

THESIS

POLYGAMY ON THE WEB: AN ONLINE COMMUNITY FOR AN UNCONVENTIONAL
PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

POLYGAMY ON THE WEB: AN ONLINE COMMUNITY FOR AN UNCONVENTIONAL PRACTICE

This thesis is a virtual ethnographic study of a polygamy website consisting of one chat room, several discussion boards, and polygamy related information and links. The findings of this research are based on the interactions and activities of women and men on the polygamy website. The research addressed the following questions: 1) what are individuals using the website for? 2) What are website members communicating about? 3) How are individuals using the website to search for polygamous relationships? 4) Are website members forming connections and meeting people offline through the use of the website? 5) Do members of the website perceive the Internet to be affecting the contemporary practice of polygamy in the U.S.? This research focused more on the desire to create a polygamous relationship rather than established polygamous marriages and kinship networks. This study found that since the naturalization of monogamous heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family has occurred in the U.S., due to a number of historical, social, cultural, political, and economic factors, the Internet can provide a means to denaturalize these concepts and provide a space for the expression and support of counter discourses of marriage, like polygamy. The findings show that individuals who support polygamy, desire to practice polygamy, or who are in a polygamous relationship may use the online space provided by the Internet to make connections and develop social networks, whether those networks result in the creation of friendship, community, polygamous relationships, activism, or political involvement. My analysis is based on the observation of four

main discussion boards on the polygamy website, participant observation conducted in the website's chat room, eight formal, semi-structured interviews with website members and administrators, a self-administered, non-random survey of 37 individuals in the Western U.S., review of primary and secondary historical documents, information from the Internet and media addressing polygamy, and government reports and laws regarding polygamy and marriage. I also reviewed the relevant literature published from anthropology and other fields of study examining polygamy and Internet relationships.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Polygamy, specifically, in my thesis, the marriage of one man to two or more women, is a topic of interest in today's popular culture with television programs featuring the marriage practice, such as the reality series *Sister Wives* and *Polygamy U.S.A*, gracing our screens. People are practicing polygamy in the U.S., even though it is illegal, and some individuals and activist groups are publicly advocating for the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy. With these circumstances in mind, it is not surprising that an interactive website focused on the topic of polygamy exists online. My research focuses on the interactions and activities of women and men on one particular polygamy website, and addresses the following questions: 1) what are individuals using the website for? 2) What are website members communicating about? 3) How are individuals using the website to search for polygamous relationships? 4) Are website members forming connections and meeting people offline through the use of the website? 5) Do members of the website perceive the Internet to be affecting the contemporary practice of polygamy in the U.S.? My research also focuses more on the desire to create a polygamous relationship rather than established polygamous marriages and kinship networks. The naturalization of monogamous heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family has occurred in the U.S. due to a number of historical, social, cultural, political, and economic factors. I argue that the Internet can provide a means to denaturalize these concepts and provide a space for the expression and support of counter discourses of marriage, like polygamy. Individuals who support polygamy, desire to practice polygamy, or who are in a polygamous relationship may use the online space provided by the Internet to make connections, whether those networks result in

the creation of friendship, community, polygamous relationships, activism, or political involvement.

For many in the U.S., the concept of polygamy is often associated with patriarchy, oppression, and exploitation. There is much concern about the occurrence of incestuous relationships and men's illegal marriage to and statutory rape of young girls within polygamous communities, especially those that are a part of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS). Some feminists argue against the practice of polygamy, believing that it may be based on male dominance, privileges men over women and girls, and subjugates women to the rule of men (Dixon-Spear 2009:xxx). While these may be valid concerns in certain circumstances, I employ a more open minded view of polygamy, which allows this marriage practice to be understood within a particular social, cultural, historical, political, and economic context. Employing a feminist anthropological framework, which will be discussed further in Chapter 3, I view women and men's experiences and voices as diverse and unique and consider that individuals, especially women, assert agency in a variety of meaningful ways. Scholars like Patricia Dixon-Spear (2009) believe polygamy, rather than being androcentric, could exist without patriarchy and be advantageous for women. The types of injustices and violence that some women have endured in polygamous marriages and families also occur in some monogamous marriages and families and are more likely due to a patriarchal family structure or society and subjugated status of women than the actual practice of polygamy (Dixon-Spear 2009:25).

The findings from the research I conducted on the polygamy website add to the limited anthropological literature on polygamy in the U.S. and to the understanding of the role the Internet plays in community building, the formation of polygamous relationships, and activism

for the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy. My work also contributes new material to the growing body of literature on ethnographic research conducted online, which is also called virtual ethnography.

The issue of decriminalizing or legalizing polygamy in the U.S. is a topic up for social and political debate, especially as legal changes have recently occurred in some states in regards to same sex marriage. An argument can be made that the freedom in choice of marriage partner or partners, amongst consenting adults, is a human rights issue. My research adds to the dialog of this debate from a feminist anthropological perspective by providing an analysis of the dominant discourse on culturally constructed concepts of gender, sexuality, and marriage in the U.S., and how this has historically and contemporarily impacted the social acceptance and legal status of polygamy in the U.S. Anthropologist Ellen Lewin (2006 [2004]) discussed the importance of legalizing same sex marriage for gay and lesbian couples, which, she argued, alleviates discrimination, allows these couples to claim a particular identity, and is a marker of legitimacy from the larger U.S. society. As an extension of this idea, I argue that it is important to also legalize polygamy in order to enable individuals in polygamous families to contextualize their relationships within the broader U.S. society and declare the authenticity of their relationships publicly. Allowing individuals to legally and openly claim their kinship ties may reduce the seclusion and secrecy surrounding polygamy because people will not have to live in fear of legal action that may result in jail time or the dismantling of their family. There is a fear that polygamists and proponents of other alternative relationship structures, like polyamory, want to eliminate monogamy (Wood 2006 [2003]:136); however, this is not the case. Polygamous families and other alternative marriage and relationship structures are simply attempting to define marriage and relationships for themselves, on their own terms.

In line with feminist anthropologists Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney's (1995) concept of naturalizing power, I argue against the assumed "naturalness" of monogamy and the idea of the "traditional" family in the U.S. by examining the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S. and Americans' views of marriage. Various cultural influences, events, and factors played into the establishment of monogamy as the dominant relationship and marriage structure in the U.S., but competing, subdominant discourses, like polygamy, do exist alongside monogamy. Henrietta Moore (1994), a social anthropologist, provides a framework that allows for the possibility of the existence of multiple femininities and masculinities within a society that are potentially contradictory and competing. I draw on Moore's framework to argue that marriage structures, as they are culturally constructed, can come in many forms, not just monogamy, and there is not a single "right" way to express love and sexuality. I show how, in recent decades, new technologies, specifically computer technologies, and communication systems have been drawn upon by individuals and groups engaging in the ongoing cultural construction of kinship, marriage, and family in the U.S., to facilitate this cultural process, and to assert power to counter the hegemony and assumed "naturalness" of heterosexual monogamous marriage. While polygamy can be viewed as a counter discourse to the dominant discourse on monogamy in the U.S., I also argue, that in many ways, ideals and values that individuals associate with polygamous marriage can reinforce certain aspects of hegemonic discourses of marriage, gender, and sexuality, as I found was the case among proponents of polygamy I conducted research with in the U.S. This issue is complex and shows that there is not a clear cut dichotomy between hegemonic and counter discourses of marriage in the U.S.

