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Polygamy: An Inappropriate Relationship

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Abstract

Polygamy is a general term that means multiple spouses (White & White, 2005). There are two types of polygamy: polygyny, which is one man with many wives, and polyandry, which is one woman with many husbands. Polygamy has been practiced in the United States as well as in other parts of the world for many centuries. When a family decides to add a new wife to their family, the decision is carefully considered and must be approved before the husband and new wife can get married (Altman & Ginat, 1996). The effect of polygamy on children has been researched but is still unclear. There are many who believe that polygamy is beneficial because it allows men to have many children and helps society (White & White, 2005). On the other hand, many view polygamy as an inappropriate relationship (Moore-Emmett, 2004). This paper explores polygamy within the context of inappropriate relationships.

Polygamy: An Inappropriate Relationship

It is estimated that somewhere between 20,000 and 60,000 people still practice polygamy today (Kincaid, 2003). Polygamy is a term that means multiple spouses (White & White, 2005). Polygyny describes a man who has many wives and polyandry describes a woman who has many husbands (White & White, 2005). Mormons referred to their practice of polygamy as plural marriages (White & White, 2005). Polygamy has been practiced in all parts of the world including the United States, Africa, and China. To many, polygamy is seen as an inappropriate relationship because they believe that polygamy oppresses women and children, but there are also those who believe that polygamy is appropriate and beneficial to society.

The History of Polygamy in the United States

Polygamy has existed in the United States for almost two centuries and has often been associated with the Mormon religion. Mormons began to practice polygamy more openly in 1839, when they moved to Nauvoo, Illinois (Altman & Ginat, 1996). Polygamy did not become a part of the Mormon religion until 1843, when Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, wrote the “Revelation on Celestial Marriage” which stated that polygamy was a holy principle of the faith (Kincaid, 2003). Smith’s revelation discussed the fact that patriarchs of the Old Testament practiced polygamy and the differences between marriages for time and marriages for eternity (Altman & Ginat, 1996). Other substantiation for plural marriages was that a virtuous man is one who has many children and by doing so attains a godlike status and in the afterlife “would administer a patriarchal ‘universe’ surrounded by his wives, children and family” (Altman & Ginat, 1996, p.27). Smith’s revelation gave men an incentive to marry many women and to have many children because of the rewards that they could attain. Indeed, the revelation made polygamy acceptable to Mormons (Altman & Ginat, 1996).

In 1847, Brigham Young, the new leader of the Mormon religion, decided that it was time for the Mormons to leave Nauvoo, and so they moved to Utah (Altman & Ginat, 1996). Three years after they arrived, Utah became a territory and the Mormons decided to make public the fact that they practiced polygamy.

During the civil war, polygamy became an important issue that sparked much debate. Many opposed polygamy and argued that it was female slavery (Kincaid, 2003). During the Civil War, the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act was passed which made polygamy illegal in the territories (Kincaid, 2003). This act, however, did not do much to stop Mormons from engaging in the practice. In order to reinforce the Morrill Act, Congress passed the Poland Act of 1874 which required juries to be chosen by the U.S. marshal, reduced the amount of power that was given to probate judges in Utah, and allowed polygamy cases to be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court (Kincaid, 2003). In response to this act, the Mormons appealed *Reynolds vs. United States* to the U.S. Supreme Court with hopes that they could obtain support from the judicial system under the first amendment, which states the right to freely exercise religion. In the end, the court decided that polygamy was not defended under the first amendment and that Mormons were free to believe in it but not to practice it. In 1887, the Edmunds Tucker Act was passed which started a battle against polygamists that resulted in raids and arrests (Moore-Emmett, 2004). This Act forced polygamists to give up their multiple wives and their children and, if they refused, to be arrested. It was not until 1890 that the Mormons officially rejected polygamy when the president of the Mormon Church released a Manifesto that announced the end of the practice (White & White, 2005). The Manifesto, however, “did not repudiate plural marriage, nor its doctrinal status” (White & White, 2005, p.168). It was not until 1907, that the Mormons

released a document that stated that polygamy was an infringement of church and civil law (Altman & Ginat, 1996).

