

## Polygamy: Chaos in the Relationships of Children

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Polygyny occurs when a man is married to multiple partners at one time. It is an act that alters the family structure and has been known to affect the lived experiences of all family members involved. The purpose of the study was to explore the immediate and long-term and lasting effects of polygyny on the interpersonal and social relationships of children from polygamous families. A sample of six participants between the age range of 24 and 30 years, was recruited (3 men and 3 women). The impact of polygyny on the social and interpersonal relations of the participants was explored using semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The participants described the immediate and long-term effect that polygamy had on their relations with their immediate family, step-family and romantic and social relations. The results of the study indicated that the experience of polygamous households were underlined with negative experiences such as disintegration of the family unit, a sense of deprivation and social, economic and educational constraints. These factors in turn affected the participants' relationships with their immediate and step families, and marital relationships. It was concluded that polygamy has an adverse impact of the interpersonal relations of individuals and lead to discord and maladjustment in their social and romantic lives.

*Key words:* polygyny, interpersonal, social relationships, step families, maladjustment

Interpersonal relationships are of utmost importance to an individual's social and emotional growth (Abbott & Ryan, 2001). Developing and maintaining positive interpersonal relationship is a key element of healthy functioning in humans (De Leon, 2000; Moos, 2002). Social scientists believe that positive and quality relationships with others are indispensable for optimal living. Some researchers even claim that the essence of humanity lies in the significant and quality relations we form with others (Ryff & Singer, 2000). One of the most significant social relations an individual develops is with his/her family. Family is the first agent of socialization through which a child learns how to interact with society and perceive ourselves and others. Due of its strategic importance, the effect family structures and functioning has on an individual has been studied extensively by researchers (Goode, 2007). Polygamy is a marital state or family structure in which the husband is married to multiple women at one time, this leaves a remarkable impact on the mental health, academic achievements, interpersonal relations, and social adjustment of children from polygamous households (Bart, Elbedour & Hektner, 2007; Cherian, 1990; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999; Al-Shamsi & Fulcher 2005; Al-Sherbiny 2005).

The practice of polygyny is widespread in collectivistic cultures such as those found in the Middle-East, Asia and Africa (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006; Al-Shamsi & Fulcher, 2005; Al-Sherbiny, 2005; Jankowiak, 2008; Sonbol, 2003). Contrary to popular belief, polygamy was a highly practiced tradition around the globe up until 2009 (United Nation's publication "Population Facts", 2011). Polygamy was practiced both in Muslim majority countries and Non-Muslim African and Asian Countries such as India. Statistics indicate that the practice was legally permissible in 33 countries, out of which 25 were located in Africa and 7 were in

the Asian continent. Overall, the report suggested that 41 countries situated in the Asian and African continent completely or partially gave legal support to the practice, making it socially acceptable in the process.

Polygyny is a legalized practice in Pakistan, which is in keeping with the state religion-Islam. The Islamic faith, allows men to be married to a maximum of four women at a time under stringent and well-defined conditions (Al-Quran, 4:3; 4:129). Despite polygyny being a permissible practice, supported both by the religious doctrines and the Pakistani constitution, there are no official records of its prevalence in the Pakistani society (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2013).

Existing literature indicates that polygynous marital structures are exceedingly underlined by interfamilial conflicts, parental violence and negative emotions such as jealousy and stress, which make the children from these families increasingly vulnerable to psychological dysfunction (Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017; Patil & Hadley, 2008). Similarly, Al-Krenawi and Lightman (2000) found that children belonging to polygamous households have higher conflicts with siblings and have poor familial relations. Research indicates that the experience of having multiple families is painful and distressing for children belonging to such households (Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008), leading to poor quality relations with the father.

The present study aimed at studying the long-term and lasting effects of polygyny on the interpersonal and social relations of children. Despite the increasing literature available on the practice and consequences of polygamy its lasting effects on the interpersonal relationships of the children is truly a neglected area.

