Perceptions of Child Wellbeing and Attitudes Towards Polygamy Between Members and Non-Members of the LDS Church

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Abstract

Perceptions of the wellbeing of children in polygamous families and attitudes toward polygamy in general were examined in this study, with comparisons between individuals who have a history of membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) and individuals who have never been members of the LDS church. No significant differences were found between members and non-members. Comparisons were also made between current and past members of the LDS church, resulting in only one significant difference: support/opposition for the legalization of polygamy. These results suggest that having a recent religious history of practicing polygamy does not necessarily result in significant changes in opinions and attitudes about polygamy. In general, questionnaire responses were also indicative of potential stigma and stereotyping that may be faced by polygamous families during interactions with non-polygamous communities.

Keywords: polygamy, LDS church, child wellbeing, public opinion
Perceptions of Child Wellbeing and Attitudes Towards Polygamy

Between Members and Non-Members of the LDS Church

Polygamy refers to a marriage involving more than two partners, but the term is most commonly used to describe marriages between one man and multiple women (Negy, Pearte & Lacefield, 2013). Polygamy is currently an acceptable practice in as many as 850 cultures, most of which are located in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Research suggests that anywhere from 20 to 50% of marriages in Africa are polygamous and that approximately 12% of all marriages in countries with predominant Muslim populations are polygamous (Negy, Pearte & Lacefield, 2013). Polygamy is less common in Western cultures, such as the United States, where it is also often an illegal practice.

In the United States, polygamy is most often associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), which is colloquially referred to as the “Mormon” church. The LDS church began privately endorsing “plural marriages” within approximately one year after its creation in 1830, and publicly endorsed the practice in 1852 (Duncan, 2008). At that time, there were no national laws limiting the practice of polygamy, but the Morrill Act for the Suppression of Polygamy in 1862 and the Supreme Court’s decision in Reynolds v. U.S. in 1878 rendered polygamous marriage as an action prosecutable in a court of law; in 1882, the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act made illegal polygamous cohabitation even without the claim of marriage (Duncan 2008).

Following decades of conflicts between the federal government and the LDS church due to polygamy—most notably in regard to the pending statehood of Utah—president Wilford Woodruff (the LDS leader at that time) advised members to discontinue the practice of polygamy in 1890 (Duncan, 2008; Marty & Appleby, 1993. Despite more than a century since the LDS
church has supported the practice of polygamy, research suggests that as many as 25% of Americans still believe members of the LDS church to be polygamous (Carroll, 2006).

Some members of the LDS church, however, were reluctant to discontinue polygamy, which they considered a religious commandment. These people were subsequently excommunicated (i.e., their membership status and religious privileges were revoked) from the LDS church, leading to the creation of the Fundamental LDS church (FLDS), as well as the Apostolic United Brethren (AUB) and the Church of the Lamb of God (Duncan, 2008). Since then, the FLDS church has divided into various smaller communities, most of which continue to practice polygamy (Marty & Appleby, 1993). Perhaps the most well-known polygamous community is located in what was once called Short Creek (currently Colorado City, Arizona and Hildale, Utah), which was the focus of a controversial government raid in 1953 (Duncan, 2008). In addition to the arrest of more than 107 adults engaged in polygamous relationships, 263 children were removed from their parents and placed in foster care, some remaining separated from parents for more than a year. Following the Short Creek Raid, many polygamous families became increasingly hesitant to interact with non-polygamous communities, fearing legal reprisals, the removal of their children into the foster care system, and/or negative social judgments (Duncan, 2008).

