

## INTRODUCTION: PRIVILEGE DISGUISES TORMENT

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This volume attempts to break new ground by analyzing polygynous men's lives in relation to their wives and children. It is important to study the family as a whole in order to gain insight into the interdependency and interactions among family members. While we take men's experiences into account, we pay close attention to the relationship between men and women and between co-wives, who have a great capacity to negotiate with, manipulate, and undermine their husband to serve their children's and their own best interests. Polygynous men have to respond to endless demands from their wives, conflict generated from daily activities of the plural families, and socio-economic pressures. Drawing from our fieldwork, we argue that the men's privilege of having multiple wives conceals much of their everyday struggle with polygyny. It is a misconception to equate men's entitlement to practice polygyny with finding happiness from having plural wives. Despite being located in a privileged position, many men are more emotionally vulnerable than they may at first appear. However, after saying this, it is equally crucial to be aware that, while men and women both suffer emotional pain, polygynous men often have much more structural support and may (but not always) have greater access to material resources than many women in plural marriages.

Much of the literature on polygyny has been focused on the formation of the polygynous family. Although polygynous family arrangements were noted by missionaries, explorers, and ethnographers, it was not until the 1960s that scholars sought to provide a theoretical overview for some of the more salient social features and psychological undercurrents common to the polygynous family (e.g., Clignet 1970; Ember 1985; Harrell 1997; Josephson 1993; Levine 1962; Low 2000; White 1988; White and Burton 1988). Much of this research sought to identify the structural factors that accounted for the establishment of polygyny. Researchers identified a strong correlation between a subsistence system and the positive valuing of the polygynous family (Betzig 1986; Chamie 1986; Dorjahn 1988; Goody 1976; Sanderson 2001:331). Boserup (1970) noted that polygyny which had many laborers (i.e., wives and their offspring) correlated with agricultural production. This subsistence consequence made polygyny a productive unit (Bledsoe 1992; Jacoby 1995). Alexander (1987) stressed that ecological factors can influence the normalization of a particular marital system. Ember, Ember, and Low (2007:428; also see Kanazawa and Still 1999; Marlowe 2003) concluded that frequent warfare results in a higher rate of male mortality, while in densely populated state societies, high pathogen stress is the stronger predictor for the increased frequency of the polygynous family

system. Some noticed that high-ranking men have more opportunities to marry more women (Altman and Ginat 1996; Young 1954). The study of the formation and transformation of the polygynous family has demonstrated the links between family and society. The contributors to this volume attempt to push this one step further; that is, to analyze the dynamic relationships in everyday interactions and the layers of emotion of the members of polygamous families in time-specific cultural contexts.

Besides the formation of the polygynous family, “female choice” is at the center of the study of polygyny. Chisholm and Burbank (1991) suggest that polygyny arises more from social coerciveness than it does out of free choice. Even when it appears as if free choice is present, there are always, though often unstated, material and social restraints. For example, among contemporary Palestinians, polygyny remains a viable family system. This is due in large measure to local norms that marginalize unmarried middle-aged women. Many unmarried women delayed marriage in favor of pursuing a professional career. In delaying marriage, these women could no longer attract a suitable mate, for the men of their society preferred a more youthful wife. The preference for a youthful wife, however, has not resulted in making middle-aged women undesirable as a second, albeit lower status, wife (Sa’ar 2004, 2008). In this instance a Palestinian woman’s decision to become a second wife is based less on her desire to enter into a polygynous family than it is upon local norms that make it essential to marry and not live alone. Similarly, a Dogon woman’s decision to enter into a polygynous marriage arises from the logic of an age-grade marriage system that all but eliminates viable monogamous opportunities. Kanazawa and Still (1999) offer an expanded version of Burbank and Chisholm’s social coerciveness model. They note that a female’s choice to enter or reject polygyny is determined largely by resource allocation, and that sometimes monogamy is not a viable choice (e.g., low parental investment and/or low quality of potential mates). In contrast to Kanazawa and Still’s model, Sanderson (2001:330) found that poor, uneducated rural women are more inclined to enter into a polygynous marriage, while wealthier women overwhelmingly shun polygyny. In short, female choice, as these scholars note, is constrained by socioeconomic and cultural forces.

