

1

Introduction

Harry, now in his 60s, had been away from home on a business trip for several days. After a long drive he arrived at the family compound and was greeted by an excited group of about 20 of his 65 children and two of his five wives. Soon thereafter the other wives and more of his children came to see him. He and his children and wives greeted one another warmly, especially since it was the weekend of the monthly family reunion and meetings. Everyone was expected home that weekend, including Harry's 37 sons and 28 daughters and their families and more than 300 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

William and his three wives – Carlyn, Danielle, and Alayna – have begun to achieve their dream of a home of their own in which they and their 12 children can live as a united family, in accordance with their religious beliefs. All converts to Mormon fundamentalism, they have struggled for years, living in rented apartments, basements of homes, and, during one hard winter, in a tent. In spite of ever-present economic strains, they finally began building their own home in a semirural area near Metropolitan City. The family has been in difficult financial straits, so construction goes slowly, they try to grow some of their own food, and they find whatever work they can in a tight economy. Admitting that they don't have much experience in plural family life, they also experiment with different living arrangements and ways to relate to one another, raise their children, and meet their religious beliefs.

Lauren, the second wife, finally quit her marriage to Fred after eight years of struggling to work things out with Fred and Elaine, the first wife in their polygamous family. She claims that Fred favored Elaine almost from the beginning of her marriage and that Elaine also didn't treat her very well. Lauren felt like a second-class person and didn't have enough time with Fred to develop their marriage; Fred gave Elaine nicer furnishings for her home and even told Lauren that he preferred Elaine to her. Elaine made things worse by demeaning Lauren, flaunting her relationship with Fred,

2 Introduction

and not supporting her as a co-wife. It finally became too stressful for Lauren, so she requested and was granted a “release” (divorce) from the marriage by the religious leader of their church.

The Sunday church service was attended by 600 to 800 people. Following several announcements, the singing of hymns, and a sacrament service, the 80-year-old religious leader, who is husband to eight wives and father of 43 children, delivered a sermon on the evils and decline of morals in the modern world and the need for members of the congregation to attend to their religious roots in 19th-century Mormonism and in the teachings of the biblical prophets. Other male elders spoke of the importance of fathers and husbands as religious and family patriarchs and the need for congregants to follow men as holders of the priesthood. Some speakers also called for appreciation and respect for wives and mothers, who are, one man said, “jewels in the crowns of their husbands.”

The people and polygamy

These vignettes are a glimpse into the story of this book, which deals with close relationships between a husband and his wives and between wives in contemporary polygamous families.

Who are these people and why do they believe in and practice polygamy? Surprising as it may seem, approximately 20,000 to 50,000 Americans are currently members of Mormon fundamentalist religious groups and believe in the principle of plural marriage, or polygamy. To be more precise, they practice and subscribe to a particular form of polygamy, termed *polygyny*, which involves a husband and two or more wives.

The families in the vignettes are members of organized fundamentalist religious communities who claim to follow the theological dictates of 19th-century Mormonism, officially known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). A uniquely American version of Christianity, the LDS religion was founded in the early 1800s in the northeastern United States by Joseph Smith, a charismatic and inspirational leader. As described in chapter 2 early Mormonism was one of several conservative counterreactions to emerging liberal values of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. In their opposition to greater freedom of choice of marital partners, women’s rights, easier divorces, abortions, and a general rise in individual rights, several conservative religious movements of the times, including Mormonism, called for the reestablishment of strong families, orderly community and religious structures, strict gender roles with women assuming traditional domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, and the

subordination of women to male patriarchal leadership. Under Joseph Smith, who claimed to have received from an angel a scripture describing the history and religion of an ancient people – the Book of Mormon – the new Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints attracted a number of followers. After years of migration and relocation, and then Joseph Smith's assassination, the Mormons emigrated to Utah in 1847 under the leadership of Brigham Young and established a combined religious and secular society, which flourishes to this day.

