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## The relationship between polygamy and family functioning in the Bedouin population in the Negev Desert

**Abstract.** *The Bedouin population in the Negev Desert has experienced in the past two decades a sharp, rapid, and drastic transition in its reality of life in the State of Israel and in the not-easy conditions that the state of Israel has created. This population finds itself coping with difficulties of types it had not known in the past, searching for new ways of existence and survival at different levels and in various aspects. Polygamy, one of the phenomena characterizing the Bedouin population in the Negev, is a multifaceted issue, encompassing legal, social, cultural, and political aspects. The multiplicity of wives in Arab society is primarily an unacceptable social phenomenon, inextricably connected to discrimination against Arab women. This discrimination is multidimensional: on the one hand, there is social discrimination against Arab women by society through their perception as inferior, in the way in which the relations of control of men over women in society is perpetuated, and on the other hand, institutionalized discrimination on the part of the country's authorities that exclude Arab women from the social, economic, and political foci and weaken their status. This article contributes to the existing studies on the implications of polygamy on the Bedouin society in Israel with an original study of the relationship between polygamy and the functioning of the family as they are seen by teenage students in the school in the Negev Desert in Israel. Data has been collected with a Survey Questionnaire in (1997).*

**Keywords:** *polygamy, Bedouins, marriage, discrimination of Arab women*

## Introduction

Polygamy is a pattern of marriage that has not lost its value over the years, despite changes that have occurred and are still occurring in Bedouin society in the Negev. Polygamy in Bedouin Arab society in the Negev is not a phenomenon occurring in a void. It is a part of the characteristic reality of the life of the Bedouin Arab women in the Negev. This is a reality of the ongoing weakness and exclusion, in which Bedouin Arab women struggle for their place in a patriarchal tribal society that refuses to relinquish the social supremacy granted to men. The Israeli establishment reinforces this reality through its mechanisms of control in the mode of “divide and conquer.” It reinforces the tribal leadership to maintain the “industrial peace” in the Negev, and the price is paid by the Bedouin Arab women.

The word “Bedouin” originally was a term used for people who lived in the desert (*badiya* in Arabic). Today in the Negev Desert there live 120,000 Bedouin, of whom approximately 40% live in the recognized villages and 60% live in the unrecognized villages – villages that lack basic existential conditions such as running water, electricity, roads, medical clinics, and so on (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1997).

Despite the changes that have occurred in Bedouin society in general and in the status of the women in particular in the past decades, polygamous marriages still are common. Al-Krenawi and Graham (1997) describe the structure of the polygamous Bedouin family as composed of sub-families, where each sub-family consists of a mother and her children and functions as a system, with the mother, who cares for the children, at the head. Economic distress is manifest in Bedouin society following the high rate of unemployment among men and women and the significant reductions in the children’s benefits provided by the government (the sole source of livelihood in many Bedouin families). In addition, the economic situation of women in polygamous families is more problematic than that of the women in monogamous families in Bedouin society, since the economic resources are divided among a larger number of people and the division also depends on the relationship between the woman and her husband. The reality indicates that women in polygamous families, for the most part the first wives, suffer more from poverty and scarcity than do other women in Bedouin society (Albin, 2004). This article examines the relationship between polygamy and family functioning in the Bedouin population in the Negev Desert.

### 1. The Bedouin Population

The Bedouin population in Israel is the secondary group in the Arab minority and is characterized by its cultural, historical, social, and political uniqueness – that

differentiates it from other secondary groups. The Bedouins in today's Israel amount to 310,000 people which includes 230,000 Bedouin people in the Negev. Approximately 40% of this population lives in permanent Bedouin communities, which consist of seven municipalities: Rahat, Kuseife, Ar'ara, Segev Shalom, Tel Sheva, Hura, and Lakiya. Rahat, for example, was declared a city in July 1994. About 60% of the Bedouin live in unrecognized communities (Al-Krenawi & Graham 1997). The Bedouin population has grown rapidly: from 17,800 in 1961, to about 120,000 in 1999. The birthrate of the Bedouin population is among the highest in the world.

