

Polygamy and social theories essay



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Societies typically set up clear boundaries for acceptable behavior, in order to maintain some degree of unity within the group.

Although some behaviors that fall outside the norm might pass without comment, some groups deviate significantly from the norm, forming sub-cultures. In many cases, sub-cultures that deviate significantly are looked upon with suspicion. Polygamy is one behavior that deviates significantly from the accepted norms; our society looks upon groups that practice polygamy, such as the Fundamental Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), with suspicion and often with distrust. Several theories that discuss how individuals interact within society have significance when used to examine polygamy. In this society, we practice “ serial monogamy;” that is, an individual may have more than one partner over a lifetime, but is in a committed and exclusive relationship with only one partner at a time (Class Notes).

From the beginning of the Mormon Church, of which the FLDS is an offshoot, the polygamous nature of its teachings has been considered worthy of suspicion. To understand the reasoning behind this thinking, it is important to examine polygamy from the viewpoints of symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and conflict theory to have an idea of how the practice interacts on both macro and micro levels of culture. Symbolic Interactionism and Polygamy Symbolic interaction theory examines society at a micro level, determining how individuals learn the meanings of things in their environment (Ballantine, 2006). In the United States, children soon learn to identify the Stars and Stripes as being the national flag, they learn about religious symbols appropriate to their family, and maybe even the logos of their favorite games, restaurants, or television programs.

Over time, they learn other symbols, such as words and monetary values and many other things. The symbols learned during this process “ summarize shared meanings with others with whom we interact and define what is real and normal” (Ballantine, 2006, p. 86). In the polygamous community, the child learns the symbols of what is normal in that subculture at a very early age. The family is composed of one father and many mothers; the representation of the faith, at least in terms of the Fundamental Latter-Day Saints, is that of a photograph of the “ prophet” that hangs on the wall of the family home.

The games, restaurants, and programs that may have meaning to other children have none in the FLDS community, in that televisions are prohibited, providing no context to the children in the community. “ Kathy,” quoted in Brown describes how the prophet Rulon Jeffs was kept changing the context of things even in his own community: some days wearing clothes with stripes were bad, other days the color red became forbidden. Looking and smiling at members of the opposite sex was wrong. Symbols, such as colors, patterns, and expressions became stripped of all meaning that the greater society provided them. Structural Functionalism and Polygamy According to Ballantine (2006) structural functionalists view society as being “ composed of interdependent parts, each fulfilling certain necessary functions or purposes for the total society” (p.

87). The structures that exist within society are usually formed to serve a purpose; that is, they allow the society to function in some way. Read also Traditional families are comprised of parents and children, as well as grandparents and other elders in some extended families. The grandparents,

typically, would allow their children to remain living in the household until they were secure enough to start a household of their own. Grandparents and grandchildren rarely lived together, however, due to short life expectancies (Cherlin & Cherlin, 2008).

In some societies, polygamous families, usually represented by a number of wives married to a single husband, were considered the norm. These families, as others, were developed to ensure the safety and material security of the family members and to ensure that children would have a better chance of surviving to maturity (Cherlin & Cherlin, 2008).

Interestingly, the plural marriages in the original Mormon Church also served such a purpose. According to Smith (2005) church members isolated themselves from the greater society for their own safety, not just for the preservation of their faith and their culture, but because “ they had spent most of the past half century in conflict with the U. S.

government over polygamy” (p. 2). Once the church had been securely established the original church willingly abandoned polygamy, in that “ even if Utah had successfully given legal protection to plural marriage, it would have stunted Church expansion and growth into other areas” (p. 52). That is, once polygamy had ceased to perform its original sociological function, the church leaders accepted their assimilation into the larger structure of American society. Conflict Theory and Polygamy Conflict theory essentially states that groups within a society typically compete for access to limited resources.

Dominant groups expect subordinate groups to adopt their cultural norms, whether those beliefs represent those of the subordinate group members (Ballantine, 2006). According to Ballantine (2006), conflict theory is useful for analyzing relationships between societies . . .

and between subcultures . . . within complex societies” (p.

88). In part, the FLDS engage in what their leaders have termed “civil disobedience” in the literal sense. They reason that they are keeping God’s laws and that they have a “positive moral duty” to defend the principles of the church to have plural marriages (Smith, 2005). However, the FLDS society also sees itself as being in conflict with the larger society and seek to obtain resources through a process that they refer to as “bleeding the beast,” in which they apply for welfare and other state aid while refusing to pay property and other taxes (Friedman, 2006). Conclusion Examples of polygamy have existed for generations all over the world.

In American society, polygamy is typically an aberration, except as practiced by the FDLS Church, a subculture that accepts the practice as part of their social norm. The FDLS uses “symbolic interaction” to immerse their younger generations into the practice of polygamy, which began as a protective measure to preserve the teachings and extend the body of the original Mormon Church. The FDLS Church sees itself in conflict with the American government, considering itself in competition for resources with the larger population of the United States as a whole. While the FDLS subculture is one that many people do not care for and do not understand, the manner in

which it established itself and the manner in which it continues to thrive can be understood through examining sociological theory.