Burden or Pleasure? A Profile of LDS Polygamous Husbands

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WHILE A NUMBER OF STUDIES DEALING WITH POLYGAMY have examined the experiences of wives and children, very few have looked at men's views. Two exceptions are articles by J. E. Hulett (1943) and Kimball Young (1942), both more than forty years old. Young contends that while plural marriage gave men "certain insecurities" because polygamy was contrary to their monogamous traditions, it also "offered men . . . ego security" because of the possibility of having additional sexual partners, and "higher status" because of the prestige in Mormon society of having more than one wife (1942, 307).

However, after studying interviews conducted by Hulett and Young in the 1930s, and the Redd Center's conducted in the 1970s and 1980s with husbands, wives, and children of Mormon polygamous households, then comparing them with Mormon monogamous families, I have found evidence to suggest other male views of polygamy (Embry 1987). Rather than seeing polygamy as a "burden or pleasure" or a system full of "ego security" with some "insecurities," I found that most men practiced polygamy because of their religious beliefs; their marital experiences were similar to the experiences of both their LDS and non-LDS American monogamous counterparts. Mormons, both monogamous and polygamous, seem simply to have adapted the Victorian ideology evident throughout nineteenth-century America to their new lifestyles.

Of course, since polygamy was practiced for such a short time, these adaptations varied from family to family, making it impossible to describe the typical Mormon polygamous family. There was no "typical" family. As I see it, understanding the diverse experience of individual families will help us avoid oversimplified conclusions and stereotypes.

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Hulett and Young's interviews were conducted with thirteen husbands, fifty wives, five husbands and wives interviewed jointly, and eighty-three children of polygamous families. Hulett, a research assistant for Young, used the interviews in writing his dissertation, and Young used them in his book, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* (1954). Young's book has been the only major study on life in polygamous families. The title suggests a negative view of the Mormon practice of polygamy, but Young identified most of the families that he studied as "successful." Based on five categories, he found half of 110 family cases were "highly successful, marked by unusual harmony" or "reasonably successful"; a quarter were "moderately successful with some conflict but on the whole fair adjustment"; the rest had "considerable conflict and marital difficulty or severe conflict, including, in some instances, separation and/or divorce" (Young 1954, 56). Without the advantages of recording devices, Hulett and Young had to depend on their note-taking ability to remember what their informants told them. Because of this, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether we are reading the opinion of the interviewee or the interviewer. Moreover, to protect identities, Young used pseudonyms throughout his book and has no footnotes, so scholars have been unable to determine his sources. Perhaps the most serious flaw, though, is that the examples Young cites in his study are not representative of even his own sources. After reading his book and the sources, it appears he took the most interesting and most dramatic cases and then drew generalizations from them as "typical" examples.

Between 1976 and 1982, the Charles Redd Center at Brigham Young University sponsored a major interview study of polygamous families. Ten trained oral historians, including me, interviewed 250 children of Church-sanctioned polygamous marriages in which the parents were married before 1904. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the Church's policy not to encourage the current practice of polygamy, almost half of those contacted first refused to be interviewed. However, as the project progressed, that number dropped to fewer than 25 percent. Those interviewed suggested brothers and sisters — both full and half — and others they knew who had been raised in polygamous families. The interview questions were developed from the topics discussed in Kimball Young's book, not by design, but because Young's study was all that was available for preliminary research at the time.

In 1982, the project was expanded to interview 150 children from monogamous families who grew up during the same time period as a comparison group to the children of polygamy studied earlier. Again, we selected those whose parents had been married before 1904. The parents' marriage date was used, rather than the age of either parents or children, because many of the polygamous children were born as late as the 1920s. A press release inviting interviewees for the project was issued by BYU Public Communications and was published in many newspapers in Utah as well as in newspapers published for LDS audiences in Arizona and California. A large number of people responded, so interviewees were chosen according to location and availability. Some effort was made to interview people who grew up in towns where there

were polygamists. Again, interviews were developed from topics discussed in Kimball Young's book.

The Redd Center interviews, like Hulett's and Young's, also have limitations. All of the interviews record adults' memories of their childhoods, and memories tend to be more favorable than actual experiences. In addition, children have only a limited knowledge of their parents' activities. Especially in the nineteenth century, children were not told about their parents' sexual activities, and they were probably not aware of all the economic and religious activities of their families. In the case of plural marriage, they would probably not have been told all the reasons why their parents chose to marry in polygamy. Despite these limitations, however, the interviews are a valuable source — in some cases the only source — of information about how plural families were set up. The children could at least report on their relationships with their own parents and with their fathers' other wives, as well as the ways their particular families operated.