Polygamy in Different Cultures

Polygamy has not only existed in the Mormon religion; other cultures around the world have practiced it, as well. Polygamy continues to be practiced in parts of Africa; more specifically in East Africa (Tracy, 2002). East Africa has an agricultural way of life and, for the people of this area, many wives suggests an increased social standing and that there will be more children who can be used for labor. Polygamy is also found in Vietnam. In the Vietnam War, many men from North Vietnam lost their lives, which made it difficult for women in their late thirties and early forties to find a husband (Tracy, 2002). These women decided to enter plural marriages in order to be able to have children.

Polygamy is also present in the Islamic culture where a man is allowed to have up to four wives, but each wife must have equal rights when it comes to family and inheritance (Ali, 2003). Polygamy is only allowed in Islamic cultures if the first wife becomes ill or is sterile or if many men die in a war and the population of men decreases. The main condition for plural marriages in Islamic cultures is that the husband must treat each wife equally, if he is not able to do this then he is allowed only to have one wife.

Polygamy was also practiced in ancient China. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Confucianism stated that polygamy was legal (Tracy, 2002). At this period in Chinese history, it was believed that dying without leaving an heir was a mortal sin. Polygamy offered a solution to this possible problem. A man would marry many wives and if the first one were to die, he would replace her with another wife (Tracy, 2002). Centuries later, polygamy, in China, was made illegal.

How Polygamy Works

The first step to forming a plural marriage is choosing a new wife. When it comes to adding a new wife to a family, a lot of thought is put into the decision. Depending on the culture, the decision must be approved by the fundamentalist group's prophet, the parents of the potential wife, and the current wife or wives (Altman & Ginat, 1996). In most cultures it is the men with high economic status who tend to have more than one wife. This is because they usually have to give some sort of a dowry to the potential wife or to her family (Altman & Ginat, 1996). The second wife is chosen differently from the first wife because, unlike the first marriage which is often arranged by the couple's parents, the second marriage is usually voluntary and the new wife is chosen because there is a mutual attraction between the man and the woman (Altman & Ginat, 1996). In some cultures it is the current wife that encourages the husband to go out and look for another wife. In some instances, it is man who chooses his next wife without consulting his current wife. After a new wife is chosen, the next step is the wedding ceremony which is performed the same way as a monogamous wedding except that in some cultures the other wives are involved in the ceremony (Altman & Ginat, 1996).

Once the husband marries the new wife, the family must adjust to this new person (Altman & Ginat, 1996). This can be a difficult period because the new wife has to adjust to living with her husband and with his other wives. If the women all live in the same house, the new wife might initially feel like a visitor because she has little control over the household. Initially, jealousy might arise between the new wife and the established wife because one might view the other as a threat to her relationship with the husband. Eventually, the family adjusts to this new person and the husband follows some type of rotational system when it comes to spending time with his wives and children. There are three types of rotational systems (Altman

& Ginat, 1996). The first is the “rigid rotational system” in which the husband has a fixed schedule. In the “laissez-faire rotational system” the husband has an irregular routine. The last rotational system is the flexible system where the husband follows a schedule most of the times but sometimes he does not depending on the circumstance. Most modern families use the flexible system (Altman & Ginat, 1996). The husband is the one that usually comes up with the schedule but he tries to make sure that each wife and child gets an equal amount of time with him.

The Effects of Polygamy on Children

Polygamy is believed to have an effect on the children that belong to these families. Some researchers believe that being part of a polygamous family weakens the bond between the parent and the child, which causes the child to receive less emotional and psychological security, while others believe that polygamous families provide more warmth and nurturing than monogamous families (Elbedour, Bart, & Hektner, 2003). In a polygamous family, the amount of attention and supervision that a child receives from their father is greatly reduced. The fact that polygamous families are characterized as large in size and low in economic resources may contribute to the problems that these children experience. Despite all this, Elbedour et al. found no significant difference in the test scores of adolescents from monogamous families and adolescents from polygamous families. Even though most researchers believe that polygamy has a negative effect on children (because of the fact that polygamous families are believed to have high levels of jealousy, emotional stress and conflict) its effect on children is still unclear (Elbedour et al, 2003).