Anthropologist Peter Wood (2006), along with many others in the U.S., maintain an essentializing stance on polygamy. Viewing polygamy only as a means for older men to accumulate young wives is homogenizing and denies the lived experiences of many women and men in polygamous marriages. In contrast to Wood, I argue that polygamy is not inherently patriarchal or oppressive, but it is the particular context in which it occurs that shapes power relations and gendered behavior, just like any other marriage structure. For example, if polygamy is practiced among fundamentalist Christians, this group may have more “traditional” ideals regarding gender roles, but despite this, many women in this group may exert agency and autonomy in their polygamous families. In more extreme cases, such as the oppression of and violence against women and children in some intentional polygamous communities, like that of the FLDS, these circumstances are more likely caused by isolation from the outside world and the fear and domination cultivated by generations of patriarchal rule rather than the practice of polygamy. My analysis provides a counter discourse to the dominant views of polygamy and to the hegemony of heterosexual monogamous marriage in the U.S. I consider polygamy and other alternative marriage and relationship structures, like polyandry or group marriage, to be viable and meaningful.

In regards to Internet studies, my research reinforces Taylor’s (2006) theory that the real/virtual cannot be separated and are interwoven, Hine’s (2000) theory that culture can be enabled by technology, and as other scholars have shown, that online communities provide sites for meaningful and relevant anthropological research. I also draw on geographer Gill Valentine’s argument that the Internet can provide a space for gay and lesbian individuals who have traditionally been excluded from public spaces (Valentine 2006:378). I argue that this idea can be expanded to include other diverse groups, specifically those who practice, are interested in

practicing, and support the practice of polygamy. Because polygamy is illegal in the U.S., most families who practice this lifestyle do so in secrecy or in secluded polygamist communities. The secrecy involved may lead to some families or individuals feeling socially or geographically isolated from others who are also interested in polygamy. The Internet can provide a much needed space to create new friendships, community, and polygamous relationships.

Polygamy in the Media

Recently, several television shows and series have featured the topic of polygamy or polygamous families or communities. This interest may have been spurred by media coverage of the arrest of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs in 2006, and the raid by law enforcement on an FLDS compound in Texas in 2008. I discuss several of these television programs in relation to Americans' views of polygamy and other topics throughout my thesis, so here I provide a brief synopsis of some of these programs. *Big Love* is a fictional television series that ran from 2006 to 2011 on the HBO television network. The show was about a fundamentalist Mormon man, his three wives, and their children living in mainstream society in Utah who kept their polygamous marriage a secret. *Sister Wives*, a reality television show on the TLC television network, started in 2010 and continues currently. The show follows the Brown family, a real fundamentalist Mormon polygamous family, consisting of one husband, four wives, and all of their children. The family lives in Las Vegas, Nevada as an openly polygamous family. Another reality television series featuring polygamy is *Polygamy U.S.A.* which aired on the National Geographic Channel in 2013. This program followed the real lives of several community members and families in the openly polygamous community of Centennial Park, Arizona who practice Mormon fundamentalism. *My Five Wives* is a new series on TLC that started in 2013, which features the real life of an openly polygamous family with one husband, five wives, and their 24

children. The family lives in Salt Lake City, Utah and practices what they call “progressive polygamy.” The marriage practice has also been featured on episodes of shows like HBO’s *Vice*, a documentary news series, or National Geographic Channel’s *Taboo*, which examines practices and behaviors that are accepted in some societies but are illegal, forbidden, or condemned in others. Each of these television shows provides a media constructed view of polygamy which influences Americans' conceptions and understandings of this marriage practice in the U.S. Polygamy is also featured through another media forum in the U.S., that is, the Internet, which was the focus of my research. Next I will discuss the polygamy website on which I conducted my research.

The Research Site

This polygamy website is made up of roughly 5,500 registered members and was created approximately ten years ago. The site consists of a chat room¹, several discussion boards², and links to polygamy news, information, and other polygamy related websites. The website’s focus is polygamy and the front page welcomes all to join in respectful dialogue in support of the practice of polygamy and its advancement. A website is not a typical or traditional choice for anthropological fieldwork, but conducting ethnographic research online opens the “. . . possibility of gaining a reflexive understanding of what it is to be part of the Internet . . . as the ethnographer learns through using the same media as informants” (Hine 2000:10). Conducting research on an interactive website allowed me to experience what it is actually like to be an Internet user and a member of the polygamy website in a way that may not be possible in a more traditional research setting.

¹ A chat room is a site on a computer network where participants can engage in real time conversations with a number of users simultaneously, which is also called group chat.

² Discussion board is a general term for an online “bulletin board” where users can leave messages and respond to other messages. Discussion boards are also referred to as online forums, message boards, or discussion groups.

Because there are no face-to-face interactions on the polygamy website it can be difficult to obtain demographic information, like gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, or socio-economic status, unless website members post their information on their personal account for the world to see or choose to share it. Some members post photos and a description of who they are and what brings them to the polygamy site, but others just post a photo or only a description or simply nothing at all. Most website members are geographically located in the U.S. and hail from many different states, such as Wisconsin, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, California, Texas, and New Hampshire. Some website members are from abroad in places like Europe, Indonesia, Canada, Pakistan, and Australia. Website members come from all walks of life, and various religious and educational backgrounds.

When visiting the research site, I open my Internet browser and navigate to the polygamy website. I am greeted by a cheerful, light blue colored background and images of flowers behind a white picket fence. The design and layout of the site is quite basic, but it is fairly easy to use. I type in my user name and password on the home page to gain access to my account. On the home page, I can see which website members are logged in to the chat room and access the latest polygamy news or topics posted by the website administrators. From here, I can check my email on the polygamy website, enter the chat room, or visit the various discussion boards. I also have access to polygamy information compiled on the website and other polygamy related links and news stories.

Upon entering the chat room, I am usually greeted by other members who are already in the room. It is customary to say hello and exchange some pleasantries, especially if one is already acquainted with the individuals in the chat room. Like other chat rooms and instant messaging services, when you type something and push the enter key, your screen name appears

followed by the text you typed to indicate who the messages are from. This chat room feature is the only way to communicate in real time with other website members on the polygamy site. At first, the speed of and continuous shift in conversation topic, along with the number of different responses appearing on the screen simultaneously can be quite overwhelming, but after a time it becomes easier to follow and join in the conversation. Also, the chat dialogue is strictly text based, so it can be a challenge to decipher the meaning of others' comments and pick up on humor or sarcasm. Some website members use emoticons, or a metacommunicative pictorial representation of a facial expression, to express emotion along with their text, such as ☺ to express happiness or humor. Website members can also initiate a private chat with someone else in the chat room, and it is typical for a number of private, side conversations to occur while also participating in the group chat. The discussion boards are easier to follow than chat room conversations as they do not occur in real time. Because of this, it is easier to provide a well thought out and organized response or initial post than in the chat room, but the discussion boards are also text based which has its draw backs as discussed above.