From the end of the Ottoman period, Bedouin society in Israel, like in neighbouring countries, has undergone many changes. The challenge faced by the Bedouins is not only to survive in the framework of the modern state but also to integrate into it and to obtain a position and status in all areas of life. However, regrettably, the Bedouins in Israel have not succeeded in achieving this, and for reasons related both to them and to the establishment, Bedouin society has become a marginalized society which has been largely ignored by the government (Meir 1997, pp. 132-134).

Only from the end of the 1960s, when the State of Israel began to settle some of the Bedouin in planned and recognized communities, did they become a factor of influence. However, Bedouin society continues to suffer from difficulties with the adjustment to urbanization, progress, and the surrounding culture, to the point that the adjustment assumes the nature of conflict, whose reasons lie in the lack of desire on the part of the Bedouin to forego values and cultural elements that have made them unique from time immemorial in contrast to other groups and cultures. For instance, in the field of education there is an unavoidable conflict between the traditional education and modern education. Thus, there is conflict regarding the prevention of girls' acquisition of education and limitation of girls to the boundaries of the home. In the field of health the use of traditional medicine is still widespread, both at home and among traditional healers, and often there is a conflict between traditional medicine and modern medicine (Shalhov-Kavorkian 1996).

## **2. Polygamy among Bedouins**

It is difficult to estimate the scope of the phenomenon of polygamy among the Bedouins in Israel, primarily since a large percentage of the polygamous marriages are not official and thus not documented. In this context, it is necessary to differentiate between the official polygamy, in which the man is married officially to a number of women, and the actual polygamy, in which the man is married lawfully to one woman but maintains the framework of a family life with a number of women in parallel. The Ministry of the Interior of Israel collects data about the "official" cases

of polygamy among Muslims in Israel. It is important to emphasize that these data pertain only to men who have reported to the Ministry of the Interior about their additional marriages, and these men are, as aforementioned, a small percentage of all the polygamous men. It should be emphasized that the data cover all Muslim men and not only Bedouin men.

The main difficulty in the enforcement of the existing law prohibiting polygamous marriage resides in the fact that it applies only to official marriages and thus it can be bypassed in different ways. The first way is divorce from the first wife, in what is called a "little divorce." In this divorce, the man tells his wife that she is divorced one time. This action is sufficient for him to obtain approval of the divorce from the *Sharia* (Islamic Religious) Court. However, according to Muslim law, the divorce is upheld only if the man tells his wife that she is divorced three times in the presence of two witnesses.

Polygamy is defined in anthropological research as a marriage relationship with a number of women, usually two which is then defined as bigamy. Polygamy was commonly practiced in different cultures and today it is common primarily in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania. In the Bedouin population polygamy was and remains the main social institution, which is largely associated with the patriarchal social structure and the importance of the group and the tribe.

Taking the above into account, the following main points arise. According to Israeli law, polygamy is a criminal offence for which the punishment is up to five years of imprisonment. There are no precise data on the scope of the phenomenon of polygamy in the Bedouin population in Israel. However, according to estimates the percentage of polygamous families in the Bedouin population is 20% to 36%. The prohibition of polygamy is barely enforced in the Bedouin population. Since 2004, the Israel Police have opened only four investigations against Bedouin for this offence. A large percentage of the polygamous marriages are established with women from the Palestinian authorities or from Jordan. Such marriages create a situation of trade in women for the purpose of marriage. In the Bedouin population there has been barely any activities to reduce the phenomenon of the multiplicity of wives, despite the negative influences on the women and the children in polygamous families.

The percentage of polygamy in Bedouin society has not declined despite the processes of modernization occurring therein, notably the transition from a nomadic life to residence in permanent communities. Moreover, some argue that the level of polygamy has even increased in the past decade. It should be noted that the phenomenon is widespread even among educated and young men, at the beginning of their thirties. The phenomenon of polygamy exists in the Bedouin population both in the North and in the Negev, but it is more widespread among the Bedouin in the Negev. A research study which examined Bedouins' attitude towards polygamous marriages showed that young men support polygamy more than do older men. The

difference derives apparently from the fact that the older men are more aware of the negative implications of polygamy than are the younger men.

