Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd

Richard Bushman's Biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Assessed from a Sociological Point of View

Richard Bushman's Biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling,* Assessed from a Sociological Point of View

Gordon Shepherd, University of Central Arkansas*
Gary Shepherd, Oakland University

Abstract. This review of Richard Bushman's biography of Joseph Smith is framed by three questions: What are the characteristics of a sociological biography? To what extent does Bushman's book succeed as a sociological biography? And, what more could be done in an effort to write a sociological biography of Joseph Smith? While attempting to reconstruct the subjective meanings and motives of Smith's thought and actions within the framework of his society and its history, a sociological biography should involve a strictly naturalistic narrative and analysis, focusing attention on the full range of human factors and events that shaped Smith's religious career, and on the social consequences of his legacy. In addition, a sociological biography of Smith should be guided by a theoretical framework that would allow for meaningful comparisons with the biographies of other religious founders in order to confirm or make theoretical generalizations about the origins of new religions. Several theoretical approaches are suggested in this regard, including a religious rhetoric typology, social construction and contingency theories, and a "sideway history" approach to the study of biography.

In November 2005, the religious studies scholar and historian, Jan Shipps, organized a session for the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Rochester, New York. Shipps had obtained advance copies of Richard L. Bushman's (2005) cultural biography of LDS Church founder, Joseph Smith, to be reviewed by a group of sociologically trained panelists. Shipps correctly anticipated that Bushman's book would be extensively reviewed by historians with expertise in American religion generally and Mormon Studies in particular, but she was also interested in how sociologists would think about the book from a social science perspective.

The four panelists whom Shipps selected for this purpose were Mormon Social Science Association members Gary Shepherd, Gordon Shepherd, Rick Phillips, and Ryan Cragun. Each panelist was asked to organize his review around three related questions formulated by Shipps and with Bushman's prior consent: What are the characteristics of a sociological biography? To what extent has Professor Bushman written a sociological biography of Joseph Smith? And what more might Professor Bushman (or other scholars) do to produce a biography of Joseph Smith that could benefit from including a sociological approach?

These are questions which are seldom addressed with respect to standard biographies of Joseph Smith (or, for that matter, other historically notable figures). They are questions that remain highly pertinent for the consideration of contributors and readers of a new social science journal that is committed to publishing articles on topics relevant to the Latter Day Saint movement from a social science perspective. To amplify this point, we have substantially revised and combined our two reviews of Bushman's biography that were given at the 2005 SSSR session.

1. What are the characteristics of a sociological biography?

Before addressing this question directly, let us make a prefatory statement regarding our understanding of the objectives and limitations of sociology as a social science. Social science teaches that the institutions of any society, including religious institutions, are formed and changed through meaningful human interaction. Alternatively, we may simply say that all human institutions are socially constructed. The province of social science is the naturalistic analysis of how the organization and patterns of human life are socially negotiated and agreed upon, the problems that human communities confront in this process (including the modification and fracturing of agreements), and the consequences that ensue for both individuals and group culture. If extra-human agency or supernatural powers are ultimately involved in the human construction of history and society, it is not the province of social science to judge their authenticity. More specifically, it is not the province of social science to validate or invalidate the ultimate truth claims of religious faith. For this we must turn to metaphysics or theology and to a consideration of the various religious epistemologies employed by seekers of transcendent meaning. While

methodologically agnostic with respect to transcendent causes and ultimate meanings, social science analysis can nonetheless contribute significantly to our understanding of the human aspects of religious institutions and religious ways of life, including those based on belief in revelatory guidance through living prophets.