This description of my "field site" exemplifies my and the website members' experience of participating with others on the polygamy website, where information about polygamy can be gleaned and a variety of relationships can be formed. While my fieldwork was not conducted at a traditional anthropological field site, my participant observation on this website, and interviews that I conducted with website participants, have provided a glimpse and generated an understanding of an important, new contemporary social setting for: the development of polygamous marriages, relationships, friendships, and community; the construction of cultural meanings of polygamy and of counter discourses that challenge hegemonic marriage discourses in U.S. society; and the emergence of political actions and potential organization for contesting

the prohibition of this form of marriage in the U.S. I will discuss these and other aspects of the polygamy website in the chapters that follow this introduction.

Thesis Outline

In the ensuing chapters, I work to answer my research questions and provide support for my main thesis argument. In Chapter 2: Literature Review, I discuss a sample of existing scholarly literature from the field of anthropology and other areas of study on the topics of polygamy and Internet research and how my research adds to this body of knowledge. In the next chapter, Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks, I introduce the theoretical approaches I use to frame my research questions and analysis, and how my research fits within a larger feminist anthropological framework. In Chapter 4: Methodology, I lay out the methods and processes I used to collect data and analyze the material I gathered in relation to my research questions, and I provide further information about the research site and the benefits and challenges of Internet research. The historical and cultural context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S. is examined by analyzing the intersection of politics, economics, religion, marriage, sexuality, and gender in Chapter 5: Prohibition of Polygamy: A Historical and Political Economic Analysis of Polygamy in the U.S. In this chapter, I argue that the particular historical, cultural, political, and economic context of the U.S. during the 19th century led to polygamy being viewed by mainstream society as socially and morally unacceptable and illegal to practice in the U.S., historically and today.

In Chapter 6: Perceptions of Polygamy in the U.S. and the Purpose and Function of the Polygamy Website, I provide an analysis of the contemporary dominant discourse regarding marriage, gender, and sexuality in the U.S., which reveals why there is a need for an online space to openly discuss and support polygamy. I also outline the purpose and function of the polygamy

website, and how website members view and define polygamy. In Chapter 7: Friendship, Community, and Forming Polygamous Relationships Online, I provide an examination of the friendship and community that is created and acknowledged by some members of the polygamy website, and the website's potential for aiding in the formation of polygamous relationships, as well as a discussion of the potential social and cultural influences on views and opinions of polygamy in the U.S. I argue that the polygamy website provides an online space that is not available to everyone offline in which website members can make friends, create community, and form polygamous relationship. In Chapter 8: Politics, the Internet, and Polygamy in the U.S., I discuss the political aspects of the polygamy website along with the website's potential for fostering political involvement and activism in regards to the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy in the U.S., and I also explore the work of polygamy activist groups found on the Internet. In Chapter 9: Conclusion, I provide a summary of my arguments and key points, and I discuss my suggestions for further study and activism efforts for the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I examine a sample of existing scholarly literature in the field of anthropology and other scholarly disciplines on the topics of polygamy and Internet research. I also discuss how my research may add new insights or information to these topics of research, and how it may share similarities or differences with this pool of rich literature and scholarly work. I will first start with a discussion of polygamy in anthropological and other scholarly studies, and then move on to Internet research in anthropology and other academic disciplines.

Polygamy in Anthropology and Other Fields of Study

Little anthropological research has been conducted in the U.S. on polygamy, and the majority of the research that has been conducted on this topic in the U.S. focuses on Mormon polygamy in the context of an intentional community, like the work of Janet Bennion (Bennion 1998). To reiterate, I am specifically focusing on polygyny (the marriage of one man to two or more women), but I refer to polygyny as polygamy, which it is commonly recognized as, including by the participants of the polygamy website I conducted research with. The association of polygamy with religion is not a primary focus of my research, however. Instead, I focus on the understanding and practice of polygamy among women and men who are members of the polygamy website I researched, reside in the U.S., are from a variety of religious backgrounds, and do not necessarily live in intentional, polygamous communities. This is significant because there have been few studies of individuals who practice polygamy and live in mainstream U.S. culture, and to the best of my knowledge, no polygamy studies in relation to the Internet.

Because marriage in the U.S. is ideally rooted in notions of romantic love, it can be difficult for women in the U.S. to imagine or tolerate the idea of polygamy. Jealousy among co-

wives is one cause for concern, but ethnographic studies have shown that accounts of jealousy among co-wives occur in conjunction with reports of peaceful cooperation and teamwork in societies cross-culturally (Stone 2006:192). The impacts of polygamous marriage on gender need to be examined within the cultural context of each particular society it occurs in (Stone 2006:193).

Polygamy, as a marriage practice, has long been studied by anthropologists as part of a larger kinship system that manages the reproduction of a society's members. Ideas about kinship help to shape the roles of men and women in each particular society and how it influences gender. Reproduction is regulated in every society according to its own set of particular laws, norms, customs, and cultural ideologies (Stone 2006:2). In societies that permit polygamy, monogamous marriage also occurs, but polygamy may be the preferred marriage structure. Polygamy (specifically polygyny), along with monogamy, is also generally permitted in societies that allow the practice of polyandry (the marriage of one woman to two or more men). As among the Nuer of southern Sudan, polygamy is often viewed by men as a sign of wealth and prestige (Stone 2006:192). Some anthropologists have shown that there is an association between patrilocality (when a married couple lives in the household or same area as the groom's kin) and polygamy (Stone 2006:74). Polygamy is sometimes only permitted if the first wife is infertile, such as among the Brahmans of Nepal (Stone 2006:98). Polygamous marriage has also been interpreted as a strategy for males to increase the number of children they have, while also increasing the number of people in their patrilineal descent group (Stone 2006:92).

Much anthropological research focusing on polygamy has been completed in Africa (Grossbard 1976; Madhavan 2002; Meekers and Franklin 1995; Musisi 1991; Welch and Glick 1981; White and Burton 1988). Anthropologists White and Burton (1988) accomplished a cross

cultural comparison of the causes of polygamy in 142 African societies by evaluating polygamy in regards to economics, ecology, kinship, and warfare. Their analysis provided support for the following interrelated views of polygamy: that polygamy is an expansionist strategy, is associated with warfare for plunder and/or female captives, is associated with the presence of fraternal interest groups, and is constrained by plow farming or by high dependence on fishing (White and Burton 1988:882). The study concluded that a different set of theories would be needed to address polygamy in America historically; theories that would account for the belief that in New World polygamy, wives tend to be related and live in the same household (White and Burton 1988:884).

Goody (1973), a social anthropologist, made a regional comparison of polygamy in Ghana in relation to women's positions in the economy using available material from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and economics. He suggested a connection between polygamy and women's value as producers of either crops or of male children (Goody 1973:180-183). In a culture where the production of male children is desired there would be a need for maximum fertility, so polygamy would be needed to meet the reproductive needs (Goody 1973:188). Goody assumed that sex must play an important role in polygamy, and he concluded that for Ghana, the reasons behind polygamy are sexual and reproductive rather than economic and productive (Goody 1973:189). In my research, sexuality may indeed play a role in polygamy in the U.S., but I argue that reasons for marrying polygamously are much more complex than just sex and reproduction. There are many varying and interrelated reasons behind the practice of polygamy in the U.S.