Today there is evidence which indicates that commitment as in the marriages of cousins is steadily declining, because of the fact that Bedouin society is changing and is exposed to the influence of other cultures (see also Alatuna 1993). Israeli anthropologists in their investigation of the topic of the Bedouins in the Sinai and Negev Deserts found a number of reasons for the phenomena of the multiplicity of women. Alatuna (1993) notes that the many births, the exhausting work, and the lack of mental satisfaction leave their marks on the Bedouin woman and for the most part her beauty fades already in her thirties. The man is thus tired of her, since the woman is old and cannot fulfill her conjugal duty. Karsel (1988) maintains that polygamous marriages are characteristic of Bedouin contractors, who have a high income and who see secondary marriages as an investment in the multiplicity of descendants and as the realization of their economic success. Alatuna (1993) notes that marrying many women is an indicator of wealth and high social status. Ben David illustrates this in the Bedouin saying "az alehhl blmal obrgal," or in other words, the family prestige lies in wealth and in men. Asadoy (1988) notes that polygamy means the satisfaction of man's sexual desire to reinforce his right to a number of women and to sanctify economic greed. In addition, she adds that women are a source of income and wealth since their shoulders were burdened with many tasks and assignments, both in the field and in the home, without any payment except for their keep and in many ways the presence of additional women in the home was welcome (Alatuna 1993).

### 3. The Causes of Polygamy among the Bedouin

As previously mentioned, polygamy traditionally is the main institution in Bedouin society. The multiplicity of wives is permitted by Islam. According to Islam, a man can be married to four women simultaneously, as long as he satisfies the economic and emotional needs of all the women and all the children equally. The multiplicity of wives is permitted under certain conditions: the woman is not fertile or is in menopause, the woman does not give the man sons, the woman is sick with a physiological or mental illness, or the woman cannot satisfy the sexual needs of the man. However, the declaration of the man of his desire to increase the number of his children is also an adequate reason for the multiplicity of wives.

According to Dr. Majid Alatuna (2003), who studies the issue, most Bedouin men aspire to live with a number of women, and what limits them is the lack of the sufficient supply of women in the tribe. There are a number of reasons why polygamy is still widespread among the Bedouin in the Negev:

One of the main factors of the phenomenon of polygamy is its legitimacy in Bedouin society, even among the young and educated. While women view polyg-

amy in a negative light, their status in patriarchal Bedouin society is low and thus they do not have an influence on the position towards the phenomenon. Moreover, marrying a woman has a financial cost, especially the cost of the *mohar* (bride price) paid for her, and thus the multiplicity of wives is evidence of the man's power and wealth. Also, a larger number of women in the family means, for the most part, a larger number of children per man, with the emphasis on male children. Every extended family or *hamula* (clan) is interested in increasing its numbers so as to gain power and prepare for future power struggles with outside factors.

It is also said that the first marriage is at a young age and the second marriage is from choice. In Bedouin society the traditional custom that a man and a woman are married at a young age according to their parents' choice is still prevalent. For the most part, the marriage is held among relatives. The second marriage generally occurs when the man is older, and is by his choice. Thus, in the polygamous families in the Bedouin sector the status of the first (senior) woman is lower than the status of the second woman, whom the husband chose of his free will. It appears that in such cases the multiplicity of wives is a tool with which the Bedouin man copes with the discrepancy between the tradition, which requires him to marry at a young age according to the family dictates, and modernization, which inspires in him the desire to live with a woman according to his own choice.