International studies, many of which were completed in countries where polygamy is a legal practice and/or a socially acceptable practice, have resulted in contradictory and varied findings about its impact on children. Some research suggests that the wellbeing of children in polygamous families is the same or even slightly better than children from monogamous families (Elbedour, Bart & Hektner, 2007; Elbedour, Bart & Hektner, 2003; Hamdan, Auerbach & Apter, 2009), but psychological, physical and/or academic disadvantages associated with children
reared in polygamy have also been reported (Al-Krenawi, 2014; Khasawneh, Hijazi & Salman, 2011; Owuamanam, 1984). Cherian (1993) suggested that the negative outcomes linked to polygamy are more attributable to family dynamics than polygamy itself. However, public opinion of polygamy is less polarized. For example, a Gallup poll in May 2014 demonstrated that only 14% of Americans believe polygamy is a morally acceptable practice (Riffkin, 2014). Such data suggests the possibility that polygamous families are stigmatized by non-polygamous communities. Unfortunately, there is little research documenting specific stigmas that might be faced by individuals from polygamous families. Conley, Moors, Matsick and Ziegler (2013) found that consensual non-monogamous relationships are perceived as being less fulfilling and the individuals participating in these relationships less trustworthy than those in monogamous relationships. These findings suggest that individuals engaged in polygamy, which can be considered one type of consensual non-monogamous relationship, likely face similar public stigma. However, Conley’s study was not focused specifically on polygamous families, nor did it address how any stigma attached to parents engaged in a consensual non-monogamous relationship could impact their children.

Information regarding public stigma for polygamous families would be beneficial in light of research suggesting that social stigma can negatively impact an individual’s likelihood to seek mental health treatment within a wide variety of populations (e.g., veterans with posttraumatic symptoms, adolescents with depression, and individuals with eating disorders) who could benefit from such services (Becker, Hadley Arrindell, Perloe, Fay & Striegel-Moore, 2010; Meredith et al., 2009; Ouimette et al., 2011). Moreover, parents who attach a social stigma to mental health issues are less likely to seek out and utilize mental health services for their children (Young, 2013). Individuals from polygamous families likely face similar social stigma as a barrier to
seeking medical or mental healthcare services, and may also experience additional stigma due to societal perspectives regarding polygamy itself. Nielson (2009) examined the opinions of current and former members of the LDS church in topics such as the legal status of polygamy, perceptions of polygamous women, use of social welfare programs among polygamous families, and the opportunity for adolescents reared in polygamous families to choose alternative marital structures. Findings indicated that participants who knew an individual from a polygamous family had more positive perceptions of polygamy (particularly males and older individuals) and that church attendance was inversely related to more favorable opinions of polygamy.

However, a review of the extant literature revealed no research focusing on public perception of the physical, psychological and academic wellbeing of children from polygamous families living in the United States, or of the potential stigma faced by polygamous families. Furthermore, no research appears to have compared the opinions of individuals from the LDS church and the opinions of individuals who have no history of membership in the LDS church.

The purpose of this study was to examine current attitudes and perceptions of polygamy between past and present members the LDS church, and between past and present LDS members with non-members. Significant differences were predicted in the opinions and attitudes about polygamy between members and non-members of the LDS church, as well as significant differences between current and past members of the LDS church.

**Method**

**Participants**

Individuals aged 18 and older residing in Utah were selected because of the state’s large community of LDS members, as well as having a more highly documented rate of polygamous families and communities compared to other states (Brooke, 1998). There were no exclusion
criteria beyond geographical location and age. Study participants were recruited via
SurveyMonkey’s Audience feature, which is comprised of individuals who previously registered
to complete studies through SurveyMonkey Contribute (SurveyMonkey Inc., n.d.). Based on
profile data provided from participants to SurveyMonkey, only qualifying adult Utah residents
were contacted about completing this study. SurveyMonkey distributed a standardized emailed
invitation to a random selection of hundreds of potentially qualified participants; the first 150
individuals to complete the survey were included in this study. SurveyMonkey compensated
participants by donating $0.50 to a participating charity of their choice; participants also had the
option of registering for a weekly drawing for a $100 electronic gift card to Amazon.com.

Out of 150 original participants, 148 individuals completed the entire survey; two
participants exited the study prior to completion, and as a result their data were not included in
data analysis. Demographic information—including participants’ gender as well as ranges of
age, household income and years of education—was automatically provided from the profile
data submitted by each participant upon registration for the SurveyMonkey Contribute service
(see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gendera</th>
<th>Current Members of the LDS Church</th>
<th>Past Members of the LDS Church</th>
<th>Never Members of the LDS Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agea</th>
<th>Current Members of the LDS Church</th>
<th>Past Members of the LDS Church</th>
<th>Never Members of the LDS Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-60</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61+</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Measures and Procedure

The study involved a single online questionnaire which assessed opinions regarding the wellbeing of children and adolescents in polygamous families, as well as self-reported attitudes toward individuals associated with polygamy. Although all survey questions were written specifically for this study, some of the questions assessing community comfort with polygamous individuals and families utilized similar concepts as found in the self-report Social Distance Scale (SDS), which has historically been used to measure community stigma towards a person with a particular condition, such as a mental illness or leprosy (International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations, 2011).