Anthropologists Meekers and Franklin's research, conducted in 1992 in Tanzania on Kaguru women, made clear that women's perspectives of polygamy can vary between and within

different cultures. Meekers and Franklin's research found that Kaguru first wives often felt neglected, jealous, and concerned about the welfare of their children after the husband took a second wife, and unlike women of other cultures, the Kaguru women did not mention any benefits of having a co-wife (Meekers and Franklin 1995:323). Another study discussed by Meekers and Franklin showed that sixty percent of Yoruba Ware women liked their husbands to practice polygamy because it reduced the amount of wage labor that wives had to perform, provided someone to gossip and have fun with, and sometimes the first wife would choose the second wife (Meekers and Franklin 1995:315). Other women did not like having to share the economic and sexual resources of their husband and this often caused jealousy (Meeker and Franklin 1995:316). Meekers and Franklin used an ethnographic and non-judgmental approach, which are approaches I use as well.

Madhavan (2002), professor of African American studies, discussed co-wife relationships in Mali, West Africa in order to demonstrate that polygamous marriages can vary among two ethnic groups, the Bamanan and Fulbe, and how co-wives used competitive and collaborative tactics to negotiate their statuses within the family. The findings of her research are based on 48 life history interviews conducted with Bamanan and Fulbe women in 1997. Mali has one of the highest rates of polygamous marriage in the world in which 45% of women are married polygamously, and 92% of the population identify as Muslim (Madhavan 2002:72). Mali is a mostly agrarian country with women undertaking much of the agricultural work, so there is a need for a large work force that polygamy can provide (Madhavan 2002:72-73). Due to increased costs in living, it is rare to find a man with more than two wives (Madhavan 2002:73). Based on the varied experiences of the women interviewed, this study showed that there is a potential for both competitive and collaborative relationships among co-wives. The findings

suggested that female empowerment is possible through the use of a collaborative approach among co-wives because the women would not have to work through their husband in order to exert power within the family (Madhavan 2002:81-82). Like Madhavan's research, I show that the cultural and socioeconomic context in which polygamy occurs plays an important role in understanding it. Madhavan also took a neutral stance towards the practice of polygamy which I employ in my research as well. My research does differ from Madhavan's in many aspects because I do not focus on specific polygamous relationships, but rather interactions on the polygamy website.

Nurmila (2009), a scholar of Islamic Studies, conducted research from December 2003 to April 2004 using an anthropological and feminist approach in Java, Indonesia, with a focus on the impacts of polygamy on wives and children. Indonesia is a predominantly Islamic country, and many Islamists interpret the Qur'an to permit men to take up to four wives. Under this interpretation and the influence of the Islamic political party members, polygamy was made legal in Indonesia in 1974 with some restrictions, but many plural marriages are not registered. Nurmila argued that polygamy jeopardizes the economic and emotional welfare of the first wife and her children when her husband takes an additional wife because the addition of a second, and any subsequent, wives can reduce the amount of economic and emotional support she could potentially receive. Also, a number of first wives she interviewed had suffered major physical and emotional abuse following the addition of a second wife (Nurmila 2009:114). Nurmila made her stance on polygamy well known and hopes her research will influence policymakers to make polygamy illegal (Nurmila 2009:3). She interviewed wives, husbands, and some children in order to gain an understanding of the implications of polygamy. The case studies Nurmila presented showcase women's negative perspectives and experiences of polygamy which served

the purpose of her book. She discussed the various interpretations of the Qur'an that condone the practice of polygamy in Indonesia by many Muslims, and how these interpretations are intertwined with politics and the complexities of Islamic law. Many Islamists interpret this excerpt from the Qur'anic verse 4:3 to allow polygamy: “. . . marry of the women who seem good to you, two or three or four” (Nurmila 2009:42).

Nurmila's work served as an example of how to structure a study of polygamy using an anthropological and feminist approach; however, my approach differs from Nurmila's because I do not believe that polygamy should be illegal in all circumstances. I also discuss the politics of polygamy in the U.S., but religion does not have such a large influence as it has in Indonesia because, in the U.S., most religions do not openly condone polygamy like Islam, the predominant religion in Indonesia, does.

Anthropologist and sociologist Sa'ar's ethnographic research showed a differing perspective on Muslim polygamy among Palestinian women in Israel. Her analysis is based on participant observation and interviews conducted in 1997 to 1999 and 2002 to 2006 (Sa'ar 2007:517-518). Sa'ar showed how some women, who she calls “women without men,” use the Islamic belief that a man may take up to four wives to morally justify their non-normative heterosexual relationships (Sa'ar 2007:515). Among Palestinians in Israel, polygamy is a declining practice, except among the Bedouin, and the general feeling toward polygamy is that it is archaic and primitive, and an already married man is a “second rate” partner in comparison to an unmarried man (Sa'ar 2007:515, 519). In spite of these commonly held beliefs, Sa'ar's data showed that a variation in understandings of and attitudes towards polygamy exists, and, because polygamy is an existent practice, it can take on new, different, and possibly subversive meanings (Sa'ar 2007:515, 524). Women in Sa'ar's research attempted to apply the idea of polygamy to

their lives, while facing criticism and in some cases hostility from their family and friends, in order to morally justify and legitimate their relationships with married men (Sa'ar 2007:533). The women she interviewed were either polygamously married or the man's family considered them to be; however, Sa'ar did not specify in every case whether the men's first wives were aware of the relationships or not (Sa'ar 2007). Like Sa'ar, I also employ a feminist and political economic approach to examine the context of polygamy in the U.S. and investigate a marginalized group of individuals. Sa'ar's examination of women who want to be part of a polygamous relationship is similar to my research because many members of the polygamy website are seeking polygamous relationships. However, my research is different as it occurs in the U.S. and is focused on online interactions.

The work of Bennion (1998), an anthropologist, is an example of ethnographic research on polygamy in the U.S. She conducted research in 1989 in the Apostolic United Brethren group, also known as the Allred Group, which is a patriarchal, fundamentalist Mormon intentional community in Montana. The town where Bennion completed her research is a rural community located in the northern Rockies and has its own city hall and grocery store. In 1986 the Allred Group consisted of 150 families with 139 of the men having more than one wife (Bennion 1998:25). The name Allred Group comes from the group's first leader Rulon C. Allred. The people of the Allred Group are governed by the Priesthood Council which consists of ten male members with the prophet as the leader (Bennion 1998:22). The Apostolic United Brethren is incorporated as a religious institution and therefore, does not pay taxes on the tithes it receives from the members. The Priesthood Council has financial and economic control over the intentional community, and it authorizes all marriages, approves policy changes, and handles deviant members (Bennion 1998:23). The members of the Allred Group practice religious

communalism which dictates that each member's surplus money is put into the community fund for projects, like roads and waterways (Bennion 1998:27). The Priesthood Council has considerable power over the community, and the council's decisions are considered law (Bennion 1998:26).

Polygamy in the Allred group is tied to religious ideology; Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, revealed that Mormons were to practice polygamy in the mid-1800s. The Allred group views polygamy as a divine principle and there are three reasons to practice polygamy: “. . . (1) Old Testament prophets, such as Abraham, had plural wives; (2) plural marriage gives one access to eternal worlds as a god; and (3) Jesus and God [who is also Adam] both had plural wives” (Bennion 1998:43). Modern day Mormon polygamists are referred to as Mormon Fundamentalists because they model their behavior after Joseph Smith's codes and believe they are practicing the “true” gospel (Bennion 1998:20). Polygamy is referred to as plural marriage, celestial marriage, and the Principle by the Allred group, and on average, there are three wives per family (Bennion 1998:31). It was estimated in 1994 that 50,000 Americans were practicing Mormon polygamy (Bennion 1998:21). Bennion found that women have varying interpretations of religious doctrines, but there is a belief of a female goddess figure, Mother Eve. Many women believe they will be rewarded in the afterlife for their suffering on Earth; women are married eternally to their husbands and become goddesses of their universes after death (Bennion 1998:52).