That said, with its intensive focus on a particular individual, any competent biography may be defined as an exercise in ideographic science. Through a thorough, factual description and analysis of the life experiences of a particular person, ideography leads to an appreciation of what is distinctive and unique in the person's history, character, and contributions to others. In this respect, biography is perhaps more closely aligned with psychology than it is with sociology. No person's life, however, can be adequately comprehended apart from the cultural and social context in which it is lived. To make adequate sense of an individual's personal history, biographers must include in their analysis the shaping influence of the contemporary problems, common beliefs, and modes of thinking and social action that were characteristic of people living together in a particular time and place. In fashioning such an amalgam, biographers especially need to identify, describe, and explain what networks of other individuals were engaged in significant role relationships with their subject and how they mutually influenced one another.

All of this involves elements of sociological analysis. It invites consideration of what Talcott Parsons (1968) called the structure of social action and what interaction theorists refer to as the social construction of human meaning. If done well, a sociologically informed biography should lead to verstehen—Max Weber's term for the subjective understanding by outsiders of the constellation of shared meanings and motives that guide other people's actions within the framework of their society and its history.

Subjective understanding of people's meaning and motives, however, is not tantamount to accepting or rejecting their beliefs, or approving or disapproving their actions. If biography is to be an ideographic science, it requires objectivity as well as skill in assembling, organizing, and analyzing documentary evidence. To the extent possible, the selection and critical examination of all relevant data should be governed by the methodological standards of a scholarly discipline and not by a researcher's personal beliefs and values. Thus, in a sociologically informed biography, the goal of verstehen is accomplished by objectively examining an individual's life as the product of social interac-

tion within a network of significant others in the cultural and social context of a particular time and place. Most historians specializing in biography and trained in the methods of historiography would, we think, agree with this characterization of their discipline.

There is, however, something else that must be said about efforts to produce a distinctively sociological biography. In its attempt to be a nomothetic science, sociology parts company with the particularizing, ideographic emphasis of conventional historiography. Sociological analysis typically is guided by theoretical models and is oriented toward confirming and/or generating theoretical generalizations. To be truly sociological, biographers would need to systematically employ a theoretical framework or typology for analyzing the documentary data pertinent to their subject and, subsequently, draw theoretical inferences from their case study analysis that might be generalized for testing in other case studies. While making theoretical comparisons, a sociological biography should not—as already emphasized—constitute an argument for or against religious truth claims. Limiting itself to the naturalistic parameters of social science investigation, sociological biographies of seminal religious figures should bracket the question of supernatural empowerment while focusing attention on the full range of human factors and events that shaped their religious careers and the positive or negative consequences of their social legacy.

2. To what extent has Professor Bushman written a sociological biography of Joseph Smith?

Bushman's rendering of Smith's life is by far the most ambitious and professional effort on the part of a believing LDS scholar in rebuttal of Fawn Brodie's (1945) debunking account of the Mormon prophet as a pious fraud. Numerous other Smith biographies over the past 75 years have been either debunking or hagiographic in their analyses and conclusions. A believing Latter-day saint, Bushman aimed to write an intellectually credible account of Mormonism's founder that merits the respect of trained historians without ultimately compromising the integrity of his own religious faith.

In the preface of his biography, Professor Bushman (2005, xix–xxiv) identifies the key questions that motivated and guided his study of the Mormon prophet. To paraphrase Bushman: In the context of nineteenth-century American society, how did a man with such an inauspicious background

and dearth of formal education succeed, at such a young age, in articulating the core doctrines and organizing the institutional foundations of a new religion? What was the logic of his visionary life and the character of his religious thought? What was the nature of the religious world he created for his followers, and why did that world appeal to them so strongly?

These are good questions. To answer them, Bushman (2007, xxii) says we must strive "to think as Smith thought and to reconstruct the beliefs of his followers as they understood them." This is the methodology of *verstehen*. To a considerable extent Bushman achieves the objective of reconstructing the worldview that Joseph Smith and his friends and family shared with other Christian primitivists and religious seekers in the highly sectarian religious economy of nineteenth-century America. He is especially good at dissecting the peculiar character of Smith's religious thought as it is expressed in his official revelations and ostensible translations of ancient religious records. Bushman's command of the intellectual and religious history of the early nineteenth century allows him to make pointed comparisons with the teachings and practices of other religious groups of that era. What Bushman's skillful contextual analysis produces is an ideographic appreciation for what is most distinctive and even remarkable about the origins of the Mormon religion.