The practice of plural marriage, or polygyny, evolved under Joseph Smith over a period of several years as one aspect of early Mormon theology. Several principles of this theology were linked to the idea of plural marriage. A key principle was that a stable and orderly family life depends in part on a husband or father functioning as a religious and social leader. This dictum was traced to the biblical patriarchs, who were empowered with religious priesthood roles and who presided over polygynous families with multiple wives and many children. Another principle pertained to marriage and life in the hereafter: a religiously “righteous” man and his wife or wives could live as a “king” and “queen(s)” in the hereafter in their own heavenly universe, surrounded by their progeny. Because women could not enter the priesthood, an idea reflected in the Old Testament, their only entry to a heavenly state in the hereafter was through their husband. And because only religiously righteous men, who are in a minority in the world, may live in an exalted state in the hereafter, women were encouraged to marry such men, even in a polygynous mode, in order to achieve the promise of a heavenly existence in the afterlife. Original Mormon doctrine also postulated that marriages in the civil system were for “time” only, that is, in earthly life; marriages performed by religious leaders were for “time and eternity,” extending into the hereafter forever. This doctrine therefore made it possible for polygynous marriages to be performed within the church and thereby to bypass the civil system and avoid direct confrontation between secular and religious principles. These principles continue to be strongly held today by Mormon fundamentalists.

It was, and still is, also important for a fundamentalist husband and his wives to have many children. This responsibility stems from their belief in a premortal existence and the need for premortal souls to pass through earthly existence before entering the hereafter and to act in righteous ways on earth.

Mormon religious doctrine of the 19th century and today is far richer than that described here, as will become evident in subsequent chapters. The crucial point to note for the time being is that modern fundamentalists believe in and practice plural marriage in accordance with the tenets of early Mormonism, even though the main LDS Church, now numbering

4 *Introduction*

some nine million members worldwide, began denouncing the practice of polygyny in 1890. Although subscribing to many of the same theological principles as fundamentalists, the main LDS Church vigorously and unequivocally rejects the practice of polygyny, does not recognize fundamentalists as Mormons, excommunicates any of its members who are affiliated with fundamentalist groups, and has actively assisted and condoned the actions of civil authorities against fundamentalists who practice plural marriage. And because fundamentalists consider themselves to be the “true” followers of Joseph Smith and original church theology, they are an embarrassment and irritant to the main LDS Church.

Why fundamentalists believe in and practice polygyny is straightforward. They believe themselves to be following Mormon religious doctrine. And they hold to the practice in spite of the fact that bigamy (a person having two or more spouses) and cohabitation-habitation (a person living with two or more members of the opposite sex) are felonies in the criminal code of Utah and that polygamy is explicitly banned in that state’s constitution. Furthermore, fundamentalists continue to practice plural marriage in the face of rejection and criticism by American society, and in spite of the possibility of arrest, prosecution, and the loss of their jobs when they are found out to be engaged in plural marriages. With strength and fervor, they hold fast to the conviction that they are following the true path of Mormon theology.

Contemporary fundamentalist polygyny

Studying husband–wife and wife–wife relationships in contemporary polygynous families is consistent with our long-standing research interest in close interpersonal relationships. Over the years we have examined how close relationships form, progress from casual to intimate bonds, and sometimes deteriorate and break up; how close relationships are played out in various settings such as homes, public places, and elsewhere; and what factors make for their success or failure (see, e.g., Altman, 1975, 1990; Altman and Chemers, 1989; Altman and Taylor, 1973). In addition, the study of close relationships is a rich and expanding topic, especially on the contemporary scene.