Bennion's research focused on women's experiences, and she examined the network that exists between women in the community and between some co-wives as a result of husbands being largely absent due to travel for work and religious duties. Women are mostly left on their own to make ends meet for themselves and their children, and often due to a lack of financial

support while husbands are outside of the community for work, women must turn to other women for help or formation of cooperatives (Bennion 1998). Female solidarity is experienced through life events like childbirth, religious conviction, motherhood, and homemaking (Bennion 1998:92). Women's experiences and perspectives of polygamy and life within the Allred community did vary. Some women felt they were independent and free to pursue hobbies and interests because there is less reliance on a husband (Bennion 1998:96). Other women reported periods of jealousy that they were able to overcome and now have a harmonious family life (Bennion 1998:98-100). Many women in Bennion's study who were unhappy felt they were forced to stay in the community because their children would have to remain with their father. Some women also feared that by leaving, they would be jeopardizing their ability to become goddesses in their own right because a woman cannot be a goddess without a husband to serve as a god. Bennion described certain personality traits, like perseverance, frugality, and compassion, that aid in making a polygamous marriage successful (Bennion 1998:107). The divorce rate in the community was 35% compared to a 50% divorce rate for the U.S. as a whole (Bennion 1998:154).

My research differs from Bennion's because it does not take place within a patriarchal, intentional community like that of the Allred group. Many of the members of the polygamy website do not live in an intentional community. In Bennion's study, the exertion of power by the Priesthood Council has the potential to negatively impact women's religious, economic, and mental well-being. The possibility of excommunication and damnation are always looming in the background as punishment for disobeying the council or one's husband, and this can have considerable impact on quality of life. I argue that within "mainstream" American culture, polygamy, in some cases, has the potential for providing more of a choice or personal preference,

as opposed to when polygamy is perceived primarily as a religious practice tied to a powerful council, and this may alter women's perspectives and experiences in a positive way. In the Allred Group, the Priesthood Council controls marriages, so one may not have a say in the selection of a spouse, and girls are married at an average age of 17 to 18, although marrying as young as 15 or 16 is acceptable (Bennion 1998:34). Also, long courtships are not customary before the decision to marry is made; courtships last anywhere from two weeks to six months (Bennion 1998:35). Bennion said that the option of plural wives or husbands, or omnigamy (everyone married to everyone), may provide a way for the modern family to survive because it allows for a number of family structures that complement modern society. Alternative family structures might allow several women to share one "good" man rather than remain single or have a monogamous relationship with a "loser," or give co-wives the option to work outside the home, complete household duties, take care of children, or pursue other interests (Bennion 1998:153). My research also examines the plural wife aspect found in Bennion's argument.

Between 1992 and 2007, anthropologist Jankowiak also conducted research in intentional fundamentalist Mormon communities in Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City and Centennial Park, Arizona, using observations and in-depth interviews (Jankowiak 2008:179). He argued that the interaction between romantic love, a desire for couple intimacy, and a deeply rooted devotion to religious principles create stress and anxiety in families. Couple bonds based on love can induce strong emotional responses in cultures where polygamy is a strong central belief (Jankowiak 2008:163). Jankowiak said that for Mormon polygamists, a desire for emotional exclusivity in love can impact how individuals justify and react to feelings of happiness and unhappiness and how men and women relate to each other (Jankowiak 2008:164). Jankowiak's research showed that in most polygamous families husbands were unable to be fair with all of their wives,

although some did try to be. In some families there are not enough emotional and material resources to meet everyone's needs, so the favorite wife and her children are often taken care of first. The other wives learn to tolerate this type of behavior (Jankowiak 2008:175). An enduring harmony is hardly ever achieved by the majority of polygamous families in this group, which is also true of many monogamous marriages (Jankowiak 2008:179). In contrast to Jankowiak's work, my research focuses more on the desire to create a polygamous relationship rather than on established relationships. Also, my research does not focus specifically on fundamentalist Mormons or those living in intentional polygamous communities.

Like Bennion, anthropologist Kilbride (1994) also suggested in his work that the choice of varying family structures can provide alternatives for high divorce rates because adding people to the family would be less disruptive than divorce. Kilbride argued that monogamy does not work for everyone, and plural marriage should be an available choice. Kilbride discussed the idea of man-sharing among African American communities where a married African American man is involved in an extra-marital affair with a single, never-married African American female who is typically a single mother due to a teenage pregnancy (Kilbride 1994:94-95). African American men have become an "endangered species" due to high rates of incarceration and unemployment (Kilbride 1994:93). Wives may not be aware of or condone the affairs, but it is suggested if the situation was consensual, then polygamy or man-sharing would be a viable option for the lack of potential African American male spouses (Kilbride 1994:95). Some people are, of course, opposed to this idea and see it causing more problems, like more pregnancies, spread of STDs, and not actually meeting the emotional needs of the "other" woman. Other solutions, like lesbianism, interracial relationships, or relationships with older or younger men, are suggested as an alternative to man-sharing (Kilbride 1994:97). Although Kilbride's notion of

man-sharing is not exactly like consensual polygamy among adults it is an example of alternative relationship structures, and themes like this one did emerge during the course of my research. For example, a reason for entering into polygamy might be because a woman could not find a suitable spouse, is divorced, or is a single mother. The main difference between man-sharing and the polygamy found on the website I researched is the element of consent, because in the man-sharing example, there is a degree of secrecy between the husband and wife as well as the wife and the “other” woman (Kilbride 1994:100). Also, polygamy involves the act of multiple marriages, which makes it illegal.

Social anthropologist Humphrey (2010) discussed how it was recently decided in Britain that the government will recognize existing multiple spouse marriages that occurred in countries where this practice is legal, such as Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Somalia. Men with multiple wives can now claim benefits for all wives, but bigamy remains illegal. This relatively new change was met with shock, rejection, and opposition from the public, which Humphrey believes stems from strong beliefs in monogamous, Christian marriage and negative feelings about Islam and immigration. Humphrey called for a more diverse and broad view of marriage types, and a need to understand why people, especially women, want to be in a polygamous marriage (Humphrey 2010:21). Humphrey noted that educated, modern groups of citizens are calling for the legalization of polygamy in countries like Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (Humphrey 2010:22). Humphrey believed that a combination of a lack of men, more liberated and educated women, the potential for female solidarity, and the practical needs of life will cause relationship and marital structure like polygamy to emerge, whether or not it is recognized as such (Humphrey 2010:25). My research attempts to answer Humphrey’s call by examining

polygamy in the U.S. in a new and different way and by trying to gain an understanding of why people are drawn to this marriage type.