This said, within a religious context, key terms like revelation and prophecy are often assumed and taken for granted by religious actors and their chroniclers. A sociological biography of Joseph Smith should offer definitions of religious claims that capture their distinctive social qualities without rendering a judgment as to their ontological validity or ethical status. Sociologically, religious revelation and prophecy may be defined as statements of instructions or commands that are attributed to God or a transcendent source by a religious leader or leaders and their followers. Similarly, we may say that religious revelators or prophets are individuals who claim to have received instruction from God or a transcendent source and are believed by their followers to have done so. These kinds of detached definitions simply identify and describe the basic elements of a particular type of human social action: attributions, claims, and beliefs are shared by leaders and followers about transcendent instructions or commands.

Bushman, however, demurs from using this kind of qualifying prose on the grounds that it becomes annoyingly redundant. He also believes, most importantly, that by mimicking Smith's and his followers' language of faith, he is better able to enter into and convey their religious worldview. Perhaps so, but

a scholarly description and analysis of events written in this form also runs the serious risk of reading like the unexamined, faith-promoting narratives of religious advocates. Surely skilled writers can strive to achieve verstehen of their subjects' religious world without sacrificing an appropriate level of detachment when describing and analyzing that world.

For their own reasons, scholars may be motivated in particular cases to unmask perceived fraudulent activities or demonstrable harm caused by various religious beliefs and practices. But these sorts of studies are largely in the tradition of exposés and investigative journalism rather than academic sociology. It is on these grounds, it should be pointed out, that Brodie's controversial biography of Smith is often criticized for pursuing a derogatory agenda rather than a purely detached, scholarly analysis.

Strictly speaking, sociological analysis of religion should not stipulate that the actors involved are either rational or delusional, sincere or deceptive, or that their claims and beliefs are either true or false, good or malevolent. A sociological biography of Joseph Smith should certainly review the religious controversies surrounding his claims of divine empowerment and guidance but not focus on refuting or supporting them. Instead, a sociological biography should concern itself with systematically investigating the cultural and familial factors that shaped Smith's personality and stimulated his religious thinking. Just as importantly, it should study the historical conduciveness of America and Europe's nineteenth-century religious economies for their receptivity to visionary religion and the interpersonal dynamics of Smith's interaction with converts, peers, and critics. By specifying a relationship between leaders and followers, sociological definitions do not merely reduce the question of revelation and prophecy to the mental states of isolated individuals. Many of these latter themes are, in fact, seriously addressed in Bushman's treatment. But the ultimate veracity of Smith's claim to be God's latter-day prophet, translator of ancient records, and founder of the restored church of Jesus Christ remains central to the subtext of Bushman's book.

Bushman (2005, xix) frankly acknowledges his own Mormon faith and the central difficulty of achieving strict objectivity in the scholarly interpretation of religious histories. In the case of Joseph Smith, scholar-believers accept the intervention of supernatural power as the ultimate explanation for his remarkable religious biography and accomplishments; they accept a priori Smith's claims of divine guidance as true, which inclines them to not merely describe their subject but to tacitly—if not overtly—vindicate the ultimate

plausibility of his claims. To the extent that this occurs, objective social science investigation and analysis are at risk of being replaced by religious apologetics. Bushman is not overtly apologetic in his exposition, but he also contends (2005, xxi) that strictly naturalistic approaches to religious biography fail to appreciate what is most important to understanding the actions of religious followers. While this contention is debatable (theorists like William James, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Rudolph Otto have made mysticism, charisma, the sacred, and the holy central to their study of human experience), an authentic sociological biography should, in fact, maintain a stringently agnostic attitude toward supernatural truth claims and limit itself to naturalistic cause-and-effect explanations of a person's life.

