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## How Do First Wives View Polygamy in Terms of Adaptation and Family Cohesiveness?

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the aspects of adaptation and cohesiveness in terms of the experiences of first wives in polygamous families in Malaysia. A total of six first wives were interviewed in in-depth, face-to-face interviews using predetermined questions. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, with the following four themes emerging: don't overthink, train yourself to be independent, accept polygamy with an open heart and submit to God, and constantly adapt to the new environment. The findings of the study are explained, and the major implications thereof are discussed in detail. These findings are expected to help in providing guidance and instruction to those first wives who have had bad experiences, conflicts, or difficulties in adjusting to polygamy. It is shown, in fact, that most first wives can successfully strive to face the challenges and difficulties of polygamous life without resorting to divorce.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Polygamy, First Wives, Family, Cohesiveness

### Introduction

Polygamy, and more specifically polygyny, is among the most common forms of marriage practiced in Malaysia as well as in various other countries. According to the terminology of the Institute of Language and Literature, polygamy is the practice of marrying more than one person at the same time. Based on this definition, any man who has more than one wife practices polygamy. Etymologically, the word polygamy is derived from Greek, from the words *poly* or *polus* meaning *many* and *gamein* or *gamos* meaning *marriage* - thus marriage with more than one spouse (Mukri, 2017). Polygyny, meanwhile, refers to a situation in which a man has more than one wife. Several issues that may arise in polygamous marriages can contribute to the risk of divorce. These issues can also negatively affect the emotions of the children involved, causing sadness, anger, depression and a sense of loss (Siti & Mohd, 2019). Occasionally the couples and children of polygamous marriages can experience psychological problems, behavioral changes, and a lack of financial resources (Nuraimirah et al., 2019), and the social support provided to family members, especially children, can also be impacted (Norhayati & Zaidah, 2016). In addition, in some polygamous marriages there are also cases

of abuse and injustice perpetrated against wives (Thobejane, 2014; Hassouneh-Philips, 2001), as well as wives who endure oppressive, unfair, and degrading treatment which can offend their dignity and sense of prestige (Arif, 2013).

In the field of positive psychology, an individual's performance in a new environment can be improved by thinking things through and examining them from all sides (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Consideration in dealing with a new situation is necessary to implement objectives rationally for the good of oneself and others. In terms of the family psychology of polygamy, couples who can adapt to each other within a family structure are better able to create comfort, happiness, and cohesion among family members. As noted by Seligman (2002), one of the constructions of the positive psychological concept of the individual is 'relationships' – such that each person needs others and improves his or her well-being by developing strong relationships with family, friends, or neighbors. According to Ismail, et al (2015), the influence of age, gender, duration of marriage, family income and number of children are factors that influence marital satisfaction and endurance. Polygamous marriages that do not encompass aspects aimed at improving and maintaining the quality of the marriage - such as tolerance, understanding, complementarity, respect and life management as laid out in the study by Marziah et al (2019) – may find their structure and psychological functioning adversely affected.

Findings from previous studies have looked at the adaptation process of wives in polygamous marriages in terms of experiences, methods, challenges, phases in acceptance and aspects of emotions and feelings. Interviews conducted by Subhi, Nasir and Razak (2020) explored the experiences of first wives from their honeymoon period to their point of full acceptance to polygamous life. The adaptation of a first wife depends on how she adjusts to various emotional, cognitive, and behavioral challenges. Emotionally, the process involves avoiding jealousy and indifference, cognitively it involves dealing with different ways of thinking – be it positive, negative or contemplative (self-reflection), and behaviorally it involves different ways of acting - aggressively, passively - and improving one's character (Subhi et al., 2020). According to Jayos & Yadzi (2018), the challenges of adjusting to polygamy among married women involve feelings such as anger, hurt, jealousy, fear, shame, joy, appreciation and love. Meanwhile, mental challenges relate to things such as religion, spouses, children, principles of life, surrender and contentment. Exacerbating the adjustment of most first wives to polygamous life are the stigmas - both positive and negative – surrounding polygamy in society (Razak et al., 2021).