### Research Questions

1. How do children with polygynous fathers perceive their relationships with their father?
2. How do individuals from polygynous families perceive their relationships with their families?
3. How do individuals from polygynous families perceive the impact of their father's second marriage on their romantic and intimate social relationships?

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Method

Participants

The sample of the present study comprised six participants (3 men and 3 women). Their age ranged between 24 and 30 years ( $M_{age} = 27$  years). The homogeneity of the sample was maintained in terms of their socio-economic background (all were from middle socio-economic class), family order (all participants were children of the first wives) and the age in which they experienced their fathers marriage (all participants started experiencing a polygamous family structure between the age of 7-10 years).

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Participants*

Participants	Age in years	Gender	Marital Status
1	26	Male	Unmarried
2	30	Male	Unmarried
3	24	Female	Unmarried
4	25	Female	Unmarried
5	30	Male	Married
6	27	Female	Married

Instrument

An interview schedule was designed after consultation with three professionals, in depth discussions between the first author and second author and reviewing the existing literature. The questions explored the experiences of individuals in the areas of interpersonal

relations, and social functioning. The questions were structured to be open ended in order to attain thorough information about the experiences of the participants.

Procedure

After gaining approval from the Board of Studies of the Department of Psychology, Government College University Lahore, the participants were recruited via personal contacts and snowball sampling. Written consent was acquired from all participants preceding the interviews. Detailed, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect the data. The interview sessions ranged from 47 -75 minutes and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts operated as the raw data for the present study.

The transcripts were analysed by the first and second authors using the technique of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), developed by Smith (2008). According to Smith the rudimentary purpose of IPA is to explore systematically and in detail how an individual makes sense of their experiences. In IPA, the researcher aims to make sense of the participant making sense of experiences.

Results

With reference to the interpersonal relationships of the participants the following superordinate themes were derived from the transcribed interviews of all the participants.

Superordinate Themes	Master Themes	Emergent Themes
Relationship With Father	Ambivalent	Effort to gain approval Protective Care for father Unconditional love Shift of affection and association Conflict of opinion Confused Respect VS. Contempt Gradual deterioration of relations
	Negative Relation	Restricted Relation Strained Relation Impaired relation Distant Relation Discomforting Relation Detachment lack of trust
Relationship With Mother	Affection for mother	Sandwiched between parents Affection and trust for mother Close association with mother Care and empathy for mother Love for mother Sympathy for mother Support for mother
	Ambivalent	Condemns mother's behaviour Blaming Conflict of opinion
Relationship With Siblings	Support	Support and Respect Advice and Guidance Brother = father figure supportive relation

	Negative	conflict of interest VS. Respect
	Positive	Lack of sharing
		Sharing
		Affectionate with siblings
		Contentment
Relationship With Step Family	Negative Reactions	Close family relations
		Jealousy
		Disliking
		Hatred
		Disown Step family
		Blames stepmother
		Stepmother's negative perception
		Condemns Stepmothers behaviour
	Apathy	Indirect relation
		indifference towards step siblings
		Ignorant towards step-mothers existence
	Ambivalent	Effort to empathize
		lack of trust
		mistrust = Men
Romantic and Spousal Relationships	Negative Associations	Reluctance to share
		Doubt Vs. Relationship longevity
		Discomfort

### Impact of Polygamy on Relationship with Fathers

The experience of polygamy was underlined with negative experiences such as disintegration of the family unit, a sense of deprivation and social, economic and educational constraints. These experiences in turn formed the foundations of the participant's relationship with their fathers. All participants reported undesirable feelings with regards to their relationship with their father. The fathers' second marriage led to the formation of distant, impaired and strained relations, characterized by condemnation, conflict, and a lack of trust. Most participants felt that their father was manipulative, materialistic, inaccessible and selfish.