The custom of *badal* marriage, or marriage based on exchange in Muslim society, is a prevalent custom in which a brother and a sister from one family marry a brother and a sister from another family. There is also a high pressure on older women to be married and to have children. Single Bedouin women who reach the age of 25-30 and especially educated women find it difficult to find a spouse, especially in a society in which it is not customary to marry men from outside of the tribe. Since in Bedouin society it is not customary for the woman to live without a spouse, pressure is exerted on the women to marry at almost any cost.

The fear of divorce and loss of the children is strong. Divorced women in traditional Muslim Arab society have a problematic stigma, and they experience real existential difficulties. In addition, according to *Sharia* law (traditional Muslim religious law), in cases of divorce the fathers are entitled to custody over boys from the age of seven and of girls from the age of nine, and women attempt to avoid divorce so as not to lose the custody of their children. Hence, even if the marriage of the husband to another woman makes life difficult for the first wife, she may prefer it over divorce.

After the Six Day War and the opening of the borders between Israel and the West Bank, the "supply" of women for Bedouin men increased, and thus more men married another wife. Although the limitations on the transfer between Israel and the West Bank were reinstated, and new limitations were added during the Second Intifada, there still is an "import" of Palestinian and Jordanian women for the purpose of marriage with Bedouin men.

#### 4. The Implications of Polygamy

The multiplicity of wives has implications both on the polygamous family, primarily on the women and children, and on Bedouin society as a whole. The economic situation of polygamous families is more difficult than that of monogamous families. Since the Bedouin women barely work outside of home, in a polygamous home there are more people (women and children) who depend on the income of the man, although the payments of government income support and the child benefit for each child are supposed to help ameliorate the situation.

Among the women in a polygamous marriage there frequently are hostile and jealous relations, since the additional marriage is generally undertaken without the consent of the senior women and is against their will. The women are in essence found in a constant competition over the husband's material and emotional resources, and thus a struggle is created among the secondary families in the polygamous family.

The women in polygamous families, primarily the senior women, suffer more than do the women in monogamous families from mental problems, including depression, anxiety, and hostility. In addition, the self-image of the senior women and their status in society are harmed when the husband chooses to marry another woman. The scholastic achievements of children in polygamous families are lower than those of children in monogamous families and their adjustment to the school is poorer.

The phenomena of violence in the family are more common among polygamous families than among monogamous families. Sometimes violence is adopted towards women who refuse to participate in "little divorces," as described previously, to cause them to cooperate. Despite the negative implications of polygamy, primarily on women and children, there is almost no activity for the prevention of the phenomenon in the Bedouin population. The existing activity focuses on the explanation of the negative implications of the phenomenon. In addition, the main activity is undertaken in the Bedouin population in the North and not among the Bedouin in the Negev, although in the Negev the phenomenon is more common.

The status of a woman who lives in the framework of a polygamous family is even lower than that of women who live in a system with only two spouses. This system of relations leads to competition and an unjust division of the means found in the family, thus resulting in jealousy and hostility between the women and the children of each and every woman. Moreover, in most cases it is possible to find differences in the difficulty faced by the first or senior women, whose husband preferred another woman to them, and by the second or newer women. Although in certain societies the status of the first woman is higher than that of the other women, in Bedouin society in Israel the situation is reversed (Albin 2004). Frequently, the

husband's relationship with a new woman leads to the neglect of the first woman and her children. In this situation, the woman feels the need to struggle for her place and status in the extended family framework. Thus, polygamous marriage leads frequently to a decline in the social and economic status, both of the woman and her children. Research studies indicate that the senior (first) wives in polygamous families in Bedouin society report a low self-esteem and feelings of failure towards the husband and society since they were not successful wives, the most important role of the woman in Bedouin society. The harm, therefore, is not only on the level of the individual but also on the level of the extended family and the community.

Al-Krenawi and Lev-Wiesel (2002) present research studies that show that senior women in polygamous marriages have many more psychological problems than do the second wives and wives in monogamous marriages. The research works even indicate a distant relationship between the father and his children from his first wife, a distance that frequently leads to violence, uncontrolled behavior, and difficulties in the school studies.