According to Rahmawati (2013), wives go through the following five phases in accepting polygamy in their lives; accepting resistance to change; evaluating alternatives; considering alternatives; showing commitment; and avoiding excessive negative thoughts. These phases have a significant relationship with one of the principles of positive psychology, that is to make rational judgments and the best choices. Furthermore, a polygamous system of marriage changes the living environment of the first wife, including changes in the husband's treatment of the wife, economic management, marital satisfaction, and family functioning, thereby jeopardizing the ability of the first wife to adapt to polygamous life (Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017). Given that married women sometimes experience unhappiness and dissatisfaction due to changes in their husband's treatment after the marriage becomes polygamous, they need to ensure they maintain strong feelings and emotions for the marriage to endure (Ickowitz & Mohanty, 2015).

### Objective

To examine the experiences of first wives in evaluating polygamy in terms of adaptation and family cohesiveness. In this study, adjustment can be defined as the process of family members' "achievement of pre- and post-crisis adjustment based on long-term observations of any changes occurring over their lives (Schneiders, 1960)."

### Method

This study employed a qualitative research method, consisting of in-depth interviews of six wives who practice polygamy. Objective sampling and snowballing techniques were used to identify and select respondents who met the inclusion criteria. All the respondents have been in a polygamous marriage for between five to 10 years. The following research instruments were used by the researcher; question set guide using semi-structured interview techniques; voice recording tapes; notebooks; and the researcher himself. This study also used the method of data triangulation as a strategy to obtain more information about the actual experiences of the respondents. The data collection process ended when the interview reached a saturation level and no new data additions were forthcoming. The study utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews to facilitate respondents in discussing topics in a relaxed, open and honest manner. Information from the data was analyzed through several coding methods, as proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1998) - namely, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Manual transcription analysis was used to analyze the data in order to obtain themes appropriate to the objectives of the study. No software was used in analyzing the data because the researcher wanted to ascertain the true profundity of the experiences felt by the respondents and to control the data information obtained. In terms of validity and reliability, the study used data triangulation, a pilot study, a validation of the research by an expert panel (question set guide), and a validation of the interviews with the respondents. According to Jasmi (2012), reliability is a concept that refers to the consistency and stability of a measure or measuring instrument, study or questionnaire over time. During the interview, the researcher achieved reliability when a respondent repeated the same information several times. This information was duly used during the process of analyzing and coding. Table 1.0 below summarizes the demographic profile of the study respondents.

Table 1.0 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Anonymous	Age	Years of Polygamy	Occupation
First wife 1	51	10	Teacher
First wife 2	39	5	Businesswomen
First wife 3	48	8	Housewife
First wife 4	45	5	Housewife
First wife 5	40	5	Housewife
First wife 6	55	9	Housewife

### Results and Discussion

#### Theme 1: Don't Overthink

Some of the first wives claimed that their adjustment and cohesiveness tended more towards the cognitive perspective of "don't overthink". The theme of not overthinking (focusing on the self) refers to respondents not thinking too much or too deeply about certain things - especially about other people like second wives or their husbands. Thinking too much is likely

to cause a first wife to become more emotional, negative, suspicious, and restless of mind. Below are some sample responses from the study respondents in this regard:

*"... I want to adjust to the marriage so I don't think about it too much. We just do our own thing and don't think too much. If we think about it for a long time, people say it is annoying. So, we simply do our own activities and don't think..."* (First wife 1).

*"...At first it was a struggle, because it's not easy for us to be in such a situation, even though there is a WhatsApp group for everyone, for support. So now, I memorize the Quran and avoid asking my husband about the other wives. Instead, I leave it to Allah SWT..."*(First wife 2).

*"...whatever is in our minds, whatever we want to do, we need to remember that we share everything - we don't just do things for ourselves. For example, if I go out shopping, even though I'm using my own money, I buy something for the other children even if they are not my children – it feels like my children are theirs and vice-versa..."*(First wife 3).