The online questionnaire was available on any internet browser and in any location with internet access. It was estimated that the survey took approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete, dependent on rate of reading and internet speed. Data was collected between 10/29/2014 and 11/13/2014. There were no follow-up procedures.
Results

Participants were asked to report whether or not they are currently or have ever been a member of the LDS church, in order to compare the responses of current and past members, as well as individuals who have no history of membership in the LDS church. Two participants chose not to identify any religious information, and their responses were omitted from the statistical analyses of the survey results \( n = 146 \). 97 participants (66%) identified some history of membership in the LDS church; out of those participants, 80 individuals identified as current members of the LDS church, and 17 individuals identified as previous but not current members of the LDS church (referred to as “ex-members”). 49 participants (34%) reported no history of membership in the LDS church (referred to as “non-members”). 21 out of 49 non-members chose to identify their religious beliefs: Catholic (3), Buddhism (2), Nondenominational Christian (2), Roman Catholic (2), Assembly of God (1), Crusaders for Christ (1), Episcopalian (1), Greek Orthodox (1), Lutheran (1), Methodist (1), Paganism (1), Protestant (1), Southern Baptist (1), Spiritual (1), Unitarian (1), and United Methodist (1).

Responses were analyzed using Fisher’s Exact Test and Mantel-Haenszel Linear-by-Linear Association, depending on whether the results of each question were nominal or ordinal. Level of significance was set to a \( p \) value of <0.05. Two categories of comparisons were made in the primary statistical analysis: between individuals who identified as ever being a member of the LDS church compared to non-members, as well as between individuals who identified as current members of the LDS church compared to ex-members.

Results were further divided into two categories: assessment of participant perceptions of child wellbeing within polygamous families, and participant attitudes towards individuals associated with polygamy. Questions which assessed perceptions of child wellbeing included
emphasis on the academic achievement, physical safety and psychological wellbeing of children in polygamous families, as well as assumptions regarding the likelihood of childhood exposure to physical and sexual abuse. Additional questions focused on areas that might demonstrate public stigma toward polygamous families, including self-report about comfort levels interacting with polygamous individuals, willingness to support a family member choosing to engage in a polygamous relationship, and approval for the legalization of polygamous marriages.

When comparing individuals with any current or past membership in the LDS church with non-members, there were no statistically significant differences in either perception of child wellbeing or social attitudes towards polygamous families. The only significant difference among group demographic variables (gender, age, education and household income) was in regard to education level (Linear-by-Linear Association $1, n = 140 = 6.04, p = .002$). Among current and ex-members of the LDS church, more individuals reported some college attendance, while more non-members reported either less than a high school degree or obtaining bachelor/graduate degrees (see Table 1). Even when the participants who responded with “Prefer not to answer” were omitted from the statistical analysis, there were no additional significant results.

When comparing individuals who currently identify as members of the LDS church with ex-members, support/opposition for the legalization of polygamous marriages was the only statistically significant difference between the two groups’ responses (Linear-by-Linear Association $1, n = 97 = 9.69, p = .002$). When omitting individuals who responded “Prefer not to answer,” the results on this question were still significant (Linear-by-Linear Association $1, n = 95 = 9.128, p = .003$). A higher percentage of ex-members of the LDS church reported strongly supporting, somewhat supporting or somewhat opposing legalization of polygamy,
while a higher percentage of current members of the LDS church strongly opposed legalization (see Figure 1). In addition, there were significant gender differences among these two groups (Fisher’s Exact Test \( n = 95, p = .029 \)), with ex-members identifying as 35% male and 65% female, and current members identifying as 65% male and 35% female. No other results were significant.

Figure 1

**Support/Opposition for Legalization of Polygamous Marriages**

![Bar chart showing support and opposition to legalization of polygamous marriages among current and past members of the LDS church.](image)

*Figure 1*. Percentage of self-reported support and opposition for the legalization of polygamous marriages, with responses compared between current and past members of the LDS church. Linear-by-Linear Association, \( (1, n = 97) = 9.69, p = .002 \).

