Religious orientation, religious affiliation, and boundary maintenance:
The case of polygamy

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Religious orientation, religious affiliation, and boundary maintenance: The case of polygamy

Michael E. Nielsen\textsuperscript{a*} and Ryan T. Cragun\textsuperscript{b}

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The role of religious orientation in group boundary maintenance was explored in the context of Fundamentalist Mormon polygamy. A sample of 2330 Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, Fundamentalist (polygamous) Mormons, and religious “nones” responded to a series of questions regarding sexuality, polygamy, religious orientation, religious doubt, and whether Mormons are considered Christian. Regression analyses indicate that attitudes regarding polygamy are predicted by attitudes toward alternative sexual practices for all groups except for Fundamentalist Mormons. Religious doubt, and considering Mormons to be Christian, were associated with relatively more favorable views toward polygamy. Intrinsic religious orientation was negatively correlated with polygamy attitudes, but this relationship reversed once conservative views toward sexuality were taken into account. The results are consistent with the view that alternative sexual and marital arrangements may generate differential treatment because of their implicit challenge to family structure.

**Keywords:** religious orientation; religious affiliation; boundary maintenance; polygamy

Introduction

Researchers have long examined the connections between religion and people’s evaluations of one another. One of the questions behind Allport and Ross' (1967) classic Intrinsic–Extrinsic distinction concerned the role of religion in prejudice. A recent review of this literature notes that research tends to find no correlation between intrinsic religiosity and prejudice (Donahue & Nielsen, 2005). Still, the role of specific beliefs must be taken into account. At the level of the individual, intrinsic religiosity is correlated with prejudice against gay men and lesbians, but when fundamentalism is controlled for, intrinsic scores do not predict prejudice against gay men and lesbians (Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999). In contrast, social-extrinsic scores correlated with prejudicial attitudes even after controlling for fundamentalism, whereas personal-extrinsic scores were uncorrelated with prejudice toward gay men and lesbians. At the institutional level we see a similar effect; intrinsic religiosity has been found to interact with the beliefs promoted by one’s church,

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such that people whose church promotes a “hate the sin; love the sinner” approach to homosexuality showed less rejection of gay men and lesbians than did people whose church did not (Veenvliet, 2008). Clearly, the relationship between religious orientation and social attitudes or behavior is complex, and it overlaps with other constructs.

The ability of religious orientation and related factors to predict reactions to homosexuality has begun to receive attention, but researchers have not yet examined how religious orientation may predict responses to polygamy, another form of sexuality. Although thousands of people in the U.S. Intermountain West are estimated either to be involved in polygamous marriages or belong to “Fundamentalist Mormon” churches that advocate polygamous marriages (Wilde, 2007), and polygamy is practiced in some predominantly Muslim areas and some African countries (Cook, 2007), social scientific research on polygamy remains limited. Studies that do exist tend to focus on communication patterns within a polygamous family structure (e.g., Altman & Ginat, 1996), on how children are affected by being raised in a polygamous household (e.g., Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Cardine, & Abu-Saad, 2002) or on understanding polygamy from an evolutionary perspective (e.g., Jankowiak & Diderich, 2000). The present study adds to this sparse literature by investigating how religious orientation affects views of polygamy.

Historical accounts indicate that people viewed polygamy quite negatively. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church, popularly called The Mormons) was forced to migrate because of adverse public opinion regarding its practice of polygamy, and polygamy negatively affected Utah’s bid for statehood (Hardy, 1992; van Wagoner, 1992). Although polygamy remains illegal in Utah and the rest of the United States, and the LDS Church renounced it over a century ago, public fascination with it continues. Despite this, relatively little is known about current attitudes toward polygamy. The primary source of social-scientific data on polygamy comes from Reginald Bibby’s (2004) study of marriage. Bibby asked a sample of 2093 Canadians how willing they were to accept polygamy. Results of that study showed that acceptance was greater among men and among younger adults, as well as among residents of Quebec or British Columbia than people in other regions of Canada. People who claimed no religious affiliation also were slightly more accepting of polygamy than were religious people.