Emotional nuances of co-wives also have received a lot of attention from anthropologists. Significantly, sociological survey questionnaires (Ware 1980) found that West African co-wife conflicts usually arise from competition over material resources. In contrast, more in-depth ethnographic analysis, especially when conducted by female researchers, repeatedly noted the presence of ambiguity women felt over sharing their husband (Allen 1973; Burbank 1994; Colson 1961; Meekers and Franklin 1995; Whyte 1979). Others argue that women compete with each other and that the emotional turmoil this engenders should not be seen as individual women fighting with one another, but that the patriarchal system compels them to compete, and that the women’s feelings and conflicts need to be analyzed in relation to the kinship structure and larger society (Bao 2005; Watson 1985). Some researchers report that co-wife relationships tend to be emotionally dissatisfying for the majority

of participants (Al-Krenawi and Graham 1999; Goldman and Pebley 1989; Fortes 1969; Hill and Hurtado 1996). Her dissatisfaction often arises from a perception of being disrespected or ignored by her husband or her co-wives. A woman's desire for greater sexual and emotional access to her husband was a recurrent reason behind many family quarrels (Jankowiak et al. 2005). Some men may divide wealth more or less equally but not attention and affection, which generates contentious rivalry between co-wives. Other researchers report that under certain circumstances, co-wife relationships in a polygynous family system can be emotionally satisfying (Borgerhoff-Mulder 1988, 1989, 1992; Kilbride 1994; Madhavan 2002; Mason 1982). In some cultures, elderly women reach a co-operative agreement with an incoming co-wife, whereby the younger wife agrees to care for the senior wife in illness, while the senior wife grants her unrestricted access to their husband (Jankowiak et al. 2005).

Co-operation among co-wives also has been explored by those who study the polygynous family as a complex social and emotional institution (Bennion 1998; Dupire 1968; Levine 1962; Soloway 1990; Ware 1980). That ethnographers seldom discuss the frequency or contexts for co-wife co-operation (Madhavan 2002) is an oversight that conveys the impression that co-wife conflict is omnipresent. What is striking about co-wives' co-operative relationships is that they are seldom random or haphazard. They tend to be organized around a series of quid pro quo exchanges designed to meet situational needs, such as establishing health care relationships (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999), thereby enhancing chances of survival (Anderson 2000; Sa'ar 2008), or finding partners willing to assist with daily chores. The contributors of this volume concur, and note, that co-operation, conflict, and tensions coexist in productive and reproductive life.

So far, anthropological studies of polygyny have largely focused on women's experiences and emotions. Some wives love their husbands; others prefer to ignore them; some develop love and hate relationships with their spouse; and still others would murder their husband if they could get away with it. While it is important to study women, an exclusive focus on their experiences hinders addressing their male counterparts, with whom they sleep, co-ordinate daily tasks, fight, and engage in conversation and negotiation. Therefore, probing the strategies and emotions polygynous men encounter with their co-wives and children is necessary.

Polygynous marital practices often are legitimized by religious beliefs. All the contributors note that "God's wish," "men's nature," fate, or karma have served to facilitate plural family systems. The ethnographies presented in this volume suggest that religious beliefs and masculine ideologies make people take men's privilege for granted, as socioeconomic and sex/gender inequalities are disguised and naturalized by religious beliefs and habitual practices.

Naturalizing such privileges empowers men, yet naturalization also constrains them because not all men want to be polygynists. In Israel, some Bedouin-Arab men felt that they had to marry more than one wife in order to conform to cultural and

religious norms. (In some cases, the first wife was under so much pressure that she would ask her husband to take another wife, often chosen by her.) In Utah, some Mormon polygamists felt miserable as they came to realize that they were unable to have a harmonious life with multiple wives. In Northern Pakistan, some Swati men become polygynists even though they understand it as a “foolish” act which might lead to being murdered by the first wife. We conclude that it is striving for privilege rather than some form of biological imperative for sexual variety that is the driving force behind men’s assuming a polygynous marriage.

A Swati man’s decision to marry a second wife is not out of romantic love but out of anger. The lineage alliance system does not enhance marital bonds, and the tension between the couple often results in the husband marrying another woman to embarrass the first wife. In fundamental Mormon society, poor or younger men have fewer choices than richer or older men. While Mormon men gain social and spiritual status by having plural wives, their desire for an enhanced status is undercut by considerations of financial support and a desire for emotional intimacy with one woman. The decision to take another wife is not a casual undertaking. In Bangkok, middle-class Chinese Thai men marry a second wife not only to demonstrate masculinity and sexual potency, but also to find a woman who can serve as a reliable laborer for the family business. Men’s choice of a certain configuration of polygyny often bears an historical marker. The first generation Chinese immigrants in Thai society chose to have one wife in Thailand and one in China, while second generation Chinese Thai men tended to choose a hidden polygyny in response to social changes and shifting regulations. A common practice that all the contributors observed is that polygynous men strategize the ways they engage with each wife evenly, such as the time spent with each subfamily, rotating sleeping with each wife, or choosing to engage with one wife and keeping a distance from another wife.