Nonetheless, and much to his credit, Bushman succeeds in humanizing Joseph Smith by disclaiming the saintliness or perfection of his character. The biography includes discussion of his personal flaws, defects in judgment, doubts and mistakes, as well as his virtues and extraordinary accomplishments. Implied by the title of his book, Bushman's thesis is that Smith grew into the role of prophet and religious innovator, gaining in self-confidence and authority as he matured. But there are significant occasions, especially in the early chapters on Smith's religious claims concerning his youthful visionary experiences and consignment of the gold plates, where Bushman's narrative often depends uncritically on reporting Smith's (or his mother's or other early converts') accounts of supernatural empowerment at face value without proposing any objective, social science analysis. It is precisely these turning-point occasions in the history of Joseph Smith that require the most detached and critical examination of historical evidence. From a strictly social science perspective, the question is not whether Smith's claims were objectively true, but why would people besides members of his own family believe them to be true and subsequently follow his guidance and instructions that radically changed their lives? Consequently, we are not provided with a systematic, cause-and-effect explanation of the interactive process in which a young prodigy, possessing certain native abilities, evolves into the founder and prophet of a new religion.

In light of the methodological stipulations of social science, perhaps it should be asked: Can a believing Latter-day Saint write a detached sociological biography of Joseph Smith? Conversely, must the author of such a biography be a doubter or nonbeliever? These questions themselves continue to be susceptible to much debate.

3. What more might Professor Bushman or other scholars do to produce a biography of Joseph Smith (and by extension, other important historical figures) that could benefit from inclusion of a sociological approach?

Throughout his superbly detailed study of Joseph Smith, Professor Bushman offers numerous and insightful ad hoc observations regarding Smith's cultural milieu, the complex facets of his character (especially as an adult), and the implications of his religious thought. What is lacking in his analysis from a sociological perspective, however, is a general theoretical framework for organizing and interpreting the available documentary data concerning Smith's life. One useful tool that a sociological approach to Smith's biography might offer is a theoretical typology for identifying the key characteristics of his prophetic career that need to be systematically examined and explained in comparison to other prophetic figures or religious innovators. For example, in describing Smith's most important doctrinal and organizational revelations as oracular and epigrammatic in comparison to the expository rhetoric of other nineteenth-century divines, Bushman (2005, xxi) himself implicitly suggests a contrasting set of typological categories: What are the social and personal characteristics of oracular prophets compared to expository prophets? What is the structure of social action in a particular time and place that is most likely to produce oracular rather than expository prophecy? To what kinds of people are these different types of prophecy most likely to appeal and with what variations in their social consequences? This is the kind of sociological analysis that might be fruitfully applied in making partial sense of Joseph Smith and the religion he founded, as well as contributing to the development of conceptual categories for the comparative study of other religious movements.

Bushman also makes passing references to other features of Smith's mode of prophecy that could be more systematically developed through a theoretical analysis of prophecy as an interactive social process. Though often oracular in their ideas and rhetoric, almost all of Smith's revelations were in response to specific inquiries and problems generated and shared by his followers. As Bushman (2005, 172) puts it, "No other visionary sect of the nineteenth century was so dependent on immediate revelation to carry on business." Some of Smith's important revelations were produced in priesthood councils, and many were formulated in discussion and communion with various leading elders of the church; some appear even to have been jointly authored.

Though ordinary members' supernatural experiences were not considered authorized revelations for dictating church doctrine or policy, they were

encouraged to have visions and to prophesy in their meetings and councils. Furthermore, Joseph Smith was a prophet who was open to editing and changing the wording of his prophecies through reflection and, presumably, in response to a certain amount of democratic input from others. To an unknown extent, ordinary sociological models of group discussion and decision-making could be applied to better understand the way in which Smith's guiding revelations for the church he founded were stimulated and shaped through the process of social interaction with like-minded disciples. A systematic analysis of the social construction of prophecy in a well-documented Mormon case study has significant potential for making theoretical contributions to the comparative study of prophecy in other visionary religions.