Justifications for Polygamy

In the nineteenth century, when polygamy was practiced openly by Mormons, many justified it. The major justification for polygamy was that it encouraged procreation (White & White, 2005). Mormons thought that more children could be created if a man had many wives. As stated earlier, it was believed that a man who had many children would be rewarded in the afterlife and this became an incentive for men to marry many women and have as many children as possible (Altman & Ginat, 1996). Another justification for polygamy is the notion that men are by nature polygamous and that women are by nature monogamous (White & White, 2005). It is thought that men have strong and unlimited sexual needs which would be easily met with more than one wife (Altman & Ginat, 1996). It was also believed that polygamy would give all women the opportunity to get married and have children which would eliminate unmarried women who were usually victims of sexual and economic exploitation (White & White, 2005). Polygamy would also help eliminate prostitution and child abandonment (White & White, 2005). Others thought that polygamy allowed women to have a more liberal life. A woman in a plural marriage does not have to worry as much about her family because she has other women there to help her (Joseph, 1998). Some believe that polygamy is very helpful to career women who might have to work late and then go home and take care of their children or husband (Joseph, 1998). In a plural marriage, the other wives are there to take care of the children and the husband which takes some stress off of the career woman because she now has less to worry about.

Why Polygamy is Deemed Inappropriate

Just like there are people who believe that polygamy should be considered appropriate, there are many people who believe that polygamy should be deemed inappropriate. Many believe that polygamy is inappropriate because they consider it to be female slavery (Kincaid,

2003). Some women in polygamous marriages are denied education, are forced to wear clothing that covers them completely and are forced into arranged marriages (Moore-Emmett, 2004). In some cultures, women in polygamous marriages are told that it is their duty to give birth to one child a year. In polygamous marriages, domestic violence and rape by the spouse are not viewed as such and therefore the husband is not prosecuted for such crimes (Moore-Emmett, 2004). The trafficking of girls can also occur in these relationships and often times the women's children are traded with them. People also believe that polygamy is inappropriate because they view it as "a powerful man collecting a submissive harem of women as property and a herd of children with no individual identity" (Moore-Emmett, 2004). In some cultures, children in polygamous families are forced to constantly work and take care of their younger siblings. Children from polygamous families are not allowed to go to school and, because of this, they may not be able to help their family economically. Many also believe that a polygamous marriage does not contribute to society because most of them depend on food stamps and Medicaid to support their families (Moore-Emmett, 2004). Because of these reasons, many believe that polygamy is an inappropriate relationship.

Inappropriate relationships can be classified in three categories; unconventional, disapproved, and forbidden (Duck & VanderVoort, 2002). An unconventional relationship is one that stretches societal norms and might cause unpleasant gossip but does not break the law. A relationship that may or may not violate formal role ascriptions is known as a disapproved relationship. In a forbidden relationship, a law is broken and this can cause the participants to be formally punished. Out of these three categories polygamy can be considered a disapproved and scandalous type of relationship because "formal role ascriptions are violated, codified rules or

practices are broken, and punishment may include social ostracism, and legal or institutional reprimand” (Duck & VanderVoort, 2002, p.18).

Conclusion

Polygamy has been practiced all over the world for many centuries. There are a lot of factors that go into whether to engage in polygamy. In many cultures, the decision to add a new wife must be approved by the fundamentalist group’s prophet, the parents of the potential wife, and the current wife or wives (Altman & Ginat, 1996). The process of adjusting to the new wife may prove to be a difficult one but the family eventually adjusts and comes up with a rotational system that determines how much time the husband spends with each wife and children (Altman & Ginat, 1996). Most studies have shown that polygamy has a negative effect on children because the bond between the child and the parent is weakened, but some studies argue against this claim (Elbedour et al., 2003). Some believe that polygamy is appropriate because it encourages procreation and helps eliminate prostitution (White & White, 2005). On the other hand, there are those who think that polygamy is inappropriate because it oppresses both women and children (Moore-Emmett, 2004). All in all, the opinion on whether polygamy should be deemed inappropriate or not is divided as it typically is for most “inappropriate relationships.”

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