Despite few significant differences among study groups, the results also provide information regarding general perceptions of child wellbeing and areas of potential stigma toward polygamous families (see Tables 2 and 3). For example, more participants reported beliefs that children in polygamous families are exposed to the same amount of physical abuse as children from non-polygamous families, while fewer participants reported beliefs that children
from polygamous families are exposed to the same amount of sexual abuse as other children (see Table 2). Similarly, more participants reported the opinion that the physical safety of children in polygamous families is likely the same as that of other children, while fewer participants reported beliefs that children reared in polygamy have similar academic achievement and psychological wellbeing as children reared in non-polygamous families (see Table 2). In addition, more participants reported being very or somewhat comfortable with allowing a child from a polygamous family to play in the participants’ own homes than allowing their child to play in the home of a polygamous family (see Table 3). In contrast, participants reported similar levels of comfort allowing an individual reared in a polygamous family to babysit their children or to teach their children in school (see Table 3).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wellbeing of Children in Polygamous Families</th>
<th>Better than monogamous family</th>
<th>Worse than monogamous family</th>
<th>The same as monogamous family</th>
<th>Prefer not to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical safety</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological wellbeing</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>Less than monogamous family</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>More than monogamous family</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would legalizing polygamy</td>
<td>Improve child wellbeing</td>
<td>Decrease child wellbeing</td>
<td>Have no effect on child wellbeing</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages rounded to omit decimal points. N = 146.
### Table 3

**Stigma Toward Polygamous Families**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comfort in interactions with individuals from PF&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Very comfortable</th>
<th>Somewhat comfortable</th>
<th>Somewhat uncomfortable</th>
<th>Very uncomfortable</th>
<th>Prefer not to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child from a PF&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; play in participant’s home</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s child play in a PF&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; home</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s child’s babysitter from PF&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s child’s teacher from PF&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Support for adults engaged in polygamy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If a family member entered into a PR&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Very supportive</th>
<th>Somewhat supportive</th>
<th>Somewhat unsupportive</th>
<th>Very unsupportive</th>
<th>Prefer not to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Political support for polygamy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support or opposition for legalizing PM&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Strongly support</th>
<th>Somewhat support</th>
<th>Somewhat oppose</th>
<th>Strongly oppose</th>
<th>Prefer not to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> PF abbreviation for polygamous family.  
<sup>b</sup> PR abbreviation for polygamous relationship.  
<sup>c</sup> PM abbreviation for polygamous marriages.

*Note.* Percentages rounded to omit decimal points. *N* = 146.

The general results also provided data regarding how many individuals have personally known people who were reared in polygamous families or engaged in a polygamous relationship as an adult. While approximately 35% of participants know someone who was reared in a polygamous family, only 27% know an adult who was in a polygamous relationship, and only 2% of participants reported a history of their own polygamous relationships.

**Discussion**

Study results showed no significant differences in self-reported opinions and attitudes toward polygamy when comparing between members and non-members of the LDS church, as well as only one significant difference between current members and ex-members. These
findings failed to support the hypothesis that significant differences (either positive or negative) would be observed among these groups. This suggests that having a modern religious history of polygamous marriages is not a notable factor in public perceptions of child wellbeing and self-reported stigma toward polygamous families. Perhaps this is because the LDS church has not practiced polygamy for more than 120 years, and as a result any connection to polygamy may have dissipated over the generations from its practice. Alternately, perhaps the statewide history of polygamy is more relevant to its perception, which would make distinctions in religious history less important than the fact that all individuals in Utah share a historical connection to polygamy simply due to location.