Elbedour et al. (2003), who conducted their research in the Bedouin sector, found that polygamous families weaken the parent-child relationship and reduce the child's level of emotional satisfaction and psychological security. The characteristics of the polygamous families especially reduce the parental connection between the father and the child. Polygamy has direct and indirect influences on the children's mental situation. The direct influences are caused by the change in the division of the resources to each woman in the framework of the polygamous marriage. The reduction of the economic and psychological resources has an impact on the child's level of livelihood and on the manner of the development of his personality.

The indirect influences penetrate into the child's life through the changes that occur following the transition to the polygamous marriage. It can be said in general that the health and mental wellbeing of the mothers have an influence on that of their children (Al-Krenawi 2000). Frequently, the father's attachment to a new wife leads to a neglect of the first woman and her children. Thus, polygamous marriage often leads to a decline in the social and economic status, both of the woman and her children (Al-Krenawi & Lev-Wiesel 2002).

## **5. Methodology chapter**

The presented research focuses on the at-risk and normative Bedouin adolescent population in recognized and unrecognized villages in the Negev. Each of the studied groups consists of 88 Bedouins adolescents (N=44 at-risk adolescents and N=44 normative adolescents) in the age range of 14-18 (N=176) in the school framework. Diagnosis of at-risk adolescents was done using diagnostic tools,

including questionnaires and the documentation of educational institutions which was consulted with the local and regional welfare departments in unrecognized villages. The studied teenagers include:

A. Youth living in circumstances which may create a risk: youth in families who are suffering a crisis due to divorce, families with many children and families suffering from high unemployment.

B. Youth living in dangerous environments: witnesses of violence between parents, addiction, family criminal activity and poverty.

C. Youth living with direct personal dangers: physically abused and neglected, criminal activity, drug abuse and smoking.

Participants in the study answered the questionnaire according to an equitable distribution and organized schedules, not all at once. The research measures had been collected through the self-report questionnaire as follows: the questionnaires were passed to students in classrooms in the school. And this was after receiving the permission of the ministry of education and the education head and the principles of the school and with the acceptance of parents.

The study put forward the following hypotheses:

4. A difference will be found between recognized and unrecognized Bedouin villages in relation to attitudes towards family functionality.

4a. At-risk adolescents in recognized villages will show more positive attitudes toward family functionality compared to at-risk adolescents in unrecognized villages.

5. A difference will be found between the at-risk and normative Bedouin in relation to attitudes towards family functionality.

5a. At-risk adolescents will show more negative attitudes toward family functionality compared to normative adolescents.

The used research tools were the following:

A: Personal socio-demographic information questionnaires, and personal and social experiences. This part is an integrated version of the "Questionnaire for students from grades 7-12" of the Brookdale Institute – JDC (Joint 2002).

B: A questionnaire which deals with family functionality. This questionnaire was originally developed in English by Bloom (1985) and was dubbed the Colorado Questionnaire for Evaluating Families (CFA). This questionnaire was built to test family functionality on a multidimensional level. As part of the questionnaire's framework participants are asked to express their perceptions regarding their family's functionality with 60 queries reflecting 12 levels of functioning: cohesion, tension, confrontation and conflict, organization, social structure, origin of external control, idealization, detachment, separation, democratic values, freedom and permissiveness, authority and over involvement. The questionnaire is built in a format in which the research participant marks answers 1-5 next to each query (1 = not correct at all; 5 = disagree).

The questionnaires were translated on the internet from Hebrew to Arabic and English. A comparison of the copies was carried out and it was found out that all three copies match with one another. It was emphasized that questionnaire was anonymous. In addition it was stressed that these questionnaires would be used only for the sake of research. The period of passing out the questionnaire was two months (March and April 2015).

## 6. Analysis and Findings

In this research study we a comparison of the level of family functioning in polygamous families of youths in situations of risk in the recognized communities and that of youths in situations of risk in the non-recognized communities in the Bedouin population in the Negev.

