antecedents to trust, benevolence and integrity are integral to consider in the context of how this group was structured and expected to function. (Mayer, et. al., 1995) Trust acts as both the relationship glue that holds the group together as a unit, as well as the lubricant that facilitates interaction and cooperation between group members. Without 1) trust in the ability of other members, especially the Bishop; 2) trust that others will have a beneficent approach to interactions and 3) trust in the integrity of members, the group itself weakens, cooperation stalls and unity disappears.

What actions did this group take to engender trust among its members? Or how was membership structured to elicit trust in members?

The defining requirement of membership of the group would be consecration itself, and the primary feature of the group that would engender trust among members of the group. If group members knew that others had consecrated all that they had, simply to be a part of the group, this encourages some level of trust between members. Often when social dilemma “games” are played this knowledge of the actions of other actors is withheld from other actors to assess what their response will be. This element of consecration also represents a barrier for entry, or a hurdle that would discourage many outside the group from joining. From their perspective the cost of membership would appear to be too high or the benefits of being a member too low to justify the cost involved to become a part of the group.

Cooperation focused members had trust that the other members of the group were abiding by the expectations of the group and striving for the same unity and cooperation. There were also members who joined the group because they saw opportunity for personal advancement or enrichment had expectations that the generosity of others might benefit them.

How was this potential conflict handled by the church through practice and/or structure?

### **Commons Dilemma**

When the group combined or pooled their resources, in some ways, they set up a “Commons dilemma”. One in which the collective good or resources are subtractable but present difficulties in excluding others from using up the resources. The most common example or illustration being that given by Hardin (1968) where herders who let their cows graze in a common area can cause the destruction of the common grazing area due to overuse.

How did this group solve or structure an answer to this dilemma? The use of a third party agent, in the form of the Bishop, transfers the resources from a collectively shared resource into portioned individual “private goods” which are both subtractable from the whole and excludable from others. This essentially creates a nexus where the resources move from private ownership, to a collective resource pool through consecration, and then through the Bishop back into private ownership. Thereby eliminated a “tragedy of the commons” situation by reintroducing the exclusion criteria and monitoring the carrying capacity of the resource pool.

How is this different from a communist system wherein the state controls both the goods and allocation of those goods to the people? The provision that this distribution of goods or resources is to be done by “mutual consent” of the parties and having a contingency for disagreements is one major difference between the two systems. That the resources become private property and may be used for whatever the individual and/or family see fit, also separates this shared resource system from that of communism where the state retains control and conveys only use of the resource not ownership of the resource.

### **Communication, Monitoring, and Review**

The consecration of properties was also to have a periodical element, where the Bishop and individual members of the group would meet to review, and determine both how the previous consecration of property was managed and what additional allocation from the communities resources or consecration to the communities resources might be mutually agreed upon. This often was scheduled annually. This acted as an early 1800's performance management system, not unlike annual performance reviews conducted by almost all organizations and companies today. Past performance could be assessed, and recommendations and alterations could be made to improve performance in the future. This routine meeting also undoubtedly provided an opportunity to enhance the performance of other individuals with which the Bishop might meet in the future. The Bishop becoming a repository, through these meetings with individual members of the group, collectively of answers and solutions to problems faced by the members of the group. An 1800's version of the computer based and online collaboration tools, like share-point, utilized by companies and organizations today to create a database of information and solutions to common problems.

These meetings also provided an opportunity to reassess membership in the group and encouragement to remain committed to the standards and expectations of the group itself. If the member decided that they wanted to take their "inheritance" or allocation and leave the group this type of meeting would facilitate that decision. The group would be able to retain those members willing to adhere to the standards and expectations of the group and allow those who did not wish to continue the opportunity to leave, again on mutually agreed upon terms. The periodic review and recommitment enabled the level of trust within the group to remain high, fostering cooperation and unity. If some members were allowed to remain a part of the group and reap the benefits of membership who did not adhere to the agreed upon standards of the group then trust would quickly dissipate and individuals within the group would have their perspectives of the group itself shift. Seeing selfish actions on the part of others with no consequence would tend to shift the focus of members of the group from a group centered beneficence to an individual self-centered focus; unravelling the ties the bind the group in unity and cooperation.

We see this tendency in politics on any level or degree; any time there are individuals who are perceived as acting self-aggrandizing or whose poor behavior is not held to the same standard or expectation as other members of the group, tribe, community or nation. Whether these individuals are reaping a benefit or avoiding negative consequences or costs of their actions, these tend to disunity and conflict. These are some of the types of issues and situations that social dilemma research seeks to understand.

## Sanctioning

Within the research on Social Dilemmas, sanctioning is one of the structural solutions identified to encourage cooperation and discourage defection. (Kollock, 1998) The church established a tiered system for grievances and/or punishment (sanctioning) of members. This system emphasized resolution at the lowest possible level, between individuals themselves if possible, often with the Bishops assistance and then through successive levels of appeals through levels of church organization up to the president of the church itself. There exists within the church a desire for erring members to “come back into the fold” and so to extend them mercy and patience. While at the same time the need to protect those members that are meeting the expectations the group has from incurring excess costs that result from the selfish behavior of others. This balance of mercy and justice is one of the challenges facing the Bishops while attempting to support these efforts at unity and cooperation. Ostrom highlights some of the aspects of sanctions related to communication of rules and expectations:

Rules are useless unless the people they affect know of their existence, expect others to monitor behavior with respect to these rules, and anticipate sanctions for nonconformance.

In other words, working rules must be common knowledge and must be monitored and enforced. (Ostrom, 1990)

Ostrom also highlights the use of graduated sanctions, with some being as severe as exclusion from the group to others being minor sanctions depending upon the severity of the offense.