Participant 2 Said:

*My father's second marriage distanced me from him; my communication with him is only on financial matters. Recently there hasn't been much interaction with him*

Participant 3 Reported:

*I cannot trust my father in anything. I cannot rely on him to take my decision for me, and even if he gives me a suggestion, I ignore it, because I think he doesn't know me*

Participant 6 Said:

*I can't approach my father for advice or support. He is only concerned with his own life. He has never been there for me.*

Participant 1 reported:

*As a child my father tried to manipulate me into believing that his second marriage was my mother's fault. He constantly tried to emotionally influence me.*

Participant 2 reported:

*When he should have been concerned for our needs, future and life decisions, my father focused more on himself, his own needs and desires, and his priority was second family"*

It reflects that the children's resentment over the second marriage of their father was due to the reason that they missed their father on important occasions; he ignored children's needs and started giving time and preference to the second wife. The extracts also illustrate that the second marriage of the father had shaken the children's trust on him.

In contrast, some of the participants showed an ambivalent attitu-

de towards their fathers and reported feelings of care, and unconditional love for their fathers at the same time.

Participant 6 reported:

*I cannot stop loving him as my father despite everything he has done. I guess it's something ingrained in us by the society.*

Participant 4 said:

*He is my father and it is unconditional love that I feel for him.*

It illustrates that some of the participants believe that love for their father is natural and it should not be conditioned with what he has done for them and with his life.

### Relationship with Birth Mother

In regards to their relationship with their birth mothers, a number of participants reported to have affectionate, close, sympathetic, loving and supportive relations.

Participant 1 reported:

*I'm very protective about my mother. I think she has suffered a lot and I feel sorry for everything she has been through. I take her side more than anyone else and always support her.*

Participant 3 said:

*I love, adore and cherish my mother. She is the only parent for us who take care of our needs despite the fact that she bear hardships produced by my father.*

Participant 6 reported

*My mother is my teacher; she is like a best friend to me. I can share everything with her. I can joke around with her. I feel comfortable with her*

As birthmothers were the primary caregivers, most of the participants showed love, care and sympathy towards them. They appeared to perceive that their mother had suffered due to the second marriage of their father. The children seemed to have the realization that their mother had been there to bear the hardships after the marriage of their fathers.

However, some reported ambivalent relations in which despite the existence of love and care for their mother, the relations were characterized by conflicts, blame and condemnation.

Participant 5 said:

*My mother used to share everything with us. She used to tell us everything that my father had done. I think that made us grow apart from our father's side. My father married again because my mother was unable to handle him properly. Its my mother's fault that forced my father to marry again.*

Participant 4 reported:

*I think there were a few things where my mom was responsible for my father's second marriage.*

The extract shows that the children appear to be in a state of confusion and blame their mother for their father's second marriage.

### Relationship with Siblings

Majority of the participants reported having a supporting, affectionate, and close knit relationship with their siblings. Their experiences outline how their fathers' second marriage promoted a greater degree of reliance and emotional and financial interdependence between the siblings.

Participant 3 said:

*My eldest brother takes care of the entire family financially. He played the role of our guardian, whenever my father was absent or busy with his other family. I look up to him for advice and guidance before doing anything*

Participant 6 said:

*I am very close to my siblings. We tend to share any problems we encounter or if anything good happens we share the happiness with each other. We feel at ease with each other*

Some participants reported to having affectionate relations with their siblings, however, this relationship was characterized by a reluctance to share personal problems and details.

Participant 1 said:

*I care a lot for my siblings, and we discuss all our family problems however I don't share personal matters with them. I don't trust them for sharing my secrets.*

Participant 5 reported:

*I am very close to my sister and brother, but I feel uncomfortable sharing my feelings with them, especially my sentiments towards my father*

The father's second marriage seems to promote a close and supportive relation between the siblings. They recounted a high degree of emotional and financial interdependence with their siblings, to compensate the lack of support and presence of their father. The elder siblings assumed the role of the head of the family where the father remained absent due to the responsibility of his second family. Despite this care and love they seem hesitant to share with each other, as they lose trust due to their fathers infidelity.

