Learning Achievement, Social Adjustment, and Family Conflict Among Bedouin-Arab Children From Polygamous and Monogamous Families. ALEAN AL-KRENAWI; ERNIE S. LIGHTMAN.

ABSTRACT. A sample of 146 Bedouin-Arab pupils from polygamous and monogamous families participated in this study, which was conducted in a Bedouin--Arab village in the Negev, Israel. The authors compared learning achievement, social adjustment, and family conflict. Data revealed differences between the two groups: The children from monogamous families had higher levels of learning achievement than did the children from polygamous families; in addition, those from monogamous families adjusted to the school framework better than did those from polygamous families. The mean conflict rating of children from polygamous families was higher than that of their counterparts from monogamous families. The father's level of education tended to be inversely correlated with family size in terms of both number of children and number of wives.

LARGE FAMILY SIZE may carry with it a variety of social problems (Fischer, 1984; Guendelman, 1985; Jejurikar & Shenvi, 1985; Kahn & Kamerman, 1983; Ward, 1987); such problems may be aggravated when associated with polygamy. Polygamous families have their own distinct household problems, usually stemming from jealousy between co-wives over the affections and resources of the husband (Adams & Mburugu, 1994; Kilbride, 1994; Mulder, 1992; Wittrup, 1990). Relationships within the family are further complicated by the presence of children of different mothers: The husband's perceived favoritism for one wife's children or the efforts of each wife to secure more resources for her own children are additional sources of friction (Dorjahn, 1988). Despite widespread interest in polygamy (Al-Krenawi, 1998; Chamie, 1986), relatively little research has compared the children from polygamous with those from monogamous families.

Ware (1979) has described the strong social pressures in some societies to accept polygamy, which is practiced widely in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, but is also known to occur in Europe and North America (Broude, 1994). It is often associated with social systems in which human resources are among the most important. In contrast, "where resources such as land or forms of private property predominate, monogamous nuclear family forms tend to be the rule" (Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology, 1986, p. 228).

Among the Bedouin Arabs of the Negev, when the husband takes another wife, the preceding wives are perceived by the community, and perceive themselves, as having been relegated to a lower status. This naturally causes them emotional distress (Al-Krenawi, 1998). Several researchers have commented on the adverse emotional effects of polygamy, on both co-wives and children (Low, 1988; Oyefeso & Adeqoke, 1992; Pela, 1984; Rivett & Street, 1993; Valsiner, 1989). Chaleby (1987) mentions the disproportionate number of polygamous wives, particularly the senior (earlier) wives, among psychiatric outpatients in Kuwait. This finding has been recorded in a number of
societies—for example, in Nigeria (Makanjuola, 1987) and in other societies in Africa (Welch & Block, 1981), in the Arab world (Al-Issa, 1990; Al-Krenawi, 1998; Chaleby, 1985; Tabutin, 1974), and in India (Haggi, 1974).

Owuamanam (1984) pointed out that polygamous families have more negative self-concepts because of sibling competition for position. D'Hondt and Vandewiele (1980) found that the majority of the high school students whom they surveyed in Senegal were against polygamy. Because each subfamily within the main family acts as a separate system headed by the mother (who takes care of her own children), jealousy, competition, and fighting among the different wives lead to their children's regarding the children of the other wives not as siblings but as enemies (Al-Krenawi, 1998). The resulting hatred and hostility affect the children both emotionally and socially (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Al-Krenawi, 1997).

The Bedouin Arabs of the Negev

The term Bedouin was originally intended to describe only those people who herded camels, but it has become the generic name for all Arabic-speaking, nomadic tribes in the Middle East (Kay, 1978). The Bedouin have lived in the Negev region for two millennia (Klizner, 1954) and should be considered a distinct national, linguistic, political, and geographic entity in Israel, although they are related to members of Bedouin--Arab communities in other countries. Today, the Bedouin Arabs of the Negev are undergoing a rapid and dramatic process of sedentarization: Of the Negev's 120,000 Bedouin Arabs, 40% now live in villages and towns, and the remainder (60%) live in unrecognized villages, without any infrastructure or services (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1997). Bedouin--Arab children suffer substantial disadvantages within the Israeli education system, which are manifested by high drop-out rates, a low percentage of high school graduates, and the failure of most graduates to matriculate in a postsecondary institution. Each year, there are between 800 and 1,000 high school graduates among the 120,000 Bedouin Arabs of the Negev area, and of the 20% who try for matriculation, only about 60% succeed (Fishkoff, 1997).

The society is largely traditional, and, thus, a slower pace of change and a higher sense of social stability predominate (Hall, 1976); the collective is emphasized over the individual. To a considerable extent, social status, economic security, and the potential for personal development continue to be founded upon tribal identity. Because the Bedouin Arabs were historically a warrior people, the larger the tribe, the more powerful it is in the hierarchy of status. Each tribe is led by a sheik, and major decisions are made by a forum of male elders representing the several extended families that constitute the tribe (Al-Aref, 1934; Marks, 1974).