Relationships in modern times

We live in an era of plural, diverse, and heterogeneous beliefs and values, cultural subgroups, and lifestyles – all of which are likely to intensify in

the coming decades as a result of changes in the demographic and social landscape of America and the Western world. Centrifugal and pluralistic forces abound in the wake of geopolitical changes that are altering the character of once stable nation-states. The effect of these changes is compounded by large-scale migrations; present and projected shifting demographics within nations, including the United States; an expanding global economy, which is tying the fate of people around the world together; and the potential for war and terrorism in the hands of small or unstable nations and ideological groups.

Accompanying these broad social changes is an increasing diversity of types of close interpersonal relationships and family forms. The stereotypical ideal of the nuclear family of a mother, father, and their children that pervaded American and Western society in the first decades of the 20th century had given way to acceptance, or at least acknowledgment, of the fact that the social landscape is now populated by a great diversity of close relationships and family types: single-parent families, usually headed by women; blended families in which a woman and man bring children from previous relationships into a new family; cohabiting couples; same-sex relationships; cohabitation parenting in which unmarried couple members agree to have children and share responsibility but do not live together (Kilbride, 1994); elderly people living in group situations; older children who are divorced returning with children to live with their parents; unique cultural and ethnic family structures; families in homeless shelters or other transient circumstances; immigrant populations with family members separated for periods of time; and others. To this diversity we add the relatively small number of fundamentalist Mormons who believe in and live in a plural family structure.¹

We are interested in this array of close relationships and family structures as scholars and citizens. As scholars, we believe it is important to study and understand these relationships in and of themselves – to see how they work, their underlying dynamics, their similarities and differences, and factors associated with their viability and well-being. So the opportunity to gain some understanding of life in plural families is consistent with our scholarly goals.

But we also have an interest as citizens of a changing world in which it is inevitable that people with varied lifestyles will come into contact, and even clash over differences in values and beliefs, including how they live in families and close relationships. We accept the reality that these diverse relationship forms are here to stay. Thus it is more important than ever before to promote mutual tolerance, if not genuine acceptance of those differences. If we can penetrate the superficial and often inaccurate stereotypes about others who live differently from us, then we may be able to

6 *Introduction*

achieve a greater degree of social unity, peace, and goodwill amidst the diversity and plurality that will be with us for decades to come.

Managing relationships in plural families

Given the uniqueness of polygyny in American and Western society, we anticipated that managing relationships between a husband and his wives and between the wives would be enormously challenging for reasons both external and internal to such relationships. External pressures stem from the general hostility of American society to polygyny; internal challenges arise from the dynamics of husband–wife and wife–wife relationships of plural marriages.

External pressures

External social pressures with which contemporary polygynous families must contend are associated with society's antipathy toward plural marriage. Tolerant as many Americans have become of alternative forms of relationships – such as blended families, single-parent families, cohabiting couples, same-gender relationships – the idea of polygynous marriages continues to be beyond the boundary of acceptability in American society. The idea of several women married to a man in a patriarchal family structure raises the hackles of many civil and women's rights activists, and probably of most Americans, whether of liberal or conservative stance. A polygynous family structure and its apparent gender inequities are simply unacceptable to many contemporary Americans. External pressures and rejection by American society, not to mention the strong opposition of the main Mormon Church to polygyny, are surely large obstacles for fundamentalists. Imagine the difficulty of managing a complex set of husband–wife and wife–wife relationships in the face of condemnation by American society and by the very religious organization with which one is historically and theologically linked. Participants are fearful about publicly stating that they are a plural wife or polygynous husband to the school system, to co-workers, or to the many people with whom they come into contact in daily life. How does one cope with plural family life in the face of queries, reactions of amazement, and explicit or implicit criticism of one's marital relationship? How does one meet the challenge of maintaining a healthy set of family relationships in the face of reinforcement of a monogamous value system in television, movies, and printed media? For us, one task is to understand how, in the face of these external challenges, members of

polygynous relationships cope with their situation to achieve some level of viability.

