



Using Family Systems Theory to Examine Polygamous Family Interactions

Pearl Stewart, Ph.D.
Rocco Placenti, Doctoral Student
Kani Diop, Ph.D.

National Council on Family Relations Conference
San Diego, CA
November 2018



Background

- In 2007, 1.4 million West Africans immigrated to the United States (Terrazas, 2009) bringing with them cultural contexts which include polygamy as a legitimate and acceptable family form.
- Polygamy has been called the bedrock of African families (Ba, 1980).

Methods

- Qualitative Study
 - Face to face, semi-structured interviews
 - , 45-90 minutes
- Participants
 - N=46 West African Immigrants,
 - Age Range 19-70.



Family Systems Theory

- Relies on the understanding that
 - The family is a whole greater than the sum of its parts
 - Individual family members have an ongoing and mutual impact on one another
 - Individual members must always be understood in the context of the larger family system (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013)
- Aspects relevant to this presentation
 - Family rules and roles
 - Subsystems
 - Alliances



Rules and Roles

- **Financial Stability-** Virtually all of the females and a number of the males in this study described polygamy as a means for males to demonstrate high social or economic status in his community.

They looked at him and saw a wealthy man [because], he could afford to have 12 wives. (Obima)

- **Equal distribution of economic and emotional resources-** one of the chief requirements/rules of polygamous family systems, yet it seemed to be the most difficult standard to meet.

He always has more love for one of the wives or 2 than he loves the others. (Awa). |

There is probably one child who you will be more close to but then you don't have to say it out loud. You just do what you have to do. (Souleymane)



Subsystems

- **Husband & Wife-** Husband wife relationships and interactions are generally managed using a rotation system guided by specific rules.

Each wife has two days with the dad. It's your time with him. You have to respect your turn, if it's not your turn, you cannot even go next to him unless he called you or something (Anna)

- **Co-wives:** Interaction among these subsystems are pivotal in family functioning. Key component is acceptance

“Religiously and in a healthy way and also medically I will say it solves a problem because he's either here or there. Instead of being with you and being everywhere else”. (Zeina)



Subsystems Involving Children

- Mother & Child: Promotion of loyalty between mother and child rather than the larger family

“We just have the same dad but we don’t have the same mom.” (Awa)

- Siblings: May have positive or negative relationships with

The first wife’s children are already taking care of my children. They will call, they will check on their work even though they don’t live together they feel that they’re responsible for the younger siblings. They feel like siblings.

If the first wife has the first born son, you know because he is the first son then all the father’s property belongs to him, so you know the siblings, if he doesn’t get along with the siblings he won’t give them anything



Implications and Future Work

■ Implications

Therapeutic & Educational Communities- Often use Family Systems as part of a treatment modality but a monogamous family model may not accommodate the complexities of polygamous families



Discussion Questions

- How do issues such as alliances, boundaries & equilibrium manifest in polygamous families?
- How are sibling subsystems influenced by other subsystems?