The Redd Center oral history interviews and the Kimball Young Collection at the BYU Library provided the bulk of information for my study. I also used diaries, autobiographies, and other interviews available in the LDS Church Archives and the BYU Manuscript Collections. In total, I scrutinized lives of approximately 200 plural husbands, 400 plural wives (mostly living in polygamy during its later period), and 150 monogamous husbands and wives.

If the study had been done a generation earlier, I could have captured the memories of those who lived in polygamy between 1852 and 1880 before opposition became formal and intense. As it is, the reminiscences of the following generation reflect the problems encountered by those who lived "the principle" during its last sanctioned days.

When asked, nearly all the Mormon participants said that they practiced polygamy for religious reasons. For example, William B. Ashworth wrote, "I loved my wife and felt that I had in her all I desired as a companion, but with the faith I had in the authorities, I felt it was my imperative duty to obey their counsel." He added that he had heard church leaders say, "If the brethren do not embrace the doctrine, and their wives are willing that they should, they (the men), are in danger of their wives being given to husbands who would exalt them in the highest glory" (n.d., 15–16). Andrew Jonus Hansen wrote in his autobiography, "Celestial and Plural Marriage is a law of Heaven and at that time in force among God's people on earth, sanctioned and approved by Him" (n.d., 141).

While most Mormon men, according to this study, would not have considered polygamy if they had not believed it to be a commandment, a minority of the children of polygamous homes said that having the option of polygamy might have changed the way men viewed other women and their own wives. Because other wives were a possibility, men might have allowed their eyes to roam more, viewing other women as possible mates. Also, with the chance of marrying more wives, a man might not divorce a wife he grew tired of, instead essentially ignoring her while offering affection to another wife who seemed more desirable at the time. For example, E. W. Wright, the eighth son of

Amos Russell Wright's first wife, Catharine Roberts, said that his father believed strongly in the principle of plural marriage and undoubtedly married for religious purposes. Yet knowing he could marry younger women made his first wife less attractive to him and he did not treat her as well (1937, 5). J. W. Wilson, a monogamist on the Juarez Stake high council in Mexico, wrote, "Polygamy is a true principle . . . but men did not live as they should have done. . . . I talked to a man who had been married to a number of wives. . . . He said . . . that all of his marriages were due to inspiration. . . . I asked him that now as he grew older and his desires were dying if he had inspirations to marry and he said no, that he had no more inspirations. That was the reason polygamy could not be lived, men believed it because of their lustful desires" (1935, 2–3). While this might have been true in some cases, there are few, if any, records indicating that sexual motives played a major role in the men's decisions to marry more than one wife.

The modern perception of men and women marrying for love was rarely mentioned in nineteenth-century marriage manuals. Historian John Gordon quotes one manual, "True love is founded on esteem, and esteem is the result of intimate acquaintance and confidential intercourse," and then adds, "A married couple should feel love for each other, but the love should grow out of the relationship rather than being the cause of it" (1980, 153). Instead of romantic love, men and women were encouraged to look for religious devotion, good character, which included avoiding "idleness, use of intoxicating drinks, smoking, chewing, snuffing tobacco, the taking of opium, licentiousness in every form, gambling, swearing, and the keeping of late hours at night," and "beauty, health, and intellect" in a marriage partner to ensure the best children (Gordon 1980, 150–52).

Plural husbands reflected this Victorian attitude about love. In general, they believed that learning to work together for common goals (including the ultimate reward, eternal life) was more important than physical attraction. After telling of his love for each of his three wives as long as they were faithful to him, Joel Hill Johnson concluded:

> Should each prove True
> Their work to do
> Like true and faithful wives
> Then all shall share
> My love and care
> With crown of endless lives (n.d., 52–53).

Another Victorian ideal perpetuated by polygamous as well as monogamous households in nineteenth-century America was the concept of differentiated male and female roles within marriage. While "nineteenth-century society gave . . . most of the substance of power to the male, within the family the relationship was, in the end, between two people [and] who predominated [in a marriage] depended as much on what each was as on the public definition of the institution" (Degler 1980, 43). Nineteenth-century men and women generally had separate spheres of responsibilities which kept them apart most of

the time. Barbara Welter, a historian of nineteenth-century women's culture, wrote, "The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society" (1978, 313). Thus, a husband was expected to provide for his family, and home was where the wife provided a refuge from the world of work. Because of this division of labor, "American society was characterized in large part by rigid gender role differentiation within the family and within society as a whole, leading to the emotional segregation of women and men" (Smith-Rosenberg 1978, 339).