Generally, polygamous family relationships are better if the husband treats his co-wives and children well. The husbands from families A, B and C are satisfied with their decision to adopt a polygamous lifestyle, even though they faced a lot of resistance from certain people. At the start of the polygamous marriage, the marriage did not function well because the first wife was not ready to accept polygamy. Consequently, the relationship between the first and second wife was distant. But the flaws in the marriage began to iron themselves out and things started to run more smoothly over time. According to Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi (2006), polygamy is a complicated structure for family members to become accustomed to, particularly for the husband and wives. However, there are many methods and techniques that can be implemented by the husband to enable the family to function well. Overall, the experience of practicing polygamy is significantly more positive than the perceived attitudes about polygamy (Al-Krenawi et al., 2006). This study clearly shows that most husbands feel much better in a polygamous family if they focus on caring for the emotions and feelings of family members, rather than thinking about the negative elements that occur in the family.

## **Theme 2: Train Yourself to be Independent**

The theme of training yourself to be independent refers to respondents not relying on others to help in the process of adjustment to polygamy. The respondents have had to rely entirely on themselves to cope with the changes taking place in their lives. According to first wives 4 and 5, they have faced many challenges arising from their polygamous marriage with relation to trust, the relationship with their husband, communication, and so on. As such, the wives in the study felt the need to be more independent and adjust by themselves without their husband's help. Upon entering into a polygamous marriage, the respondents started training themselves to adjust to this new kind of life, realizing the importance of being independent from the beginning of the marriage. Below are some sample responses from the study respondents in this regard:

*"...there are a lot of changes in terms of trust, our relationships, and communication – all of which have made me a lot more independent since entering into polygamy. I do a lot for myself and don't expect my husband to help if I can finish it by myself. At first, we both studied, took care of the children together - but after two months of polygamy, I said I need to get up and do everything independently. I can't rely on my husband and I don't want to disturb his life with his new wife - that's how it is..."* (first wife 4).

*"... there are many changes, such as the time I spend with my husband. Nobody wants to be together all the time. At times, you must also be patient and endure your husband's arrogance*

*and anger, as he can be a little sensitive and angry and raises his voice. In terms of his behavior and attitude, it is difficult for me to read after we entered into polygamy. It hurts, but I still carry out my responsibilities as a wife...*" (first wife 5).

The study found that, on average, the respondents felt the need to train themselves to be independent in order to enable adjustment to occur in their polygamous marriage. These findings were also supported by the study of Mustafar (2019) who found that a woman's acceptance of polygamy is dependent on her knowledge and understanding of religion, in that polygamy makes a person less dependent on the husband and more oriented towards God. Most married women adopt an attitude of 'self-depreciation', whereby they learn to justify and agree to the act of polygamy despite experiencing physical and mental suffering (Hariyanto, 2015). Training oneself to be independent, and therefore not completely dependent on the husband, is thus an effort towards self-depreciation and part of the adaptation process of wives in polygamous marriages.

### **Theme 3: Accept Polygamy with an Open Heart and Submit to God**

The theme of accepting polygamy with an open heart and submitting to God refers to the respondents needing to be resigned and satisfied with the provisions of destiny when it comes to living in a polygamous family. According to first wives 4, 5 and 6, they were able to adjust to polygamy by embracing it with an open heart upon accepting the husband's marriage proposal. Indeed, this event was the beginning of the respondents' acceptance of living in polygamy. Below are some sample responses from the study respondents in this regard:

*"...whatever happens, I leave it to God. I felt no burden at that time because, from the beginning, my husband already knew it would be like that. There was no real sense of anything. I surrendered to God - I was ready for what would happen in the family after I had accepted, and so I just waited for my husband's second wife..."*(first wife 4).

*"...There are people who feel that there is no need for polygamy. But, I really like polygamy, even though I found it hard to accept initially. Of course, it is not possible for God to create something if there is no good in it. Since I've been living the real life of polygamy, I have seen a lot of good things. As a woman who works and has children, I don't need my husband all the time. So, for me, polygamy is the best way..."* (first wife 5)

*"...you have to accept it. So, if anything happens, I'm happy and there are no accusations against me. If you feel like you can't accept it, it's really hard to feel good about polygamy. However, if there's a feeling of satisfaction and you can accept it, it makes it easier to adjust..."* (first wife 6).

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of other studies showing the importance of religious orientation (Stafford, 2016), having strong beliefs and self-confidence (believing the second wife is God's destiny and should be accepted) (Fahmi, 2014), and accepting that polygamous marriage is the plan of Allah SWT (Lestari & Indrabuati, 2020). This theme falls under the scope of spiritual practice and religious orientation. Acceptance of polygamy and submission to God means putting full trust in God for anything that may happen and accepting it with resignation and contentment. As stated in previous studies, creating a good polygamous marriage and producing a quality family institution requires knowledge, and every couple needs to deepen their religion adherence in this regard (Mustafar, 2019).