### Relationship with Step-Family

In this particular context, the step families were formed through the father's second marriage. The participants' experiences with their step-families were predominantly negative, characterized by negative reactions, apathy and ambivalence. The relationship was underscored by the feelings of jealousy, hatred, dislike, blame, condemnation and disownment.

Participant 3 reported:

*I severely hate my father's second wife. She knew my father was married and she knew he had children but still she chose to get married to him. I know my father is to blame as well, but the other women destroyed our family completely.*

Participant 5 said:

*I was jealous of my stepfamily. They had my father's love, attention*

*and support while we were left to our own devices to manage our problems and take care of our house*

Most participants reported having a neutral and indifferent attitude towards their stepsiblings, relegating them to the status of a passing acquaintance or someone of no significant importance.

Participant 6 reported:

*We see our stepsiblings as mere acquaintances*

Participant 3 said:

*My stepsiblings are just like strangers to me. They mean nothing more than that*

It appears that the participants had reasons for dislike and negative feelings towards their stepfamily. They reported to hate their stepmother for intentionally destroying their peace and family cohesion by marrying their father. They felt resentful towards their stepsiblings because the love and attention of their father was divided between both sets of children. The participants believed that the stepfamily were enjoying more than their share of their father's love and care, whilst they were being deprived.

### Romantic and Marital Relations

The married participants reported remarkably diffident and hesitant relations with their intimate partners/spouse. The participants reported a reluctance to trust and share confidence with their partner.

Participant 5 reported:

*I don't share a lot of things with my partner. I just don't feel comfortable, because of how my parents' relations were. I am afraid, he will betray me like my father.*

Participant 4 said:

*I cannot trust men, especially after seeing what my father did to my mother. It takes me a good time to judge someone and know them and only then do I get involved in a relationship.*

The participants' experiences reflected their uncertainty about the future and long term potential of their relations with their spouses and partners. In women, mistrust towards men was obvious due to their mistrust on their father for his second marriage.

Participant 1 reported:

*I'm very close to my girlfriend, but nothing lasts forever. Everybody leaves so even though we're close but you know I know she will leave*

Participant 3 said:

*I cannot form intimate relations with people easily. I know they will leave eventually and getting close to them would only hurt me in the long run. So whenever I think any relation is getting too close I push the other person away.*

Polygamy appears to leave long term impact on the intimate relationships of the individuals. It seems that polygamy not only affects the relationship of the children with their family of origin, but they carryover their negativity, resentment and mistrust to their relationships with their partners or spouses.

### Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that individuals belonging to polygamous households experience debilitating effects in their interpersonal relationships as a by-product of their fathers second marriage. These findings are supported by previous studies carried out in Arab and Eastern counties, (Adams & Mburugu, 1994; Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2006) that suggest that the act of polygamy is connected to the varying emotional difficulties faced by members of such families.

The results display how the participants' relationships with their family were characterized by distrust and conflict. Researches conducted in Israel and Arab countries support these findings, suggesting that the presence of negative emotions such as distrust, blame, anger, jealousy and bitterness contribute towards the prevalence of interfamilial conflicts (Al-Krenawi & Lightman, 2000).