As a partial consequence of this social structure, hierarchical order is also maintained within the family on the basis of the dominance of the male over the female and the older over the younger. Gender differences are strongly defined, and social structure is largely patriarchal. Men hold the authority of leadership in the household, in the economy, and in the polity (Al-Krenawi, 1996). As good wives and mothers, women are expected to spend
most of their time at home and to sacrifice their own wishes for the sake of the family (Mass & Al-Krenawi, 1994). Women's social status is based on marriage and rearing children, especially boys. In Bedouin--Arab society, sons have higher status than daughters; as one saying puts it, "Al-Aolad Lifazah wa Al-banat Lirazah" [the boys for war time and the girls for song] (Ben-David, 1982). In discussions of how many children a man has, the count invariably includes only the sons (Al-Abbadi, 1973; Kacen, Anson, Nir, & Livneh, 1992).

The majority of Bedouin--Arab marriages are arranged for girls in their early teens by parents or parent substitutes, without prior consultation with the girl concerned and, in some cases, even if she raises objections. Love in marriage is a rarity. Polygamy is still practiced, even among the young people: The first marriage is usually arranged, but the second may be by choice and, thus, closer to the Western concept of a "love match" (Al-Krenawi, 1996; Al-Krenawi et al., 1997).

Several variables contribute to the practice of polygamy among the Bedouin--Arab people. On religious grounds, the Koran (Surah 4:3) permits men to have multiple wives (Jawad, 1991). "Exchange marriages" are also quite common. These occur when two men are married to each other's sisters, and one of the men decides to take a second wife. The other man, in turn, experiences pressure from his family to follow suit, to maintain a symmetry between the two family structures as well as the honor of his sister and, hence, of his family. There are other reasons for polygamy. A man may take a second wife if the first wife is not fertile, if she has not borne him sons, if she is physically or mentally ill, or if she cannot meet the husband's sexual needs. To enhance the status of his family and himself, the husband may select a new wife (or wives) to increase the number of his sons (Al-Krenawi et al., 1997). Polygamous marriages produce large numbers of children, so there is never any shortage of potential wives within the tribes. Men also have the option of marrying women from outside the Bedouin--Arab community (e.g., from the Gaza Strip, from the West Bank, from the north of Israel, and even from Jordan and Egypt). Chamie (1986) has reported that 2%-12% of marriages in the Arab world are polygamous. Although there are no hard data for the Bedouin Arabs in the Negev, the approximate proportion of polygamous marriages appears to be between 15% and 20%.

On the basis of the foregoing research regarding large families in general and polygamy in particular, as well as on the basis of an understanding of the structure of Bedouin--Arab society, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The academic achievements of children from monogamous families are higher than those of children from polygamous families.

Hypothesis 2: Children from polygamous families exhibit more problems in social adjustment than do children from monogamous families.

Hypothesis 3: There are more conflicts in polygamous families than in monogamous families.
Hypothesis 3 is, perhaps, the most general and follows directly from the discussion about the effects of polygamy in other traditional societies (Oyefeso & Adeqoke, 1992; Valsiner, 1989). Hypotheses 1 and 2 are based on the premise that internal family dysfunction is associated with difficulties in the formal school system. After reporting the findings, we discuss the longer term implications of these difficulties for direct practice intervention.

Method

We attempted to compare children in monogamous and polygamous Bedouin--Arab families by using both primary and secondary data. For purposes of the present study, we defined a polygamous family as one with two wives only (i.e., bigamous); thus, one should exercise caution in drawing inferences beyond this range. For consistency across the sample, the children chosen for this study were those of the senior wives within the polygamous families (Chaleby, 1985).

We selected the research population from pupils at a primary school in a Bedouin--Arab village in the Negev. We randomly chose the school (with 900 pupils and a range of kindergarten through Grade 6) from 10 schools in one of the largest Bedouin--Arab towns. The principal and staff expressed their willingness to participate in the study; thus, the files of individual pupils and various data related to the school were made available to us. We did not seek signed consent of the parents, largely because of the traditional nature of the society: The support and endorsement of the school officials was deemed appropriate, and any further approval procedures would have been seen as excessive by the families.

We drew the sample from a total of 300 students (8-9 years of age) in Grades 3 and 4. The sample was equally divided by gender and between children from polygamous (two-wife) families and children from monogamous families. There were 39 boys and 34 girls in each group, a total of 146 children, representing roughly a 50% sampling rate. None of the children in the sample were siblings, but they were all from the same village.

We analyzed the data by using means, standard deviations, and t test.