While the main focus of my thesis is polygamy, specifically polygyny, it is relevant to briefly discuss polyandry (the marriage of one woman to two or more men), as I touch on this topic in some of the chapters to come. Polyandry is the rarest marriage form, and it often occurs alongside polygamy, such as among the Nayar of South India before 1810 (Stone 2006:19, 144, 151). The practice of polyandry occurs or has occurred among the Shoshoni Indians of Nevada, Tibetan peoples of northern Nepal, on the Marquesas Islands, and a handful of other places in Africa, the Americas, and South Asia (Stone 2006:193). The practice of fraternal polyandry, in which a woman marries two or more brothers, results in low population growth (Stone 2006:193-194). Some anthropologists have argued that polyandry develops in part as a means of population control, especially in areas with scarce environmental resources, in order to maintain a balance between the human population and nature (Stone 2006:194).

The early study of polyandry was plagued by male biases, and some men found it completely unthinkable that a man would give up their exclusive sexual and reproductive rights to their wives. Because of these biases, some observers characterized polyandry as perverse, did not classify it as marriage at all, or assumed there was repressed jealousy among the husbands, even though no jealousy was found (Stone 2006:193). Later studies have taken polyandrous marriage more seriously and attempted to treat the topic more objectively, like the work of anthropologist Nancy Levine. Levine (1988) studied polyandry among the Nyinba, a small group of Tibetan people now living in Nepal. Levine found that population control cannot be viewed as the only reason for the practice of polyandry because other ethnic groups live in the same environment as the Nyinba do and they do not practice polyandry. Among the Nyinba, polyandry

is strongly connected to gender, kinship values, cultural traditions, and the domestic economy (Levine 1988). Even though polyandry is not the main focus of my thesis, I do approach the discussion of polyandry, and other alternative marriage and relationship structures, seriously and view them as viable forms of marriage in the U.S.

The depth of anthropological research on polygamy, discussed above, provides a solid foundation for my research on the polygamy website. As there is little research conducted on the practice of polygamy in the U.S., my research will add to this relatively small body of literature. I also focus on the creation of polygamous relationships, rather than existing relationships, intentional polygamous communities, and kinship networks, which may add to the understanding of polygamy in a new and different way. Next, I discuss Internet research in the field of anthropology and other scholarly disciplines as my research focused on a website centered on polygamy.

Internet Research in Anthropology and Other Scholarly Disciplines

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff stated, “It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human ‘nature’ to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being” (Boellstorff 2008:5). Boellstorff suggested that anthropology has a special place in studying virtual worlds because the discipline aims to view the culture from the “native’s” perspective which is a way of virtually being in the community or culture (Boellstorff 2008:6). By recognizing the complex ways people are engaged in the process of making and interpreting the Internet in relation to their own cultural, social, and historical circumstances, anthropologists can contribute to the study of the Internet. Individuals within an online community are also simultaneously a part of other interacting communities, societies, and cultures (Wilson &

Peterson 2002:455). The Internet is a valid site of study like that of any physical and localized field site, although it is still relatively new territory to chart.

Boellstorff's internet research focused on the cultural practices and beliefs of the virtual world *Second Life*. He defined virtual worlds as “. . . places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet” (Boellstorff 2008:17). The founding research question of his study addressed what ethnography can reveal about virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008:61). He used a Boasian framework that focused on equality and participation and considered all happenings worthy of research (Boellstorff 2008:69). Boellstorff conducted his research entirely online in the virtual world of *Second Life* by carrying out interviews, participant observation, and organized focus groups through the use of his avatar; by doing this, he showed that a virtual world is a legitimate site of culture (Boellstorff 2008:61). Boellstorff recruited participants for interview by interacting with them during participant observation and by using snowball sampling (Boellstorff 2008:77). He did not take on a neutral role, as he reported abuse and mistreatment to administrators and gave his personal opinions during informal conversations, interviews, and focus groups (Boellstorff 2008:80).

Another example of virtual ethnography is anthropologist Nicole Constable's use of the Internet to study correspondence relationships between American men and Chinese and Filipina women. Using a feminist approach, she addressed the questions of why men from the U.S. would correspond with women across the globe in hopes of finding a wife and if the stereotypes about the young foreign women responding to men and agreeing to marry are true. Her research methods included anthropological interviews, participant observation, face-to-face interactions, and virtual ethnography of an online community with members involved in global

correspondence relationships, which are often referred to as “mail-order brides” (Constable 2003:3).

Constable sorted through feminist and commonly held beliefs about “mail-order brides,” such as ideas about gender inequality, trafficking of women, and oppression of women through marriage, a patriarchal institution (Constable 2003:4). She questioned the idea that women in these relationships are victims of trafficking and need to be saved, and the men involved are oppressors looking for sex slaves. Constable asserted that the women in her study exercise agency and make choices about relationships based on a variety of factors besides economics (Constable 2003:145). She found that the men in her study are not primarily concerned with sexuality, but rather most of them are concerned with finding a “traditional” woman to be their wife (Constable 2003:4). Many of the U.S. men and the Chinese women and Filipinas have complimentary ideas about gender roles and core conservative values (Constable 2003:92).

Constable argued that using the idea of transnationalism or transnational marriage to frame the online correspondence relationships she researched is more useful than using a lens of migration and trafficking because transnationalism accounts for flows of ideas, desires, objects, and people, across and beyond national borders (Constable 2003:215-216). Constable questioned why U.S. men’s criminal backgrounds are not investigated during the petition process for their foreign partner’s immigration because the immigrant women may have minimal English skills, be unfamiliar with U.S. laws and customs, and be isolated from their friends and family, which might make them more vulnerable to domestic abuse (Constable 2003:218-219). Narratives collected from Chinese women revealed that interest in Western men is a result of personal circumstance, class background, and available Chinese marital prospects (Constable 2003:145). Constable argued that romantic love, or at least an attempt to define the relationship in those

terms, is the basis of the online correspondence relationships (Constable 2003:118). Her research concluded that Chinese and Filipina women involved in correspondence relationships are not victimized, trafficked women, as commonly believed, but rather the women exercise a great deal of agency in the choice to communicate and marry American men (Constable 2003:218).

My research is very similar to Constable's as we both examine the creation of romantic relationships through the use of the Internet and use virtual ethnography to study an online community. Like Constable, I attempt to challenge generalizations and commonly held beliefs or stereotypes about polygamy and those that choose to enter into polygamous relationships. Constable raises the issue of agency among Chinese and Filipina women in her research, and she finds that the women are not oppressed or dominated by American men, as is the commonly held assumption about "mail order brides." I also investigate the issue of male domination on the polygamy website, and similarly to Constable, I observe that male dominance of women on the site does not obviously or blatantly occur. In addition, I use a feminist framework to approach the study of polygamy in an online context and view the experiences and voices of women and men as heterogeneous and varied.

Another study that investigates romantic relationships created online is the work of communication studies scholar Malin Sveningsson who employed ethnographic methods in her research. Using snowball or chain sampling, Sveningsson conducted interviews with 14 heterosexual Swedish men and women, age 19 to 30, who use online chat rooms to create romantic relationships (Sveningsson 2002:48-49). Individuals do not necessarily use the chat room with the aim of finding a potential romantic partner, but it does occur (Sveningsson 2002:49). Sveningsson followed the relationships from chatting online to meeting face-to-face. She found that instead of changing dating, the Internet functions as just another optional meeting

place that people have the choice of using to find a romantic relationship. She found that for the individuals she interviewed, the relationships created in chat rooms were no different from any of their other relationships. Sveningsson argued that regardless of which communication media is used to create a romantic relationship, personal relationships will not change drastically (Sveningsson 2002:75). My research also looks at the creation of romantic relationships online, and just like the chat room Sveningsson investigated, the polygamy website was not designed for or always used with the intent of creating a polygamous relationship. Unlike Sveningsson's research methods, I conducted all of my interviews online through the polygamy website's private chat feature.