While recent previous research (Nielsen, 2009) has examined demographic factors that predict attitudes toward polygamy, there has, to date, been no investigation of how various religious groups view polygamy, nor has there been any investigation of how religious orientation interacts with attitudes toward polygamy. Addressing these two issues is the focus of the present study. Respondents were a combination of mainstream Mormons (or LDS), Fundamentalist Mormons affiliated with groups that broke from the LDS Church after it abandoned polygamy in 1890, members of other religious groups, and non-religious individuals.

The survey items were selected in part to address attitudes toward sexuality, polygamy, and polygamists. The most basic question of interest concerned polygamy as a legal issue. Recently several high profile cases of polygamists involved in child sexual abuse, kidnapping, and government welfare fraud have occupied the news media in Utah and the U.S. (Kovach, 2008; Tuchman & Townsend, 2008). Two questions regarding the legal status of polygamy were included in the present study. Because polygamy is fundamentally an issue of sexuality, several questions concerning various sexual practices were included in the survey. These questions also help set a baseline for understanding the views and attitudes of the participants in the study as their religiosity type influences attitudes toward sexuality.
Another issue of interest is the classification of Mormons as Christian (Cragun & Nielsen, in press). Mormons have spent the last several decades trying to maintain a balance between assimilating with mainstream Mormon culture and maintaining a distinctiveness with it (Mauss, 1994). As part of the process of assimilating, Mormons have tried to reshape their image (an effort to attain legitimacy status) and become accepted within the fold of “Christian” religions (Cragun & Nielsen, 2009). Despite the efforts of the mainstream Mormon religion, i.e., The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, to assimilate and distinguish itself from polygamist groups, a recent survey found 30% of the US public still believe the main body of Mormons practice polygamy (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2008). Because Mormonism is so closely associated with polygamy in the eyes of the American public and because Mormonism is not always viewed as a Christian religion, in particular by conservative Protestants (see Cragun & Nielsen, forthcoming, for a review of this debate), it may be the case that attitudes toward Mormonism affect how one views polygamy. Thus, a question asking whether Mormons are Christian was included in the survey.

Given the strict nature of Mormonism (Stark, 1984, 1996), and the even stricter nature of fundamentalist polygamist Mormons, it is hypothesized that both groups will score higher in intrinsic religiosity than Protestants and Catholics. As for attitudes toward polygamy, polygamists and LDS respondents are hypothesized to have the most favorable attitudes toward polygamy due to proximity effects (Allport, 1954; Nielsen, 2009). Protestants and Catholics will have the least favorable; religious nones will fall in between the two groups as religious nones have been shown to be more tolerant of diversity, especially sexual diversity (Bibby, 2004; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006).

Finally, given the importance placed on religion by individuals who score high in intrinsic religiosity, it is hypothesized that among Protestants and Catholics there will be significant negative correlations between intrinsic religiosity and attitudes toward polygamy—the higher their intrinsic religiosity, the less favorable their attitude toward polygamy. The inverse will be true for polygamist Mormons. We made no firm predictions for Mormons because of the church’s ambivalent treatment of polygamy, although we predicted that greater doubt would be associated with more positive views toward polygamy. In contrast, individuals who score high in extrinsic social (ES) religiosity will be more like religious nones in that they will be more tolerant of behaviors and attitudes that differ from their own. Thus, it is hypothesized that there will be no correlation between extrinsic social religiosity and attitudes toward polygamy for Protestants and Catholics.

In order to solicit responses from a wide variety of people, the survey was conducted online. Although it is not a representative sample of Mormons, polygamists, Protestants, Catholics, and religious nones, this method of data collection does offer certain advantages. In particular, it is possible to obtain responses from samples (such as polygamists) who otherwise would be difficult to locate (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & Oliver, 2004; Kraut et al., 2004; Reips, 2000). Data also suggest that online responses to sensitive questions may be more candid than surveys conducted by other means (Gosling et al., 2004), including surveys concerning sexuality (Bailey, Foote & Throckmorton, 2000). Moreover, there is evidence that, for a wide variety of phenomena, data collected online are quite comparable to that collected by other means (Krantz & Dalal, 2000). In light of the dearth of data regarding people’s opinions toward polygamy, and in view of the findings that online research can yield useful results, conducting an online survey seemed a useful way to examine people’s opinions regarding polygamy.
Method