This pattern was true in both LDS monogamous and polygamous families; evidently the number of wives was not the deciding factor in determining division of labor. According to my study of 185 polygamous husbands and 118 monogamous husbands, 58 percent of the polygamists and 62 percent of the monogamists were involved in farming or ranching, manufacturing, merchandising, and freighting. Over half of that group — 57 percent of the plural husbands and 59 percent of the monogamous — were farmers or ranchers. Even when farming was not the major source of income, most families raised nearly all of their food and produced nearly everything they used, the men and women each having specific assignments. The men usually worked in the fields or in businesses outside of the home while women worked inside the home, in the garden, and with domestic animals.

Of course, there were some unique problems with polygamy since a plural husband had to provide not only physical but emotional support for more than one wife. However, my study showed that many husbands saw all of their wives regularly. Of 156 families, 47 percent had a regular daily or weekly visiting schedule, 8 percent had no routine, and 20 percent stayed mainly with one wife. The remaining 24 percent visited either once every three days, rotated once a month, or visited at General Conference or harvest time, depending on family circumstances. With regular visits, husbands were most likely aware of their wives' needs. Since 60 percent of the wives in my study lived in the same community as their husbands and co-wives, if there were special problems such as illness, most husbands could usually be reached quickly and could help the family in need.

Apparently most husbands tried to divide not only their time, but also their resources and affections equally between all of their wives. Mary E. Croshaw Farrell, the fourth wife of George Farrell, said that financial matters caused most domestic disagreements in polygamous families (1937, 9). To avoid financial problems, in 65 percent of forty-nine families who mentioned the subject, the husband divided the supplies between the families. In about 60 percent of the thirty-two examples, each wife received equal provisions. Other husbands provided an allowance for each wife. Whatever way the financial resources were divided, the husband "would have to be really considerate of both wives," as one son put it. "I'm sure under the circumstances eyes would be open if one wife had more than the other. Jealousy crept in. I think that applied to polygamy in general with the exception of a few of the families. A husband living in polygamy should have the same for one wife that he does for another" (Jackson 1978, 25).

Most polygamous husbands also tried to prevent jealousy over affection. Thomas E. Taylor, in a letter to his plural wife Brighaminia (Minnie), explained, "When a man has a number of families he has to be very circumspect and careful in both actions and words." He went on to explain, "I may do things . . . for you that others would feel bad about. On other times, something for others might give you pain but I am going to try and do my best in my imperfect way" (Taylor, 17 July 1893). Edith Smith Bushman said, "Father was very wise. He never carried the stories from one family to another and he never made a comparison" (1979, 5).

There were times, however, when one wife was clearly the favorite, a situation which, of course, led to bad feelings. Lawrence Leavitt reported, "I think he [my father] cared a lot for my mother" but then implied that she was not the favorite wife (1980, 9). Catherine Scott Brown began, "My father was rather partial," but then stopped and concluded, "I will just say this. My mother wasn't the favored wife. I won't say anything more about it" (1976, 12). But of course favoritism is a highly subjective perception; even children of the same mother occasionally viewed their favoritism differently. Jesse, the son of the second wife, Sarah Eliza Fenn Barney, said that he felt his father favored the first wife, his mother's sister Annie, "because she was the first wife, the first love" (1982, 33). His full brother Orin, however, said, "We couldn't see that Dad treated anyone any different than anyone else" (1982, 7).

Men in polygamy, according to the interviews, usually hoped that their wives would also love each other and avoid arguments. Thomas E. Taylor wrote to Minnie about his first wife, "I would like Emma to be frank with you and you with her and each learn the lesson of humility. I am your husband as well as hers." In one instance when his wives were apparently not communicating, Thomas sent a letter to Minnie and asked her to mail it or take it from Gunnison to Emma in Salt Lake City. He added, "I hope you can see your way to do this in the spirit of meekness and love, not only for your husband's sake but for your own and all your family." Charles E. Rich wrote to his wives from a mission in 1861, "I am glad and thankful so far as I know that there is a kind and friendly feeling amongst you. I hope and pray that this spirit and feeling may increase among you till you will be one, as the church of God is one."