In contrast to Boellstorff, Constable, and Sveningsson's work, sociolinguist Pamela Cushing explored the lack of female actors and voices on the Internet in 1996 and the reasons for this using a different approach. Cushing drew on the work of Deborah Tannen regarding gendered conversational rituals which asserted that people's world views influence how they communicate and how they perceive what others say. This approach views language and culture as always changing, and men and women as gendered with certain communication styles, indicating this is a cultural phenomenon rather than a natural one (Cushing 1996:53). Cushing's model is based on the idea that women in the U.S. see the world as a network of connections and use the Internet for connecting their position in the network. Men, on the other hand, see the world as a hierarchical social order and use the Internet for status to secure their position in the hierarchy (Cushing 1996:54).

Cushing observed Internet culture in the 1990s and analyzed other ethnographies and the content of *WIRED* magazine and other publications from the U.S. to collect data. Cushing distinguished communications between the online users and the world of innovators; she then

discussed four elements, purpose, environment, style, and content, to help identify the sources of female and male based communication rituals (Cushing 1996:57). The user's purpose was to talk with other people and retrieve data, and the purpose of the innovators was progress and profit. The environment for both innovators and users was one of male dominance that allowed for aggressive behavior which was a result of the Internet's historical roots in the military (Cushing 1996:58). The style of communication for users was characterized by assertiveness and challenging of others (Cushing 1996:64). For male innovators the style of communication was characterized by aggressiveness, competitive language, exaggeration, report talk, and systematic and linear logic, and for women innovators the style was characterized by modest attitudes, downplaying the "truth" of their work, not seeing their work as part of a vital solution, and downplaying expertise (Cushing 1996:70-72).

Cushing concluded that a lack of female voices online and women in the IT field in the 1990s were a direct result of gender differences in communication styles. The Internet is male dominated and oriented because of the "public" aspect of the forum with male conversation rituals being more pervasive, which is a result of historical patterns and the existing offline power structure (Cushing 1996:74). Cushing noted that there is a possibility for an egalitarian network that accepts and encourages diversity, but in practice, this ideal is not reality (Cushing 1996:50). She indicated that a male dominated Internet is detrimental to women, as well as all users and innovators, because it results in a loss of diversity and a narrowing of Internet culture (Cushing 1996:49). Cushing's research showed that dominant gender behavior and roles present offline did indeed transfer to the online world in some cases. The offline power structures and hierarchies, as well as historical and cultural context, do influence online communications. Her research draws attention to gender issues that I address in my own research because men and

women are using the website to meet, interact, and build polygamous relationships. Also, like Cushing, I look at the textual content of website posts and analyze their meanings and implications.

Anthropologist Jacobson also looked at computer-mediated communication (CMC) in his study of college students' use and knowledge of instant messaging. He examined how knowledge is a context of CMC, and how in different contexts, meanings attributed to a message may vary (Jacobson 2007:359). Jacobson's goal was to draw the attention of anthropologists to this new method of communication because little attention has been paid to it (Jacobson 2007:362). The ethnography is based on interviews with 30 college students and reports of naturally occurring behavior and specifically constructed communications using instant messaging with over 200 correspondents (Jacobson 2007:363). Behavior, either online or offline, is interpreted within a specific context, so different people may contextualize the same behavior differently and ascribe it different meanings (Jacobson 2007:359). Jacobson found that having different kinds of knowledge about a correspondent on instant messaging will impact how messages are interpreted. The knowledge that correspondents have about each other is rooted in the type of relationship and interactions they have (Jacobson 2007:362). The varying levels of knowledge that correspondents have about each other creates different types of contexts, which influence the way people behave and interpret the behavior of people while instant messaging (Jacobson 2007:360). Like Jacobson, I focus on text based communications, but instead of looking at how messages are interpreted by others, I examine the use and function of a particular website and chat room.

The Internet is still a relatively new frontier in anthropology, yet it is well suited for anthropological investigation, as cited from Boellstorff above. My research on the polygamy

website adds to the available literature of virtual ethnography, and it shows the variety of communities that exist online. I also reveal how the Internet can be used to facilitate a group or population that may be marginalized offline, and how offline cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and marriage are present online. In the next chapter, I discuss the main theoretical approaches I use to frame my research on the polygamy website.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this chapter I introduce the theoretical approaches I use to frame my research questions and analysis. I will discuss how my research fits within a larger feminist anthropological framework and the specific theoretical approaches I use to investigate what the polygamy website is used for, if polygamous relationships are being formed, if offline connections are being made through the website, and how the Internet is impacting the practice of polygamy in the U.S.

Feminist Anthropological Theoretical Framework

There is a rich feminist history in anthropology that has worked to shape and inform my own research interests, questions, methodologies, and analysis. Variability and difference are at the forefront of feminist concerns in anthropology with a view of women as heterogeneous (Stockett and Geller 2006:10). There is a concern with addressing real world problems with the use of anthropological methods and theories, and there is an interest in challenging the oppression of marginalized peoples, including marginalized women, by making these groups visible and empowering them (Stockett and Geller 2006:12, 14). By giving attention to marginalized groups in scholarly work, past anthropologists' and other scholars' interpretations of these groups' lives can be challenged, and this can give rise to new interpretations. Work is being done to change exclusionary views of society as homogenous and normative (Stockett and Geller 2006:14). Understanding the role of power, gender relations, and political economy in culture is an orientation that has persisted in feminist anthropology throughout its history (Lamphere 2006:x).

Working within a feminist anthropological framework means taking on the perspective that gender, sex, and sexuality are culturally constructed categories rather than biological or natural (Lamphere 2006:ix; Stockett and Geller 2006:8). Focusing on emic perspectives and multivocality, and using a more historical and localized analysis are important, as well as a need to address causes of inequalities within specific cultural contexts (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000:105; Stockett and Geller 2006:10). Taking an intersectional approach to understanding the interactions between race, class, gender, sexual preference, age, religion, and other social categories is integral to using a feminist anthropological approach. Although the work and interests of feminist anthropologists may vary greatly, there is always a shared concern with issues of power, difference, and identity (Stockett and Geller 2006:11).

I work within this larger feminist anthropological framework by concerning myself with many of the issues discussed above. I address a real world concern with a feminist anthropological framework and methodologies, as I am attempting to dispel commonly held stereotypes about people who practice polygamy by providing an analysis of gender, sexuality, and marriage. I am exploring and revealing the variation that exists among people in the U.S. and their choices in marriage structures. Those who practice polygamy in the U.S. have been historically marginalized and oppressed, and this still continues today as the practice remains illegal. My hope is that my work can bring visibility to this marginalized group, and also to the inequalities they face due to their choice in marital arrangement, which could be based on religious ideologies, personal preference, or a combination of these and other factors. I provide a counter discourse to normative and dominant views and practices of marriage in the U.S. I am also trying to demonstrate that the culturally constructed binary opposition of real/virtual, as it concerns human interactions and relationships on the Internet, is a false construct.