Participants

Participants were solicited by posting an announcement of the study at several websites and online bulletin boards devoted to psychology, religion and Mormonism (e.g., socialpsychology.org; psyrel.com; bloggernacle.org; mormonstories.org). Requests for participants also went out to both pro- and anti-polygamy web sites (e.g., principlevoices.org and the online bulletin board “Stop Polygabuse”). This resulted in a total of 2433 usable questionnaires submitted, 2330 of which were included in the present analyses. Included among these were 1326 LDS (\(M\) age = 32.6, 54.2% male, 59.2% married), 47 Fundamentalist Mormons (\(M\) age = 43.2, 39.1% male, 68.9% married), 544 Protestants (\(M\) age = 29.3, 31.1% male, 37.5% married), 128 Catholics (\(M\) age = 28.8, 35.4% Male, 36.7% married), and 285 Religious Nones (\(M\) age = 31.7, 45.1% male, 42.8% married). The 103 excluded participants were a different religion or left the item blank. The groups had comparable average educational attainment, from a low of 14.8 years (Protestants and Catholics) to a high of 15.9 years (Religious Nones).

Variables

Religious orientation was measured using the single-item questions from Gorsuch and McPherson (1989). Religious doubt was measured using Altemeyer’s (1988) religious doubt scale. Additional measures included the following:

1. I consider Mormons to be Christians.
2. Having a series of several short-term marriages with people of the opposite sex.
3. Having a series of several short-term sexual relationships (not marriages) with people of the opposite sex.
4. Being married to a person of the same sex.
5. Being married to one person of the opposite sex, while also having a sexual relationship with another person of the opposite sex.
6. Having sexual relationships with multiple people of the opposite sex.
7. Being married to multiple people of the opposite sex at the same time.
8. Polygamous marriages between consenting adults should be legalized.
9. Polygamists should be prosecuted for breaking the law. (reverse-coded)

Responses to items ranged from 1 to 5, with poles representing “Strongly Disagree” and “Strongly Agree,” or “Very Unacceptable” and “Very Acceptable,” depending on the wording of the item.

Results

Scale scores were constructed to measure attitudes toward sexual practices (Items 2–6 in the list above, \(\alpha = 0.86\); higher values indicate greater acceptance), attitudes toward polygamy (Items 7–9 above, \(\alpha = 0.74\); higher values indicate more favorable views), and Hunsberger’s Doubt scale (\(\alpha = 0.94\); higher values indicate greater doubt). Scale means and group comparisons are reported in Table 1.

Correlations among the measures are reported in Table 2. The more intrinsically oriented Catholics and Protestants are, the less likely they are to consider Mormons and Mormon polygamists to be Christians. Personal extrinsic scores follow a similar pattern, but show a more modest relationship. Intrinsic and extrinsic personal scores also are

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negatively correlated with views toward polygamy, alternative sexual practices, and religious doubt. Social extrinsic scores are generally uncorrelated with other measures among the Catholic and Protestant respondents. In contrast, LDS and polygamists show a positive correlation between scores on personal extrinsic and intrinsic religious orientation and the question concerning whether Mormons are Christian. Scores on the doubt scale, and on the attitudes toward sexual practices scale, show consistently strong, negative correlations with intrinsic and personal extrinsic scores. A similar but weaker pattern is found with religious orientation and attitudes toward polygamy, except among polygamists and religious nones.

Finally, multiple regression analyses were computed in order to examine the relative impact of religious orientation, religious doubt, attitudes toward sexual practices, and whether Mormons are Christian on people’s attitudes toward polygamy. Results in Table 3 show that, among polygamists themselves, opinions toward polygamy are predicted most strongly by responses to the question regarding whether Mormons are Christian. Also of note among the polygamists is the lack of a significant relationship between attitudes toward sexuality and attitudes toward polygamy, which is only the case for the polygamists. Across the other samples, attitudes toward polygamy are predicted by attitudes toward other alternative sexual practices. Among Mormons and Protestants, intrinsic religious orientation and, to a lesser extent, religious doubt, also contributed positively to attitudes toward polygamy.

