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PROGRESSIVE POLYGAMY IN WESTERN UNITED STATES

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This paper is based on 20 years of ethnographic fieldwork among the Mormon fundamentalist polygynists of the Intermountain Western United States, providing an analysis of a new phenomenon—a ultra-liberal version of polygynous family life, emerging in the last twenty years in three locales: Salt Lake City, Utah; the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, and the northern Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico. It is predicted that this “progressive” version of a rigid patriarchal family form emerged in response to the inclusion of additional female converts from mainstream orthodox Mormon society. These unique women are both highly educated and career-oriented, while still maintaining stalwart faith in the Mormon doctrine of celestial marriage, large families, and the raising up “a righteous seed” unto the Lord. These women are also unique in finding very few familial models for their needs in the mainstream Mormon world due to divorce, widowhood, unmarriageability, and/or lack of female networking.

Relevance

Only a few scholars have provided in-depth analyses of North American polygyny. Social psychologist Irv Altman (1996) of the University of Utah, anthropologist Robin Fox (1993) of Rutgers, anthropologist Bill Jankowiak (1995) of the University of Nevada, anthropologist Phil Kilbride (1994) of Bryn Mawr, and Janet Bennion of Lyndon State College of Vermont (Bennion 1998, 2004). Altman focused on the complexity of relationships among the Apostolic United Brethren (the Allredites), emphasizing how these families struggled to fit into a polygamous structure using Victorian psychological frameworks developed in a monogamous context. Jankowiak investigated the father-adoration concept in polygamous relationships in Colorado City (also known as Short Creek). Fox and Kilbride were both interested in showing the benefits polygamy offers in the context of the crises of American modernity; they emphasized how women...
choose alternative family forms as a way to cope with the socioeconomic obstacles they confront. Kilbride applauded the adaptive measures polygamists to share resources and provide protection from the harsh realities of urban life. My early research explored the unexpected ascendance of women in rigid patriarchal communities, especially how women could gain autonomy and power during the prolonged absences of their husbands. I recorded the experiences of female converts in the Montana Allredite order (Bennion 1998) and found that many women are attracted to the commune because of the socioeconomic support it offers, replacing a rather difficult life in the mainstream where their status as divorcees, single mothers, widows, and “unmarriageables” limited their access to good men and the economic and spiritual affirmation that comes from a community of worship. She depicted enormous variety in the expressions of polygamy in her volume, *Polygamy in Prime Time* (2012), finding that some Mormon women experience more individual satisfaction within the dynamics of a polygamous family than they could in any other marital form. Kilbride’s book *Plural Marriage for Our Time: A Reinvented Option* (1994) similarly states that plural marriage can help rebuild a strong sense of family for specific groups of Americans, especially in times of socioeconomic crisis.

Polygamy is practiced by only 2% of North Americans from a range of religious and national backgrounds, but the practice of plural marriage occupies a disproportionately large space in the public and legal imagination. Reality television shows like *Sister Wives* and *Polygamy, USA* seek to titillate with the details of polygamous family formation and family management among Mormon fundamentalists. These programs also operate to normalize the polygamous unit, showing seemingly happy, thriving and relatively self-aware families with little apparent abuse or underage marriage. The public is able to see—with their own eyes—a variety of forms of polygamy, even those depicting women as the decision makers who operate in the public sphere with careers and political ambitions. At the very least—revealing the enormous complexity and variability of poly life to public scrutiny—people are beginning to question the age-old adage that polygamy per se causes harm. Although polygamy was the object of intense legal actions between the 1930s and 1950s, no effort to arrest polygamists was made between 1960 and 2001. This lack of interest in prosecuting polygamists causes many to question criminalization of polygamy and the validity of Reynolds v. United States which bans polygamy in our era of modern religious freedom. It has also become difficult to justify banning polygamy when so many other forms of marriage and sexuality are liberalized and tolerated. Could polygamy be considered as a viable tool for women to juggle careers and motherhood and for single women, who normally would not be able to marry, to find a solution to the “lack of good men” dilemma? Or, is the recent verdict of the British Columbia polygamy trial and what many a handful of scholars in this volume suggest is true—that polygamy itself causes gross violations against women’s civil rights and that it is uniformly abusive to women and children?

My contribution in this paper concern here is to identify the variable impact of polygamy on the lives of women and children within three extended polygynous homesteads located in Utah, Washington, and Mexico, with whom I have worked and lived intermittently for several years. As stated, I predict that women in these new progressive movements are well educated, adopt polygyny of their own volition as fully consensual adults, and do so, in order to flee the issues that plague them as active Mormons in the mainstream, namely, widowhood, spinsterhood, and lack of female friends with which to work and raise their children.

**Results**

The most significant findings among the three extended polygynous families observed were that the women had selected liberally-minded patriarchs/husbands who believed in female-led households, female autonomy, and a more relaxed version of priesthood power. All three husbands exhibited signs of ENFP personalities (extraverted feelers who operate on intuition and non-goal oriented processes) that took pleasure in their wives’ control of the household and sexual matters. Further, the family philosophy and faith-based worship incorporated a more liberal ideological interpretation
of Mormonism, including Eastern mysticism, goddesshood, female priesthood, hypergamy, and polyandry.

The families observed also admitted to having been influenced in their “progressive” philosophies of polygyny by HBO’s Big Love series where an independent polygynist leaves the group to provide his wives and children with a more liberal and open expression of fundamentalist life and TLC’s reality show, Sister Wives, depicting defunct independent Kody Brown and his four wives who are in favor of gay marriage and career women. Of great interest is the third family in the ethnography, Brady Brown and his five wives who recently “came out of the closet” with their reality show My Five Wives, depicting the most progressive form so far—a Mormon polygynous family which has blended Buddhist ideologies in their belief framework. They practice female priesthood and four of the five women have careers, as well as children of their own.

In conclusion, this new direction of liberal, progressive Mormon polygyny is a direct result of female conversion from the more educated, more career-oriented Mormon mainstream community, which produces an excess of disenfranchised widows, divorcees, and unmarrieds that look to polygyny for ironic sources of empowerment, access to a liberal “Savior on Mt. Zion,” female networking, and ideologies that give rise to Eastern concepts of the divine self.

References