Internal dyadic challenges

All close relationships – monogamous or otherwise – also face an incredible number of internal challenges. Monogamous partners must figure out how to relate to one another in a variety of life domains and cope with the inevitable changes in their joint life connected with raising children, working or pursuing careers, aging and health problems, and experiencing day-to-day conflicts and tensions. Self-help books, newspaper advice columns, divorce rates, and the frequency of marital counseling all attest to the challenges faced by contemporary Americans and others around the world as they attempt to achieve viable and satisfying close relationships.

But these statements refer to monogamous relationships, usually between a man and a woman. In the American value system a husband–wife couple is joined by a sacred bond, and the partners ideally have a unique, distinctive, intimate, and love-based relationship. Furthermore, this idealized image is reinforced by literature, the law, and the media and in everyday life.

The fact is, however, that fundamentalists hold to the same value system. They also believe that husband–wife relationships should be based on love and that dyadic bonds between a husband and wife should be intimate, unique, and special. They also believe that every husband–wife couple in a plural family should have its own distinctive character and should satisfy the ideal of love and intimacy. How is this possible for polygynous partners amidst all the other challenges involved in developing a viable relationship? Imagine being a woman whose husband has one or more other wives, all having to share him while seeking their own unique, special, intimate, and loving relationship with the same man. How can this be achieved? What does a wife think on seeing her husband in an intimate and close relationship with another woman on a regular basis? What does she feel knowing that her husband is having sex and sleeping with another woman with whom she herself has regular contact (and with whom she may even be sharing living quarters)? What is it like for an older wife to see her husband marry a younger and seemingly more attractive woman? And how does a young new wife feel when she sees her husband and an established wife in a smooth and easy flowing relationship with one another, while she struggles to develop her own relationship with her husband? What stresses does a new wife face living in the home of an established wife and being unable to meet the American ideal of creating and managing her own home for herself and her husband? Conversely, what is it like for an established wife

8 *Introduction*

to have a new wife live with her, intrude on her routines, and be intimate with her husband in her home? The stresses and challenges facing wives in polygynous families magnify manifold the ordinary problems faced in monogamous relationships.

But what about the challenges facing husbands in plural marriages? What is it like managing multiple intimate, special, and unique relationships with more than one woman at the same time? How is it possible to have distinctive emotional, love-based ties to more than one woman at a time? How should a man behave toward each wife in the presence of other wives and still ideally achieve a special relationship with each one? How should a husband apportion his time between his wives and families? How is it possible to simultaneously deal with the day-to-day life and emotional issues of each wife and family? How can a husband resolve with each wife his and their personality differences and cope with their mutual interpersonal emotions, needs, and stresses that are inevitably part of married life? Where should a husband live from day to day? How can he be available for family crises and needs?

Internal communal challenges

Achieving viable multiple *dyadic* relationships between a husband and wives in plural families is surely a complicated matter. But there is yet another major challenge. Members of contemporary polygynous families believe that they should also strive to become a unified, cohesive, and integrated *communal* family unit. That is, religious values and cultural norms call for wives to love, support, and nurture one another. They are also expected to support each other's relationship with the husband. And husbands are expected to be fair to, to love, and to honor all wives. Of course, these idealized communal values are not always achieved in practice, in the same way that cultural ideals for monogamous marriages are not always realized.

Taken together, participants in modern plural families subscribe to the American view that each marital relationship in a family – a *dyad* – should be special, unique, intimate, and individualized. At the same time, they seek a unified, cohesive *communal* family structure in which all participants support, nurture, and function as a cohesive family unit.