Only one comparison between current members and ex-members of the LDS church resulted in significant differences: support/opposition for the legalization of polygamous marriages. This finding is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the insignificant results on every other question, which suggests that current members of the LDS church are more likely to strongly oppose the legalization of polygamy despite reporting similar opinions regarding the frequency of childhood maltreatment, comfort interacting with individuals associated with polygamy, and potential to harm/improve the wellbeing of children from polygamous families via legalization. This may be consistent with research by Nielsen (2009), which suggests that people who attend the LDS church less frequently reported more favorable opinions regarding polygamy.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy in opinions regarding legalization between current and ex-members of the LDS church is that current members may have more concern about how this legislation would impact broader public opinion of the LDS church, which continues to be associated with polygamy despite not having endorsed plural marriages since
Alternately, current members may be concerned about the potential for LDS leadership to re-endorse the practice of polygamy if legally allowed to do so, since polygamy was only discontinued due to legal ramifications that negatively impacted the LDS community (Marty & Appleby, 1993). A third possible explanation for these results could be related to political orientation, as more members of the LDS church tend to identify as conservative than members of the general population (Pond, 2009). It is also possible that group differences are more attributable to demographic variability because a larger percentage of ex-LDS participants identified as female.

Without dividing responses among religious identification, this study also provides information about how people in Utah conceptualize polygamy (see Tables 2 and 3). This information may prove useful if polygamy continues to gain media attention and public scrutiny in the future, as well as if legislation is presented regarding legalizing or decriminalizing polygamy. In addition, data regarding opinions and attitudes about polygamy could be used in attempts to educate the public and alleviate any possible negative effects from potential community stigmas. It is important to note, however, that this data is only representative for the opinions of the larger population in Utah. Although it may be similar to potential findings from other states with relatively high populations of polygamists, it is less likely to generalize to the rest of the United States, given the geographic limitations of the sample and also the significant differences in proximity to polygamous families found in other states (Brooke, 1998).

Another possible indicator of discomfort with the concept of polygamy was found in the number of participants who chose “Prefer not to answer” on any given question. According to Dobronte (2014), there are three possible reasons for a participant choosing not to answer a research question: (a) participants may be unclear regarding the meaning of the question, (b)
when the survey exceeds motivation/ability and (c) to avoid thinking about a specific question or issue. As it relates to this study, it is possible that participants were reluctant to think about some questions, possibly because the concept of polygamy feels uncomfortable, which may be a result of perceived social stigma. Interestingly, more participants chose not to answer questions about child wellbeing than questions assessing potential stigma (see Tables 2 and 3). This may be due to reluctance or discomfort considering sensitive aspects of child wellbeing, such as exposure to abuse and academic achievement. It is also possible that some participants had concerns regarding anonymity, despite SurveyMonkey’s policy to not release identifying data, and therefore may have been less willing to answer sensitive questions about child wellbeing (R. Storaasli, personal communication, July 10, 2015).

Although not the focus of this particular study and unrelated to hypothesis testing, exploratory data analysis (EDA) conducted after completion of the study suggests that there may be value in future studies analyzing participants’ opinions and attitudes towards polygamy while comparing individuals who have/have not engaged in one or more personal polygamous relationship(s). Similarly, future studies could analyze the difference in responses between demographic data, such as age, gender, years of education and household income. Potential differences in these areas would be consistent with general research regarding stigma, which suggests that education about the stigmatized topic as well as increased contact with stigmatized individuals decreases stigma (Penn & Couture, 2002). Additional research in regard to previously noted groups may provide beneficial information regarding perceptions and stigmas about polygamous families, which could lead to new methods of decreasing stigma and improving child wellbeing in polygamous families.
Limitations of this study include those inherent to study design, which limited participants to individuals who have access to the internet and also previously enrolled in the SurveyMonkey Contribute service. In addition, the questions designed to assess stigma were rewritten based on the assessment of stigma for individuals with mental health conditions or leprosy, and as a result may not fully capture potential areas of stigma in regard to polygamy, which is arguably very different from leprosy. Further limitations involve the ability to generalize this data beyond individuals living in Utah, where the sample was drawn.

In conclusion, the results of this study did not support the hypothesis that perceptions and attitudes would be different among participants with a more recent religious history of practicing polygamy. The one statistically significant result related to opinions about legalization of polygamy between members and ex-members of the LDS church, which could be due to members’ concern that the LDS church would be associated with polygamy or would choose to endorse the practice again without fear of legal ramifications, or may simply reflect larger political differences between members and ex-members. The study also provided some general information regarding how people in Utah, and possibly people in the greater United States, conceptualize and respond to the practice of polygamy.
References