In this research study we evaluated the measures of family functioning in the polygamous families of youths in situations of risk who live in the recognized communities and in the non-recognized communities, in comparison to the general measure of family functioning. A significant difference was found between the two groups ( $F(119,120) = 13.34, P < .001$ ).

In the comparison between the two groups of twelve measures included in the family functioning questionnaire (Hotellings Trace), significant differences were also found between the two groups ( $F(12,107) = 7.492, P < .001$ ).

The findings indicate that youths in situations of risk from polygamous families in the non-recognized communities tend to perceive their family functioning as better than do the youths in situations of risk from polygamous families who live in the recognized families. These findings recur in the examination of each one of the measures separately. (See table number 1., p. 27)

## 7. Discussion

According to the systemic approach, the (individual's) experience in the family is the basis for the development of social ability. According to Minuchin (1982), the family contact that recurs in the first years of the individual's development establishes the patterns of behaviour. Deficient functioning in the family system in polygamous families may lead among youths in situations of risk to deficiencies in their emotional, cognitive, or social dimensions.

The present research study examined youths in situations of risk in recognized communities and in the non-recognized communities in the Bedouin population in the Negev who functioned normatively until the nuclear family was extended to the polygamous family. The assumption was that the concept of youths in situations of risk was not familiar in the Bedouin family, since it was characterized as a family with clear boundaries that enabled the youths to develop according to the customs.

Table Number 1. Comparison of the Measures of Family Functioning between Youths in Situations of Risk in the Recognized Communities and Youths in Situations o Risk in the Non-Recognized Communities

	Youths in Situations of Risk in the Non-Recognized Communities		Youths in Situations of Risk in the Recognized Communities		F (df=119)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Cohesion	2.78	0.94	3.32	0.65	***14.71
Openness	3.1	0.86	3.83	0.74	1.56
Conflicts	3.06	0.98	3.68	0.64	**9.69
Organization	3.15	0.81	3.36	0.49	.31
Friendship	2.45	0.55	3.25	0.52	*4.44
External locus of control	2.55	0.61	3.50	0.63	***44.01
Glorification of family	2.24	0.79	2.32	0.51	3.59
Disconnection & separation	3.03	0.79	3.44	0.58	*4.78
Democracy	2.77	1.11	3.03	0.63	1.62
Freedom & permissiveness	2.84	0.62	3.44	0.46	***53.60
Authoritarianism	2.63	0.71	3.68	0.49	**8.70
Excess involvement	2.78	0.59	3.40	0.59	***24.30

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.005$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The findings of the present research study show that the perception of the family functioning among youths in situations of risk in the non-recognized communities is significantly better than the perception of the family functioning among youths in situations of risk who live in the recognized communities, both in terms of the general measure of the perception of the family functioning and in eight of the twelve measures of the perception of the family's functioning.

The meaning of this finding is that youths in situations of risk in the non-recognized communities perceive their family as more cohesive, as more characterized by fewer conflicts, as more meaningful in its role as an agent of culture, and as more permitting freedom and separation and with more authority and more involvement.

These findings again reinforce the importance of the Bedouin family in the context of youths in situations of risk. It is difficult from the present research study to know whether the level of the family functioning among youths in situations of risk in the non-recognized communities is really higher or whether such are the perceptions of the research respondents.

It is possible for the first time from these research findings to derive an etiology of the phenomenon of risk with the argument that apparently the phenomenon of risk is not linked to the level of the family's functioning but rather perhaps to the scarcity of opportunities for the existence of meaningful encounters between youths in situations of risk and their families.

The findings of this research study indicate that youths in situations of risk in the Bedouin population in polygamous families suffer from similar problems in the field of family functioning. However, the findings of the present research study show that there is a difference between the two groups of youths in situations of risk. It was found that youths in situations of risk in the non-recognized communities tend to perceive their families more positively than do the youths in the recognized communities. This datum indicates the degree of disconnection of youths in situations of risk from the family framework in the polygamous families in the recognized communities.

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## Calls

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