In addition to a particular focus on the type of prophecy employed by Joseph Smith, one could take a step back and draw upon a number of broader sociological concerns and theoretically related concepts that would be highly relevant in analyzing Smith's prophetic career. Thus, for example, in his critique of 1950s-era social science, C. Wright Mills (1959, 5, 7) called for a robust integration of factual research and theoretical analysis, wherein discrete studies of individuals could be made meaningful in the larger context of history and contemporary institutions. Mills urged cultivation of what he called the "sociological imagination"—a quality of mind necessary "to grasp history and biography and the relations of the two within society … the capacity to shift from one perspective to another … to range from the impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two."

Amplifying and refining Mill's approach to questions of biography and history, Norman Denzin (1989) has written from a social constructionist perspective on the topic of "interpretive biography," in which he too emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the course of a person's life and the larger structure of shaping events within the institutional and cultural order of a particular society. In particular, Denzin deploys the concept of "epiphanies" or turning points in the arc of a person's life. Such epiphanies can be produced both by high points (such as Joseph Smith's completion and publication of the Book of Mormon) and low points (such as his imprisonment in Liberty Jail on charges of treason) or other momentous moments that are deemed subjectively significant—especially for ambitiously creative individuals like Joseph Smith who are constantly engaged in constructing and reconstructing their own identities.

In a similar vein, based on contingency theory in interactionist social psychology, we recently employed a social process approach to assess both the internal and external contingency factors at play in the intellectual history of Jan Shipps's development as a renowned non-Mormon historian of Mormon history. Compatible with Denzin's social constructionist approach, we (Shepherd and Shepherd 2019, 114) argued that "the unfolding of an individual's career is always a social process that allows for a substantial degree of human agency in responding to turning point events and contingency factors in its evolutionary development." This statement frames a potentially useful set of questions for constructing a sociological biography of Joseph Smith: What were the most important turning point events in Smith's life? What were the most significant internal and external "contingencies" that shaped his distinctive responses to these events?

Internal contingencies are factors connected to the capabilities of individuals: their talents, native intelligence, and moral character, especially including individual differences in cognitive complexity, motivation, and achievement orientation. External contingencies are factors connected to the relative influence of other persons or social circumstances that impinge on the lives of individuals: their social networks, primary and secondary group relationships, and the opportunity structures and mobility channels afforded by institutions and historical events. It should be understood that in many ways, internal and external contingencies are themselves mutually contingent: Individuals' talents, intelligence, and moral character are shaped by their social networks and primary and secondary group relations, as well as by the opportunity structure and mobility channels of their society. Conversely, group norms, cultural values, and the structure of existing institutions can be influenced and significantly modified by the thinking and actions of highly creative individuals like Joseph Smith—precisely the kinds of individuals who, in fact, become the most prominent candidates for biographical consideration. A systematic exposition and analysis of the entire constellation of key turning point events and the major internal and external contingencies of a person's life are central to the task of producing a sociological biography.

One other closely related approach for composing a sociological biography of Joseph Smith might take a cue from Arland Thornton's (2005) critical assessment of straight-line developmental theories of social change, especially with regard to Western models of historical development of the family as a basic social institution in human societies. In contrast to conventional approach-

es to the study of social change in particular societies, Thornton recommends "reading history sideways," which is to say, comparing societies at the same point in time to examine their points of convergence and divergence, as opposed to the traditional historical approach in which one particular society's history is followed over time. Shifting from a macro to a micro perspective, we might consider composing a sociological biography of Joseph Smith in the same "sideways" manner; that is, by comparing and contrasting Smith's prophetic career with contemporaries whose lives intimately intersected with his (such as Hyrum Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and Sidney Rigdon), but whose career paths also differed from his in significant ways.