Discussion
The present data indicate that among Protestants and Catholics, intrinsic and personal extrinsic religious orientations are negatively correlated with including Mormons as Christian, whereas among Mormons themselves intrinsic and personal extrinsic orientations show the reverse pattern. A similar finding emerged in terms of evaluations of a religious practice that lies outside the norms of mainstream Christianity; intrinsic and personal extrinsic religious orientations are negatively associated with polygamy among most Christians, but not among religious polygamists themselves.

People maintain boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and respond defensively when those boundaries are threatened (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008).
One option available in such a situation is to make distinctions between the acceptability of different practices and beliefs; the content of beliefs is relevant to understanding this process (Veenvliet, 2008). The present data are consistent with the finding that alternative sexual and marital arrangements may generate differential treatment because of their implicit challenge to family structure (Henry & Reyna, 2007).

Our findings also illustrate the connection between polygamy and alternative sexual practices. Except among polygamists, attitudes toward alternative sexual practices is

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*<0.05; **<0.01; ***<0.001.
a significant predictor of attitudes toward polygamy. That this is not the case among polygamists illustrates that they have an essentially different perspective on polygamy. Fundamentalist Mormons object to being known as “polygamists” because, in their view, their practice of polygamy is not the central tenet of their religious beliefs (Wilde, 2007). From their perspective, their religion focuses primarily on their relationship to God and Jesus Christ, and not on their marital arrangements. Thus, their views toward alternative sexual practices are disassociated from their views toward polygamy. However, the other samples in our study do not distinguish between the religious beliefs of polygamists and their practice of polygamy; instead, Fundamentalist Mormons are labeled by their distinctive behavior, and not by their distinctive beliefs. Across all samples, greater doubt was associated with greater acceptance of polygamy. This appears to parallel the quest religious orientation outlined by Batson (1976) and Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993), with those who are less certain of their own beliefs demonstrating more tolerance toward different beliefs. This also likely explains the more accepting views of the religious none, who held the most favorable views of polygamy behind the polygamists.

Also of note is the change in relationship between the correlations and the regressions. In the correlation analyses, intrinsic religiosity is significantly negatively associated with views toward polygamy. Stepwise regression analysis (not shown) indicates that it is the inclusion of attitudes toward alternative sexual practices and considering Mormons Christian that account for the negative attitudes toward polygamy. Thus, when views toward alternative sexual practices and considering Mormons Christian are included in the regression equation, the relationship between intrinsic religiosity and attitudes toward polygamy inverts. In other words, intrinsically oriented individuals tend to have less...
liberal attitudes toward alternative sexual practices and toward Mormons as Christians, but not all intrinsically oriented individuals do. And when you account for those who do (or at least for that component of their views), it is not having an intrinsic religious orientation that translates into less favorable attitudes but rather having an intrinsic religious orientation and having conservative attitudes toward alternative sexual practices.

There are several limitations to the present data. One limitation is the use of the short-form of the intrinsic/extrinsic measure, especially in light of the recent development of a new set of indexes that measure intrinsic/extrinsic/quest religiosity more accurately (Francis 2007). Our data were collected in 2005, prior to the publication of Francis’s article on the New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO). While it is likely that the new measures correlate with the old measures (something not addressed in Francis’s article), were we to replicate this study we would likely use the new measures rather than the old measures.

The most important limitation, as noted earlier, is that our data are not based on a random sample of the groups included in this analysis. A related limitation is the divergent sample sizes, ranging as low as 47 for the polygamist sample. However, given our interest in gathering data on a population as reclusive as polygamists, the only option available was a purposive, non-random sampling. We have tried to account for the limitation of this sampling in our analyses; likewise, we do not present our data as being representative of these populations, but simply as illustrative of the relationships between these variables. This is important to recognize, particularly as it bears on the Fundamentalist Mormons, who are quite diverse in terms of their social attitudes, their engagement with the broader community, and other aspects of their lifestyle (Wilde, 2007). The data from the present study indicate that intrinsic and personal extrinsic religious orientations can be associated with defensive boundary maintenance when the out-group practices an alternative lifestyle. Future research might profitably examine this in other contexts, or consider the ways that this effect impacts society. For example, if out-groups were integrated into society more closely, how might this affect their members, beliefs and practices? More basically, are there conditions under which people do not make in-group/out-group distinctions; and what roles does religion play in people’s boundary maintenance efforts? Answers to these questions would have important applications as societies face questions bearing on religious diversity.

References