In the following chapters we explore the interplay of dyadic and communal relationships in various aspects of polygynous life: the decision to add a wife to a family, courting practices, weddings, adjustment to and by new wives, relationships between husbands and wives, rotation of husbands among families, home management, living arrangements, attachments to

home by husbands and wives, celebrations, conflict resolution, and other topics. Managing dyadic and communal relationships in plural families is an extraordinary balancing act requiring enormous energy, attention, and patience by family members. Other polygynous cultures sometimes face the same challenges but may over decades and centuries have developed norms and practices for managing family relationships. However, Mormon polygyny involves a relatively new culture, with few firm traditions and little guidance available to its practitioners. It is, in other words, an emergent culture “in search of itself,” one that is striving to develop formal and informal mechanisms by which its members can achieve viable relationships in plural families. And the problem is magnified by the fact that many husbands and wives are converts, meaning that they grew up or lived in monogamous families and only joined the fundamentalist movement as adults or when their parents joined. Thus many men and women in plural families have had little or no prior personal experience with this lifestyle.

This cultural group presents an unusual opportunity to study close relationships in families struggling to develop a viable polygynous lifestyle amidst a variety of internal and external pressures and in the context of relatively little personal experience or cultural guidelines. *The central conceptual question addressed throughout this book is how do contemporary polygynous families cope with the challenge of simultaneously achieving viable dyadic and communal relationships?* Or, how does each husband–wife dyad develop and sustain a constructive marital relationship in the context of other husband–wife pairs, while simultaneously working toward a healthy set of communal relations between wives and within the family as a whole? To answer this question we will tap into a variety of aspects of plural family life, to examine how individuals, couples, and families achieve a viable interplay of dyadic and communal relationships, the successes, stresses, and failures they experience, and the trial and error steps they take to manage their unique and complex lifestyle.²

Studying close relationships through a transactional lens

To study close relationships in polygynous families we adopted a strategy that has guided our work for many years. It is based on the “worldviews” or approaches to knowledge described by the philosophers John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949) and Stephen Pepper (1942, 1967). In our synthesis and extension of their ideas we identified four worldviews that apply to psychological phenomena: *trait, interactional, organismic, and transactional* (Altman and Rogoff, 1987).³ Our research is guided primarily by the transactional perspective, particularly the following principles:

10 *Introduction*

1. Close personal relationships are embedded in and inseparable from other *social contexts*, including family and kin; friends and co-workers; *physical settings* of homes, workplaces, and public environments; and broad *historical and cultural contexts*. Social, physical, cultural, and historical contexts affect, define, reflect, and are integral to the nature and dynamics of close relationships.
2. Close personal relationships are holistic social units; they can be profitably studied in terms of patterns of behaviors that fit together like a “symphony.”
3. Close relationships involve “dialectic” oppositional processes.
4. Close relationships are dynamic. They evolve and change over their history.
5. A transactional perspective is broadly based in its research strategy and approach to knowledge.

1. Close relationships are “contextual.” As just mentioned, close relationships are embedded in and inseparable from cultural and historical contexts, social contexts, and physical environmental settings. The contextual nature of close relationships, which is a primary concern of our approach, is too often ignored by scholars and participants in relationships. The fact is that close relationships do not exist apart from the various contexts in which they are embedded. Those contexts affect and give meaning to close relationships. Couples and couple members relate to, are influenced by, negotiate with, and often must take into account family, kin, friends, co-workers, and other *social contexts*. For example, families in a variety of cultures, including that of Mormon polygynists, often play key roles in courtship, weddings, and early stages of relationship formation through interfamily negotiations, gift exchanges, and wedding rituals. Furthermore, couples may be bonded and responsible to families and kin in different ways throughout their marital history. The couple is therefore partly defined by these *social contexts*, and is inseparable from them, and they constitute a crucial part of the “meaning” and definition of a relationship. Thus it is just as important to understand the ways in which dyads are embedded in a variety of social contexts as it is to understand the internal dynamics of close relationships – feelings, actions, and dealings of couple members with one another.

Husband–wife couples in plural families must develop and manage each dyadic relationship in the social context of multiple dyadic relationships and of communal relationships between wives. To achieve viability, each couple unit, each wife, and the husband must relate to other wives and couples in a constructive fashion. Thus the very meaning and functioning of each dyadic pair is inseparable from the social context of other husband–