The participants' experience and contemplation of love and care in their relationship with their father and their mother coincided with existing literature available on Bedouin and Arab tribes in Middle East, suggesting most individuals from polygamous household experience a distant and detached relationship with their father, while sympathising and relying more on their birth mothers for love and support (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Al-Krenawi, 1997; Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990). However, some of the participants have also reported experiences of unconditional love and care for their fathers. These results can be understood in light of religious and cultural paradigms prevailing in the Pakistani society, which preach submission before parents and respect of parents as ultimate virtues. In collectivist societies, such as Pakistan, birth mothers are the primary care givers to their children. Overall participants showed a sympathetic, loving and caring relation with their mother. Al-Krenawi, Graham, and Al-Krenawi (1997) suggested that due to the division of the fathers' social and economic resources children form closer bonds with their mothers. Also as Pakistan is a collectivistic society there is greater unity in social ties and relations; sympathy, respect, affection and care can be seen as a by-product of this relation. However, participants also reported condemnation, blame and conflict in their relationship with their mother. A study on polygamy in Bedouin Arab tribes conducted by Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo (2006), suggested that family relations can suffer from conflicts as a result of the fathers second marriage.

The results indicate that the participants' relationships with their siblings were largely characterized by love, support, care and a sense of interdependence. These results are supported by existing literature which indicates that polygamous families show a greater sense of cohesion and interdependence (Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Caridine, & Abu-Saad, 2002) and suggests that due to marital conflicts in the family, children may have to undertake the responsibility of the family (Elbedour, Bart, & Hektner, 2007). The children from polygamous households may have to take over the role and responsibilities of their fathers and face the emotional consequences and financial burdens associated with it. Moreover, in collectivistic societies, such as Pakistan, the family unit are considered to be closely integrated and are characterized by a strong sense of inter-dependence. These findings do not coincide with a research conducted by Al-Krenawi and lightman (2000), which showed the family conflicts are higher and family adjustment is poor in individuals belonging to polygamous households when compared to their monogamous counterparts.

The results displayed that the participants had an apathetic and negative relationship with their step families. This relation was defined by feelings of jealousy, dislike, hatred, condemnation, indifference, disownment and an effort to empathize with the step family. These results are in agreement with the research conducted by Elbedour, Bart, and Hektner (2007), which suggests that the relationships between the children and their step-families are undermined by emotions such as anger, jealousy and detachment. Lev-Wiesel and Al-Krenawi (2000) suggest that children of the senior wives are more inclined towards rejecting their fathers' seco-

nd wife and her children.

The participants of the present study were young adults and their experiences outline the lasting impacts of having lived in a polygamous family structure. One of the most significant findings of the present study was the detrimental effect the father's second marriage had on the individual's formation of romantic and marital relations. Existing literature has indicated that children from polygamous households face greater difficulties in socializing and interpersonal relationships when compared to their counterparts from monogamous households (Elbedour, Bart, & Hektner, 2003). The poor quality of romantic and marital relations of the participants can be the consequences of their excessive exposure to "marital conflict, marital distress, absence of father, and financial stress" (Elbedour et al., 2002, p. 258).

### *Implications*

The study provides ground work for further research on the effects polygamy has on the social and interpersonal growth of individuals from such family structures. The study highlights the emotional problems and lasting consequences of polygamy which practitioners, health care workers and counsellors should consider while dealing with the psychological issues of children from polygamous households. The research also helps to create awareness of the lasting impact polygamy has on the development of children in the society.

### *Limitations and Future Recommendations*

The results of our study should be used keeping in mind the limitations it contains. Firstly, the sample size employed in the research was small and the results cannot be generalized to general population. The participants of the study were all children of the first wife; children from subsequent marriages can have vastly different experiences. Finally the present research focused on exploring the relationships of children with polygamous fathers, further research could be conducted to explore the experiences of children whose mother marries for a second time.

### *Conclusion*

The current research highlights the lasting effect that exposure to a polygamous marital structure has for the children. Having lived in a polygamous family can cause the individual to develop poor interpersonal relationships, which in turn can affect the functioning and success of the individual in various arenas of their life. The study reveals that polygamy has long-term impact on the relationships of the children in the society, and may cause maladjustments in the marital and romantic lives of the individuals. The results suggest that an individual's initial interaction within their family forms the basics of their social and emotional development over the course of their life. The results provide adequate support to illustrate the immense importance and involvement fathers have in the development of their children.

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