This volume reveals that a harmonious polygynous family exists more in men’s fantasies than in reality. This does not mean that the men find no pleasure, comfort, or companionship. Some clearly do. However, many polygynous men must constantly deal with stress, ambivalence, and emotional anguish. In coping with this, men have developed different strategies designed to promote harmony. These range from using one wife to control another wife, seeking the first wife’s permission to marry another wife, marrying a wife’s sister or best friend, or hiding the fact that they have taken another wife. These strategies are not always successful. When a man’s life becomes too stressful, some hang out at a men’s house, or have an apartment in another city, or even withdraw into their dreams of ordaining as a monk and living a celibate life. Still other men come to regret polygyny and do not want their sons or daughters to have what they experienced. (The children in all these polygynous families were against polygyny.) The volume demonstrates the complexity and varieties of polygynous families in different cultural, religious, and socioeconomic contexts. The following is a brief summary of the key arguments of each essay in this issue.

By focusing on middle-class Chinese Thai, Jiemin Bao denaturalizes male sexual privilege and analyzes the ways in which polygyny in Thai society is informed by the political economy and identity politics. She points out that masculine and feminine identities are not in opposition, but continuously echo and communicate with each other through the polygyny. Like the spiritual transformation from man to monk, polygyny also is transformative. The awakening of the Chinese Thai man is both sexual and economic. Chinese Thai polygynists cross the boundaries between the presumed binary opposition between production and reproduction. A woman—bound to the family business by her own interests and her middle-class identity as a “good” wife and mother—sometimes accepts male sexual privilege and sometimes resists it, shifting between complaint and compliance, and between working with and against her husband and the other wife. Such polygyny can be defined not just in terms of sexual and economic interests but also by relationships of co-dependency. Bao suggests that naturalization occurs within political and economic forces, not outside of them. More important, naturalized men’s sexual privilege obscures the contingent ways in which masculine and feminine identities can be negotiated and acted upon.

Drawing from extensive fieldwork among Mormon fundamentalists, William Jankowiak illustrates the interplay between two different kinds of yearnings: Yearning for a glorious celestial marriage and a harmonious family, which is at the core of fundamentalist Mormon religious faith, and yearning for romantic love with a favorite wife. Mormon religious ethics—having multiple wives and many children in order to achieve salvation and eternal happiness—play an important role in this formation of polygyny. Jankowiak demonstrates that men experience a range of emotional turmoil—anxiety, shame, pride, guilt, regret, anger, and jealousy—which directly influences their children’s understanding and acceptance of the plural family arrangement. He shows that there is a wide variety of co-wife practices, ranging from seeking romantic love, to being afraid to fall in love, to seeking divorce.

Charles Lindholm demonstrates that Sunni Muslim men in the Swat Valley, Pakistan, with elite landholding warrior lineages tend to marry a second wife from a lower social order to humiliate the first wife who is from his same class. The misery of having two rival wives sometimes drives a man to marry a third wife. Lindholm argues that a patriarchal society does not protect women’s rights, and that Islam has inconsistent policies toward women and polygamy which simultaneously empowers and constrains them. Therefore, gender relations and polygyny must relate to Islamic law and a patriarchal society.

Vered Slonim-Nevo, Alean Al-Krenawi, and Bar Yuval-Shani compare “high functioning” with “low functioning” polygyny families among Bedouin-Arabs in Israel from the point of view of the husband, wives, children, and extended family members. They argue that the second wife has higher social status than the first wife, because the men choose the second wife rather than her being assigned to them. The biggest difference between the high and low functioning families is that the husbands

in the high functioning families pay more attention to the first wife and her children than the husbands in the low functioning ones. Moreover, they found that children from polygynous families tend to have more mental health and academic performance problems than the children from monogamous families. Some men did not want to marry more than one wife, but acquiesced under the pressure of Bedouin socio-religious custom and prohibitions against extra-marital sex. Just as the women are compelled to battle for resources and for emotional support, so are men coerced into forming a polygynous family. In short, this volume challenges the assumption that polygynous men gain material or social benefits without emotional cost.

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