We examined academic achievement on the basis of results of tests administered by the teachers in four subjects: Hebrew, Arabic, arithmetic, and reading comprehension. These tests were given at the end of the school year and recorded in each pupil's file. We took the marks from the files and calculated the average grades for each pupil in these four subjects.

We measured adjustment to the school system on the basis of an evaluation questionnaire developed at the Henrietta Szold Institute in Israel and used by classroom teachers across the country (Smilansky & Shefatiya, 1974). The questionnaire was translated into Arabic in consultation with the school's staff. Teachers were asked to grade the social adjustment of students by using a Likert-type scale (1 = lowest level of adjustment, 4 = highest level of adjustment). The measures on the scale included discipline, aggression, sociability,
leadership, activeness, external appearance, perception, ability to concentrate, interest, ambition, perseverance, honesty, self-confidence, mental balance, mood, status as a scapegoat, acceptance by the teacher, and special phenomena (e.g., behavioral problems such as stuttering and bedwetting; other physical problems such as hearing or vision defects). We aggregated responses to the individual items under the following three headings, referring to three distinct areas of the child's adjustment to school life:

Adjustment to school life referred to the extent to which the child adjusts to the social life of the pupils, to class norms of behavior, and to relations with the general school environment (teachers, principal).

Adjustment to education norms encompassed adjustment in areas relating to the learning process in the classroom.

Adjustment to the society of peers referred to the relationships between the pupil and other children.

The delineation of categories was done by the researchers and, thus, has face validity. Scores for each indicator were aggregated and averaged for each child, resulting in individual values ranging from 1 to 4.

We examined family conflict, as perceived by the students, through a semi-structured pupils' questionnaire in Arabic, prepared especially for the present study. We developed the questionnaire with extensive input from the school principal and teachers; thus, it has face validity. We used three areas of intrafamilial conflict: conflicts between fathers and children; conflicts between the children and their siblings; and conflicts between mothers and fathers. As before, we graded the children's responses to each question on a 4-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater conflict. We then averaged the four answers to produce a single overall score with values ranging from 1 (low conflict) to 4 (high conflict).

We administered the questionnaire just described to all 146 students. Some of the polygamous families were known to the welfare services in the area; therefore, it was possible to obtain an informal and rough validity check on individual responses to the questionnaires.

Results

Demographic

The extended-family nature of this traditional society was reflected in the fact that about 50% of the children came from families in which the parents were close relatives (e.g., first cousins); the parents of the remaining 50% were more distantly related. We found no difference between the education levels of the mothers in the two types of families because none of them had attended school. However, the education levels of the fathers in the monogamous families were significantly higher, p [less than] .05, than those of the
fathers in the polygamous families (5.41 years and 3.18 years of schooling, respectively). This is an important finding for policy purposes. It appeared that the men with more years of schooling were significantly more likely to choose monogamous marriages; thus, as noted subsequently, the education level of the father tended to be inversely correlated with family size (both number of children and number of wives).

None of the mothers in either group worked outside the home. There was no difference in the range of occupations found among the fathers in both groups of families.

According to a comparison between the monogamous and the polygamous families, about 90% of the monogamous families had 10 children or fewer, whereas among their polygamous counterparts, the corresponding proportion dropped to about 30%. The mean number of children in the monogamous families was 5.92 (SD = 3.42); in the polygamous cases, the mean number of children was 11.33 (SD = 4.54). The difference is highly significant, p < .01, but not surprising.

Comparing Outcomes

The scholastic achievements of children in polygamous and monogamous families (M = 70.14, SD = 20.21, and M = 83.39, SD = 16.74, respectively) were based on the grades recorded in their school files in the four subjects mentioned earlier. The difference between the two groups of children is highly significant statistically, as well as important quantitatively, p < .01, t(142) = 4.28. The variance in grades was also smaller in monogamous families, suggesting greater consistency of grade results as well. This finding, as we expected, supported Hypothesis 1.

We tested three categories of social adjustment in school. The results of a t test to examine the differences between children from the two types of family revealed that the children from monogamous families adjusted to the school framework better (M = 3.15, SD = 0.59) than did the children from polygamous families (M = 2.89, SD = 0.63), p < .013, t(142) = 2.51. We also found that children from monogamous families (M = 3.23, SD = 0.65) adjusted to the society of other children better than did the children from polygamous families (M = 2.91, SD = 0.66), p < .004, t(142) = 2.9. The difference in adjustment to classroom norms was not significant at the .05 level, p < .066, although the mean scores were generally close, in value to those of the other two categories.

