

Polygamy and Polyamory

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Q: Are they really the same thing?

Polyamory and polygamy can look similar on the surface. Deeper examination reveals this question to be complicated by factors such as community, language, religion, gender equity, sexual orientation, abuse concerns, and experience.

Community

The polyamory community and the polygamous community in the United States and Canada are separate groups that know very little about each other. Furthermore, neither group is one cohesive community. Both the “polyamory community” and the “polygamy community” in reality consist of a variety of diverse communities and independent families. To further complicate matters, some independent families practice polygamy or polyamory without any connection to either community.

Language

Historically and sociologically, the term “polygamy” is based in heterosexual marriage. The term includes both polygyny, the marriage of one man to more than one woman, and polyandry, the marriage of one woman to more than one man. Throughout human history and across cultures, both polygamous and monogamous marriages have occurred, with polygamous marriages acceptable in the majority of cultures. Both types have at times included marriages arranged for political, economic, religious and/or familial benefit.

In the U.S. and Canada, the general public tends to associate polygamy with fundamentalist Mormonism. These families prefer the term “plural marriage.” However, polygamy can also be found in other types of communities. An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 Muslim immigrants living in the U.S are polygamous (All Things Considered, May 27, 2008, NPR, www.npr.org). Information about immigrant polygamists who are not Muslim is difficult to find. Another example is Christian polygamy (www.christianpolygamy.com), neither fundamentalist Mormonism nor immigrants. The idea that polygamy is limited to fundamentalist Mormons is deeply rooted in the North American imagination, but it is inaccurate.

The term “polyamory” is relationship based, but it is not necessarily tied to marriage. It is a new term with a short history, just beginning to make its way into sociological literature. The term covers a variety of multi-partner relationship styles, that might or might not involve one or more married couples; and each of those married individuals, if any, might have one or more partners in addition to their spouse. Polyamorous relationship structures might include open relationships, open marriage, group marriage, intimate networks, or combinations of the above.

Religion

The most well-known polygamous communities are associated with a religious doctrine that supports it. Muslims practicing polygyny refer to the verse in the Qur'an (4:3) which states that a man may take up to four wives. Fundamentalist Mormons describe plural marriage as commanded by God and necessary to receive specific blessings in the afterlife, including eternal marriage (Mary Batchelor et. al.; *Voices in Harmony*). Christian polygamists, claiming to come from conservative churches, quote Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and cite Biblical patriarchs to support their understanding of polygyny as "clearly only a matter of believing the Scriptures, believing what the Scriptures actually say and have always actually said." (The Christian Polygamy "Movement"; www.christianpolygamy.com)

Within polygamous communities, religious doctrines shared with other individuals provide support and encouragement. Neighbors, co-workers, and sometimes extended family members within the group are likely to be supportive. At the same time, societal hostility dictates caution about visibility outside the polygamous community.

Polyamory is associated with no religious doctrine, no commandments from God or prophets, no promises about the afterlife. Polyamory is a personal issue that each person, couple, or multi-partner family must sort out for themselves. No shared doctrines are available to provide support or encouragement. Rather, quite the opposite is the case. Mainstream religions in the U.S. and Canada declare that monogamy is the only acceptable relationship form. Extended family, congregation members, neighbors, or co-workers might provide condemnation rather than support. People in polyamorous relationships often stay "in the closet" about their family structure to the people they spend the most time with. Alternatively, a few people in polyamorous relationships "come out" completely.

Religion still matters immensely for some people in polyamorous relationships. Despite mainstream hostility toward multi-partner relationships, individuals of faith in these families may feel a need to reconcile these two parts of themselves and understand their relationships and their faith in terms of each other.

Gender Equity

Polygamy can include practices in which a woman may have more than one marriage partner, but the U.S. and Canada have no known examples of any such polyandrous communities. Christian and Muslim polygamy and Mormon plural marriage are polygynous by doctrine, restricting the privilege of multiple spouses to the man.