#### **Theme 4: Constantly Adapt to the New Environment**

The theme of constant adaptation to the new environment refers to the wives in the study having to accept the changes that take place in the family even though this is difficult. This includes learning to share, accepting new people, allocating time, and dealing with the treatment of the husband. Dealing with conflict is also important as the new environment may involve changes that give rise to conflict at any time, especially if the new norms are not liked by the wives. According to first wives 3, 4 and 5, the acceptance of their husband's other wives was very difficult, taking them as long as two years to adjust their minds and become used to the reorganized married life. Below are some sample responses from the study respondents in this regard:

*"...the first time with my husband's second wife was very difficult. Acceptance was difficult, the first knock was really bad - it took two years to correct myself, my mind, my life..."* (first wife 3)

*"...Accepting a new wife, in line with my husband's wish for me to accept her as part of his own family, is very difficult and needs guidelines. When we agree to polygamy, we want to accept him in the family. So, we accept him - if I don't accept him, it means we can't live together in one family..."* (first wife 4).

*"...If you follow your heart and true feelings, you can't accept it anymore - but I'm happy with anything. I have learned to accept and share the bitter sweetness. The important thing is that my husband's other wife and I are not enemies and don't quarrel with each other, because both of us have learned to be calm..."* (first wife 5).

Given that married women sometimes experience unhappiness and dissatisfaction due to changes in their husband's treatment after the marriage becomes polygamous, they need to ensure they maintain strong feelings and emotions for the marriage to endure (Ickowitz & Mohanty, 2015). The wives in this study indicated that they needed to learn to adapt to the new environment and control self-conflict. This is because there is a significant relationship between romantic relationships and marital adjustment (Muraru & Turliuc, 2013). Thus, adapting to a new environment can improve and rebuild the romantic relationship between wives and husbands, even in polygamous situations. Relationships among spouses often give rise to endemic conflicts, competition, resentment, and constant hostility (Janakowiak et al., 2005). Most of the first wives are aware of the conflicts and issues that occur and the need to take the initiative by being sensitive and adapting to the new environment, while also managing the conflicts that stem from themselves and others.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, this study presents four key themes in identifying adjustment and cohesiveness from the perspectives of first wives - namely; don't overthink, train yourself to be independent, accept polygamy with an open heart and submit to God, and constantly adapt to the new environment. The first wife is a major pillar of adjustment and well-being in a polygamous family structure. This is because the first wife is the most affected individual in the polygamy system as she deals with the feelings, trust, honesty, and transparency of her husband when it comes to building a household in the early stages of marriage. The presence of other women can affect the perceptions, way of thinking, treatment, affection and respect shown, and psychological well-being of the first wife with respect to her husband. Darmawijaya (2019) states that polygamous families encounter threats to maintaining the household, such as ongoing conflict, and thus require physical, social, and psychological resilience. As such, one

of the themes of adaptation for first wives is the act of accepting polygamy with an open heart and submitting to God, as well as learning to accept the new environment in order to reduce the larger threats that can hinder the process of adaptation. Religious and spiritual elements, as embodied by submission to God, are commonly applied by wives because they tend to feel the tests of polygamy especially keenly. First wives need to sacrifice more feelings, love, psyche, and emotions to ensure that they successfully navigate the process of adjustment to and acceptance of polygamous life. Wives tend to use a spiritual and religious approach in carrying out their roles of obeying, respecting and following the instructions of the husband. First wives are generally very fond of the children involved and the family atmosphere that was built with the husband at the beginning of the marriage. As such, the mental and physical sacrifices they make are intended to ensure their husband and children's happiness as much as they are for their own benefit. To facilitate the adjustment of first wives, as well as subsequent wives, to polygamous life, cooperation from various parties, such as family institutions, government, NGOs and communities, is needed to recognize and develop polygamous family institutions through family programs, research activities, policy building, as well as policies or laws aimed at ensuring effective interventions to resolve adjustment issues in polygamy.

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