As in monogamous marriages, though, individual personalities dictated how well the husbands and wives got along. As Ida Walser Jackson explained, "Not all the [plural] families got along. It was the people though and not the institution. It was the way the man handled it a lot and not the way the women themselves accepted it. . . . There was jealousy among some, but many of them just got along beautifully" (1976, 18). David Candland did not always get along with one of his wives, Hannah, but had a system for dealing with disagreement: "I absent myself sometimes for weeks then she craves forgiveness" (n.d., 51). Christopher Layton recalled his love for his third wife, "Death came to the relief of my wife Sarah M. on October 25, 1864. This was a great blow to us all, for in her we lost our best advisor and peacemaker, a true wife and loving mother" (n.d., 35–36). Monogamous marriages seemed

no different, however. Elbert Hans Anderson, for example, said of his monogamous parents, "I think at times that Mother felt that Father didn't take enough time to spend with her" (1983, 9).

Nineteenth-century American families displayed the Victorian influence not only in their attitudes toward love and the marital roles they followed, but also in their methods of child-rearing. Because husbands and fathers in American and Mormon families were often gone, wives cared for the home as well as the children. As one scholar explained, "From every available source, it is clearly evident that girls and boys were raised by mothers who were faithful to the standards of motherhood. . . . Men lived a masculine existence 'out there' which from decade to decade seemed more isolated from the feminized home life of 'in here' " (Dubbert 1979, 21).

Like other nineteenth-century American children, most monogamous and polygamous children felt a special closeness to their mothers. Ada S. Howlett, a child of a monogamous family, explained, "My mother was my mainstay I guess. Father was quite busy, and he had a big family" (1982, 7). But many felt little closeness, especially with their fathers. Elsie Jane Hubbard spoke of her monogamous parents, "In those pioneer days they had to work pretty much all the time. We worked with our parents. We helped along. But as far as spending any time in my life much, no" (1983, 11). Marjorie Cannon Pingree said, "I was not neglected, but it seemed to me that I grew up with very little regulating because my father had another family that he lived with a part of the time. He supervised us as best he could, but I couldn't remember that I was ever forced to study or guided in my assignments" (1983, 2).

One might suppose from such evidence that children of monogamous families were closer to their fathers than those of polygamous families. Of sixty-three polygamous families whose children talked about their relationships with their fathers, 13 percent reported receiving no attention from their fathers, 52 percent had little interaction with their fathers, and 33 percent were close to their fathers. In contrast, 84 percent of the children from forty-one monogamous families reported that they were close to their fathers. At first, these figures seem overwhelmingly to support the theory that not only did most polygamous children feel a special closeness to their mothers, but they also lacked a closeness with their fathers. However, such a conclusion may be based more on what was not reported than on what was. Of the more than 200 polygamous and 150 monogamous families that I studied, only 63 and 41 children, respectively, mentioned specifically their relationship with their fathers, although the interviewees were asked to describe their fathers as well as their mothers. However, rather than talking about specific relationships, the children usually talked about their fathers' occupations and their Church positions, just as they did when discussing their mothers. It would be fairer to conclude that, given the Victorian ideal, children in polygamous families, much like children in monogamous families, expected to be closer to their mothers than to their fathers since their fathers were earning the living and did not spend as much time in the home.

But although they were not always present, the polygamous fathers in my study generally expressed love for their families. Teaching religious values was considered to be especially important, as the children recall, and polygamous families as well as monogamous LDS families nearly always had a family prayer. Of seventy-nine polygamous families (a husband and his wives counted as one family) and seventy-six monogamous LDS families, 90 percent of the polygamous and 85 percent of the monogamous had daily family prayers. These family prayers apparently continued in both monogamous and polygamous families whether the father was there or not. Some men, like Martin B. Bushman, "made it a practice to live with each family the same that I might help them with their children and have prayers with them. I tried to set a good example before my children by having prayer night and morning" (n.d., n.p.).

Polygamy, then, did not completely change the nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of family relationships for the families who practiced it. Husbands and fathers were often gone in plural families just as they were in monogamous ones; polygamy only meant that men had to divide up their family time even more. But for the most part, plural husbands and fathers maintained good relationships with all of their families. Charles Rich's letter to his plural wives written on 11 January 1863 while he was on a mission summarizes the hopes of many plural husbands:

> Now my dear wives how is it with you? How do you enjoy yourselves? Do you enjoy the Holy Spirit? Do you pray? Do you teach our children to pray and do you see that no unholy principle that will destroy them is suffered to grow in their minds? Do you attend meetings faithfully? Do you cultivate love for each other? Do you love and remember an absent husband? I trust that you remember all these things and many more.

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