By contrast, the polyamory community insists on gender equity. Individuals of any gender are permitted multi-partner relationships within the negotiated agreements of their partnerships.

Sexual Orientation

In both academic and cultural usage, the language of polygamy is geared toward heterosexuality. In polygyny, a man marries two or more wives; in polyandry, two or more men marry one wife. Use of these terms to refer to same sex relationships has

been uncommon, for reasons such as heterosexism, failure to recognize same sex marriage, and cultural associations of polygamy with conservative religious groups. Preconceived ideas are widely held concerning the responses of the diverse polygamous communities to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender people in their groups; however, their actual responses are not well known.

The language of polyamory maintains neutrality toward sexual orientation, and the polyamory community generally is welcoming toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender people. For example: If one man and two women have a “vee” relationship (where one person has two partners), the general public will typically assume that it is the man who has two partners. However, the person with two partners might well be one of the women instead of the man. Similarly, if two men and one woman have a vee relationship, the person with two partners might be one of the men instead of the woman. Polyamorous same sex relationships occur as well. The polyamory community welcomes same gender multi-partner families.

Abuse Concerns

Although most of the general public associates polygamy with non-consent and child abuse, abuse occurs in every community, including monogamous and polyamorous ones. Lessons from social justice work confirm that painting all people in any community with the same brush is simplistic and unjust.

Additional lessons show that closets and isolation allow abuse to flourish, leaving people too afraid to report abuse directed at themselves or their neighbors. In one example, abused immigrant women in Italy in polygamous marriages were afraid to seek help because the law in Italy does not protect polygamous wives in the manner that the law protected them in their country of origin (“Bruises and a blind eye in Italy”; July 15, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com>).

The Attorneys General of Utah and Arizona have recognized this reality. They spearheaded the creation of the Safety Net Committee, which helps people in polygamous situations have access to social services, whether they leave or stay, and prepares providers of services through a guidebook called *The Primer* (digitallibrary.utah.gov/awweb/awarchive?item=23622). Representatives of the plural marriage community serve on this Safety Net Committee and participate fully in creating and maintaining safe avenues for reporting abuse. (“Funding approved for polygamous ‘Safety Net’,” www.deseretnews.com, March 4, 2008).

Abuse must be dealt with separately from family structure. As in monogamous families, only sensational abuse makes the headlines. Polygamous families don't want to be defined by the offenders in their communities any more than the rest of us do.

Experience

From the standpoint of behavior alone, certain types of polyamory and certain types of polygamy appear identical. A multi-partner, loving marriage of adults, entered into with the consent of all, meets the behavioral description of both polygamy and polyamory.

From the standpoint of culture, considerable differences exist. Two similarly configured families, one belonging to each community, will likely have tremendously different responses from their extended family, faith community, and neighbors. The polygamous family might put a much different emphasis on “marriage” and the importance of restricting intimacy to the marriage relationship. The polyamorous family might or might not consider their family group a marriage, and might allow intimate relationships outside the group.

The stereotype has often been voiced that a polyamorous family and a polygamous family are interchangeable. This idea is mistaken. Two similarly configured families, one belonging to each community, will develop an identification with their respective communities. Supposing their personal experiences to be largely identical, their communities of identification will still vary significantly in myriad ways. Each family would likely feel like a fish out of water if they suddenly found themselves transported to the other community...which brings us full circle back to community as a distinguishing characteristic.

Speaking Out

In the first decade of the 21st century, some fundamentalist Mormon plural wives stepped out of their hundred-year isolation, obtaining a seat at the table with state government and a voice in determining their own destiny. Muslim polygamists and Christian polygamists have yet to be heard from to the same extent. In that same decade, polyamorists stepped out of their closets, seeking to raise awareness and acceptance of polyamory. Polygamous and polyamorous communities provide informational resources for themselves and the general public.

Considerable differences exist between polygamy and polyamory. The desire to live their lives openly, confidently, without hiding in fear is common to both communities.

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How can I learn more?

Contact Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, at:

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