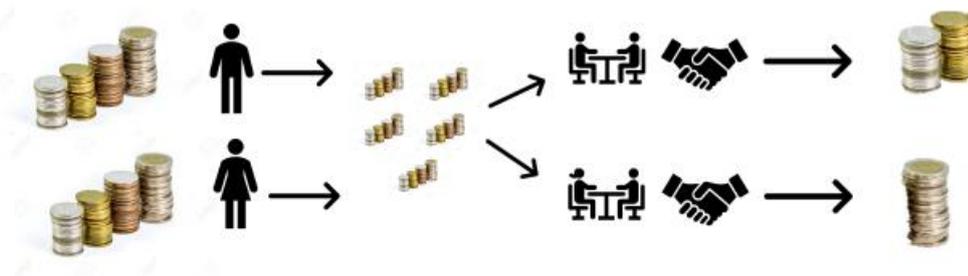
Sanctioning also presents an issue faced by the members of the church and Bishops more specifically, that of enforcement. Many of the localities in which this consecration and stewardship model was practiced did not recognize the legality of the church’s authority over these consecrations or transfers of property. This allowed some of the members of the church who came into the community with more assets, property, etc. the opportunity to simply leave the community and take their initial holdings with them. Without the ability to enforce these agreements the problem highlighted in the statement of Joseph Smith becomes a reality, in that “to let every man say how much he needs, and the Bishop be obliged to comply with his judgment, is to throw Zion into confusion, and make a slave of the Bishop.” Within this context the structural solutions to the social dilemmas become impotent and the dilemmas remain.

The problems of selfishness and perceptions of inequality did arise among the Latter-Day Saint communities. There are numerous examples usually involving individuals, either members or Bishop themselves, who acted in a self-serving way that contributed to the lack of trust and dissolution of cooperation and unity within the group. When one member of the group is benefitted, due to selfish behavior over others in the group, this creates an incentive or ‘temptation’ for other members of the group to do so as well. This attitude often exhibits a tendency to spread to other members of the group.

The existence of a large group of trusting individuals who are willing to share resources and help one another offers a substantial target and temptation for self-centric individuals to try and benefit from membership or at least benefit from association with members of that group.

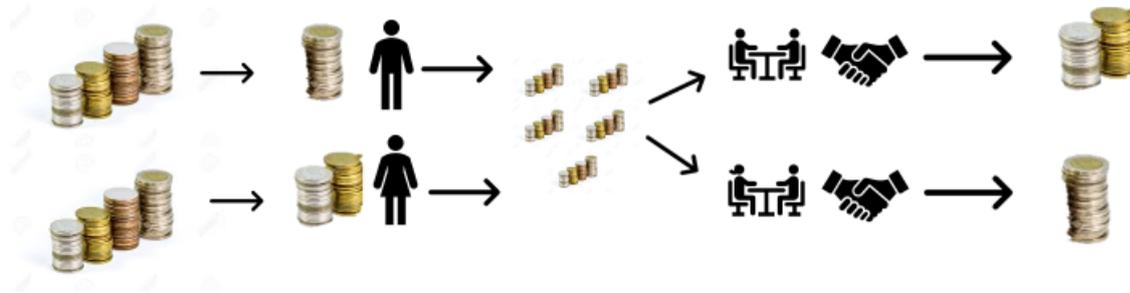
### Adjustments Over Time

Over time the group collectively proved unable to meet the requirements of consecrating *all* their property to the church and receiving a portion of this consecrated property back or inheritance.



At first, the expectation was the consecration of all property, then an allocation distributed back based on the members wants and needs, mutually arrived at by the member and Bishop

This expectation was adjusted to require members to consecrate their “surplus” property, or that which they had remaining after meeting all their “needs”, instead of all their property as originally practiced. An early church leader, Brigham Young, was assigned to go among the members of the group “and find out what surplus property the people had...” Brigham Young asked Joseph Smith “who shall be the judge of what is surplus property?”, said he (Joseph Smith), ‘let them be the judges themselves’”.



This changed with the expectation being the consecration of “surplus” property, then an allocation distributed back based on the members wants and needs, mutually arrived at by the member and Bishop.

Once again, the collective membership was not able to establish a successful collective group of any considerable size or that functioned for a duration of time long enough that was able to meet this expectation. Some of this owing to external forces, including religious persecution they faced in what was at that time the Western United States.

After years of effort and numerous attempts to establish this type of cooperative community, including after its relocation to the intermountain West of the United States, the church established a tithe of ten percent of the annual income of its members as the standard offering expected of its members along with a voluntary donation of a “fast” offering each month of an amount to be determined by individual members and families. Each month individuals and families are invited to fast for two meals or twenty-four hours and donate the cost of the food they would have eaten along with any additional amount they may choose to donate, to be used for the care of the poor and needy.

## Conclusion

We can learn many things from the successes and failures of the early members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints efforts to create and live in a cooperative and unified society. We can also learn and understand some aspects of the social dilemmas that play out in the real world with real situations. We can gain a better understanding of how some of the motivational, strategic, and structural solutions to these problems have been tackled in the past, and by a group with a specific goal directed to overcome these dilemmas. We can see the benefits of creating and fostering trust and a cooperative perspective. The use and positive influence of performance review and accountability within a group. And some of the effects that a lack of power to enforce rules or lack of ability to effectively sanction members of a group who violate group expectations can have. Additionally the utility of being able to change or alter the practical expectations of a group based on the ability of the members of that group to comply with those expectations, while striving to maintain the ideals and focus of the group on the desired outcome.

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