The first two categories yielded results that were statistically significant and in the direction expected, whereas the differences in adjustment to class norms (the learning process) were close to the .05 significance level. Hypothesis 2 was supported in large part, in that children from polygamous families experienced greater difficulty in adjusting both to the classroom environment and to relations with other children, the teachers, and the principal. The social problems of the home environments of the polygamous families (Al-Krenawi et al., 1997), it appears, spilled over into the education arena and impeded the children's social adjustment to school.
According to an analysis of the findings regarding the differences between the two groups in intrafamilial conflicts, the conflict rating of children from polygamous families ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.31$) was higher than that of children from monogamous families ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.27$), $p < .01$, $t(142) = 4.08$. Thus, this part of Hypothesis 3 was supported. However, Hypothesis 3 was not supported at the paternal level; there were no significant differences between family types in conflict between fathers and either children or mothers. Given that the data were reported directly by the children, the findings may reflect the social unacceptability in a traditional society of discussing in public anything that would reflect badly on one's father (Mass & Al-Krenawi, 1994).

Discussion

The results of the present study have confirmed the obvious expectation that polygamous families are significantly larger than their monogamous counterparts within a traditional Bedouin--Arab community. Results of research suggesting the greater incidence of intrafamilial conflict and dysfunction in polygamous families were confirmed, in part, by our empirical findings: Conflict ratings among siblings were significantly higher in polygamous than in monogamous families.

Furthermore, the results of our study show that these social problems within the family carried over to the formal education system: The children of polygamous families had lower levels of education achievement and generally greater difficulty in the social adjustment process within the schools. The children of those polygamous families may, thus, be seen as doubly disadvantaged educationally: They experienced both the general education disadvantage of their Bedouin-Arab community and the additional social difficulties resulting from the polygamy.

A clear goal of clinical intervention must be to increase teachers' awareness of the emotional and social needs of children from polygamous families. The problems of these children may be viewed as symptoms of family dysfunction; this perspective should lead to collaboration between school systems and community social services. In terms of clinical intervention, a mental health practitioner needs to be able to read the family's ecological map (Hartman, 1978)--that is, the two subfamilies within the main family and the family's place within the extended family-tribe and community. Recognizing the father's considerable power over both subfamily systems, we suggest that such change would be most successfully implemented with his active participation. The paternal grandfather, because he is often respected by the husband, both wives, and their respective families, would, in some cases, also be valuable in the intervention as a mediator or advocate.

Intervention requires the ability to think systematically and to carry out intervention accordingly (Al-Krenawi, Maoz, & Reicher, 1994). The mental health practitioner must carefully select target systems for intervention. Women, it should be emphasized, are socially disposed to be loyal to their husbands. A wife who divulges family problems to anyone outside the immediate family is considered disloyal and could incur the anger of her husband, her extended-family members, or both (Mass & Al-Krenawi, 1994). Thus, it
would be difficult to frame intervention in the immediate context of meeting the wife's needs.

A far more appropriate target system is the children. The social status and future economic well-being of both parents are strongly dependent upon the size of the family, because family honor is closely associated with the number of sons and their future successes. Thus, a mental health intervention could feasibly be framed in the context of attending to the children's emotional, instrumental, and relational needs (Al-Krenawi et al., 1997).

The motivation to address these aspects may be high if a clinician can help the family to appreciate their relationship to the children's social functioning at school. Moreover, in focusing on the children's difficulties, other familial systemic issues may also be addressed. This focus allows consideration of differential allocation of economic and social support between the two subfamilies.

Improvements in subfamily, half-sibling, and co-wife relations may be convincingly portrayed as interdependent. The co-wives could be encouraged to perceive each other as partners, rather than as opponents; half-sibling relations could improve in conjunction with relations between their mothers.

Finally, the present results have suggested the importance of increasing the awareness of teachers and other social health-care workers that children from polygamous families are less likely to do as well as their peers from monogamous families--a result, in part, of more general intrafamilial problems. One may assume that children from polygamous families are also more likely to drop out of school earlier and to be more at risk of succumbing to the other social problems such as drugs. The solutions, as suggested, should focus on the recognition of polygamy as a particular risk factor, along with the expectation that, over time, higher levels of paternal education may well lead to smaller families and more attention to the emotional and social needs of the children.

Two important caveats must be added here. First, the research was limited to polygamous families with only two wives; nothing directly can be said about whether the situation would differ in larger family units—that is, whether the important differences are between one and more than one wife; whether there is some other dichotomy; or whether there is a linearity, so that numbers of wives and the incidence of social problems would vary directly.

Second, the study was based only on a sample of urban Bedouin Arabs. Some 60% of the community in the Negev continues to live outside settled towns and villages; any sort of education for children is often difficult to obtain because facilities are not available in these areas. In such cases, the children must walk, ride a donkey, use public transportation, or resort to a combination of these to reach schools in central locations that are often very far away. The problems--and responses--in such contexts are of an entirely different magnitude from those facing children living in villages.
A copy of the conflict questionnaire developed for this study is available upon request.

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