Other obvious elements of a sociological biography of Smith's prophetic career would include the long-established notions of charismatic authority and its organizational consequences, prophetic leadership in the founding and early development of new religious movements, and the transformation and accommodation of new religious movements over time. Additional conceptual themes—such as reference groups, plausibility structures, identity formation, utopian social movements, deviance labeling, and inter-group conflict—have clear and significant application to Joseph Smith and the religious movement he founded. These are issues and ideas that have been theoretically and empirically pursued by sociologists of religion for close to a hundred years, from Max Weber (1978) to Rodney Stark (1999, 2005), Armand Mauss (1984), Kendall White (1987), the two of us (2015), and a multitude of other scholars as well.

In conclusion it should be said that whatever methodological or theoretical shortcomings can be adduced from a sociological standpoint, Richard Bushman's biography of Joseph Smith is a landmark study of the Mormon prophet, one that substantially expands our understanding and human appreciation—whether believers, skeptics, or nonbelievers—of the founder of a contemporary, international faith. If and when a sociological study of Smith's life and prophetic career as Mormonism's founder is ever attempted, it should exploit the vast collection of historical material already aggregated and rendered by Professor Bushman (and other skilled Mormon historians). But such a study should be guided by a theoretical framework that aims to produce an entirely neutral, naturalistic explanation of his history and accomplishments—an analysis that systematically assesses rather than simply narrates the relative influence of Smith's social networks over time, including his family, peers, antagonists, and the accumulation of critical turning point events in nineteenth-century frontier America that led him to take certain directions in life rather than others.

Theoretical elements of a genuinely sociological biography of Joseph Smith (such as a typology of prophecy and revelation as outlined above, or pursuing leads suggested by C. Wright Mills, Norman Denzin, and Arland Thornton) should lead to additional hypotheses whose value could be tested comparatively for a better understanding of the similarities and differences between Mormonism's founder and the founders of other visionary religions. A rigorous sociological biography would not, however, presume to stand as the definitive word on the life of Joseph Smith that somehow satisfies both believers and non-believer critics who are preoccupied with the question of the religious authenticity of his prophetic claims. Such a book lies outside the boundaries of social science analysis and, indeed, would appear to be a contradiction in terms.

References

Brodie, Fawn McKay. 1945. *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bushman, Richard L. 2005. *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bushman, Richard L. 2007. *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author's Diary*. Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books.

Denzin, Norman. 1989. *Interpretive Biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Mauss, Armand L. 1994. *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Parsons, Talcott. 1968. *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: The Free Press.

Quinn, D. Michael. 2006. "Biographers and the Mormon 'Prophet Puzzle': 1974–2004." *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 2: 226–245.

Shepherd, Gary and Gordon Shepherd. 2007. "Grassroots Prophecy in the Family International." *Nova Religio* 10, no. 4: 38–71.

Shepherd, Gordon and Gary Shepherd. 2009. "Prophecy Channels and Prophetic Modalities: A Comparison of Revelation in the Family International and the LDS Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48, no. 4: 743–754.

Shepherd, Gordon and Gary Shepherd 2010. *Talking with the Children of God: Prophecy and Transformation in a Radical Religious Group*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Shepherd, Gordon and Gary Shepherd. 2015. *A Kingdom Transformed: Early Mormonism and the Modern LDS Church*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

Shepherd, Gordon and Gary Shepherd. 2019. *Jan Shipps, A Social and Intellectual Portrait: How a Methodist Girl from Hueytown, Alabama, Became an Acclaimed Mormon Studies Scholar*. Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books.

Shipps, Jan. 1974. "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith." *Journal of Mormon History* 1, no. 1: 3–20.

Stark, Rodney. 1999. "A Theory of Revelations." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2: 287–307.

Stark, Rodney. 2005. *The Rise of Mormonism*, edited by Reid Nelson. New York: Columbia University Press.

Thornton, Arland. 2005. *Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, edited by Guenther Ross and Claus Wittich*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

White, Kendall O. 1987. *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology*. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books.