Examining gender and kinship in relation to polygamy and human interactions on the website is also part of using a feminist anthropological framework. These topics intersect when it comes to reproduction because all societies have mechanisms, such as cultural and religious ideologies and norms, to regulate heterosexual intercourse. How a society defines marriage is just one component of how reproduction is managed, and institutions of marriage exist in a variety of diverse forms around the world (Stone 2006:2). Because there are so many different forms of and meanings attributed to marriage, the ways in which marriage influences and reproduces gender are also diverse. My research examines a marriage structure that is outside of the cultural norm of mainstream American culture while also analyzing gender, as it intersects with marriage, family, and state governance of these.

Issues of gender, sexuality, and marriage are central to debates in U.S. society and are not simply confined to the private, domestic sphere because they challenge what people believe to be true about human origins and the structure of the universe (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:9). Feminist anthropologists Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) argued that cultural spheres and social institutions, like that of marriage, are culturally constructed and only give the impression of being “natural.” The ideas and practices produced from these ideologies appear to be “natural,” have a deep influence on shaping ideologies, and are associated with systems of inequality (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:10, 18). Establishing a connection between non-human concepts, such as nature, biology, or god, with particular types of ideologies and discourses, such as sexuality and ethnicity, bestows legitimacy on these discourses in the U.S., creating a hierarchy in which power relations are rooted and in effect, naturalizes power (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:20). People do not necessarily categorize their daily actions to match the discourses and

ideologies produced by culturally constructed institutions, but rather, actions of people reside at the intersections of discourses (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:18).

In relation to Yanagisako and Delaney's position, I argue against the assumed "naturalness" of monogamy and the idea of the "traditional" family in the U.S. by examining the various cultural influences, events, and factors that played into the establishment of monogamy as the dominant relationship and marriage structure in the U.S. I analyze the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S. and Americans' views of marriage. I discuss how heterosexual monogamous marriage is awarded certain privileges that are unavailable to those who are in polygamous marriages in the U.S., and why polygamy is viewed negatively and holds a position inferior to that of monogamy. Like Yanagisako and Delaney pointed out, the everyday actions of polygamy website members that I conducted research with do not correlate with dominant discourses regarding monogamous marriage in the U.S., but rather occur at the intersection of various discourses of marriage, sexuality, gender, religion, and politics.

Theoretical Approaches

In regard to feminist methodologies, I use an intersectional approach in my research and analysis. During my research I collected data on each interview participant's social categories in order to construct a better understanding about each participant's life situations. I ask about their gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, state they live in, education level, job field, political party affiliation, religious affiliation, marital status, type of marriage structure, number of wives in their family, number of children, and approximate yearly income. I assess how these status positions intersect to create particular and diverse experiences for the website users. This feminist method highlights the importance of women and men's voices, experiences, and agency

and the political economic and cultural context in which they are located (Harrison 2007:24). Collecting this information helps to contextualize their responses to more open ended interview questions and construct a picture of what types of people are using the website. Feminist anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo said, “. . . we need to attend to and to investigate actively the multiple layers of context—or, in another formulation, social location—through which we perceive particular cultural realities” (di Leonardo 1991:31). This is one objective of using a political economic analysis, which will be discussed below. Using an intersectional approach has allowed me to recognize the diversity that exists among members of the website, and that every member has their own unique reasons for joining and using the website. Collecting this data may also show variations in experience based on one or more intersecting social locations or categories like gender, race, religion, or income level.

I also use a political economic approach to examine the historical and contemporary context of polygamy in the U.S. Political economy was defined by di Leonardo as “. . . work in anthropology that attends both to economics and politics and to the ways in which they are culturally construed by differing social actors in history” (di Leonardo 1991:27-28). A key point of a feminist political economic framework is that all forms of inequality are worthy of analysis (di Leonardo 1991:31). Because polygamy is illegal and discriminated against and involves issues pertaining to gender and sexuality, it can benefit from this type of analysis. A political economic approach is also beneficial to anthropological research of the Internet. I use a political economic analysis to explore the historical and cultural context in which polygamy was criminalized and made illegal in the U.S. by examining the intersection of politics, economics, religion, marriage, sexuality, and gender. Incorporating historical research into ethnography is very common among many anthropologists, and from a political economic standpoint, it is

important to examine each cultural group within its own local, national, and global history (Boellstorff 2007:23; di Leonardo 1991:30). Understanding the historical roots of polygamy by examining cultural ideas of religion, marriage, sexuality, gender, economics, and politics help to explain why the practice was made illegal in the U.S. and why it remains this way today.

In regard to theoretical developments in recent Internet research, the Internet must be thought of as a place where people “do things” in order to understand, in people’s own terms, what exactly they are doing and why (Hine 2000:21). The Internet is shaped both by social context, and expectations for its purposes and how it should be used (Hine 2000:30). I use sociologist Christine Hine’s idea that a culture can be enabled by technology as a framework for understanding the existence of a polygamy community on the Internet (Hine 2000:8). Within this framework, the Internet is viewed as a place, “cyberspace,” where rich interactions can occur and culture can be created and sustained (Hine 2000:9). The use of the Internet facilitates the development and cohesiveness of the online community, which may enhance individuals’ ability to learn and communicate about polygamy in a relatively safe environment and provide a community or support system that may not be available offline. The technology of the Internet can provide a setting in which members of the polygamy website can form a cultural group.

In the 1990s, much research was devoted to the rigid separation of the real and the virtual, and this body of work “. . . framed online life as a bounded-off zone of experimentation” (Taylor 2006:18). Contrary to this early rhetoric, online and offline life are actually intricately woven together in complex ways (Taylor 2006:19). I use sociologist T. L. Taylor’s theory to understand that a rigid dichotomy does not exist between online/offline and real/virtual (Taylor 2006:9). Using this conceptual framework, the offline world and the online world cannot be separated because the ideas that exist in the “real” world translate into the “virtual” world, and

vice versa (Taylor 2006:153). Often the offline is over-privileged, and participants find what occurs in their online life to be just as real and meaningful to them as if it were to happen offline (Taylor 2006:19). Taylor's theory helps us to understand how members of the polygamy website are able to meet offline and form "real world" relationships as an extension of their meaningful online relationships of either friendship or romance. It also helps to explain the need for an online community for those that support polygamy, given the social context of the legal restriction on polygamous marriage in the U.S.

To explain why multiple discourses of gender, love, marriage, and sexuality can coexist in one society, such as is found in the U.S., I use social anthropologist Henrietta Moore's idea of dominant and subdominant discourses. The various discourses on gender present in one society are hierarchically ordered, which is subject to historical change and may be personally or contextually variable, resulting in the prevalence of a dominant discourse on gender while subdominant discourses emerge in opposition to it (Moore 1994:59). Moore's framework allows for the possibility of the existence of multiple femininities and masculinities within a society that are potentially contradictory and competing (Moore 1994:63). With this view, femininity and masculinity cannot be considered singular or static, or solely found in women or men (Moore 1994:64). Her framework supports the idea that marriage structures, as they are culturally constructed, can come in many forms, not just monogamy, and there is not a single "right" way to express love and sexuality. In the U.S., polygamy exists as a competing, subdominant discourse in opposition to the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamy, and points to the existence of multiple femininities and masculinities in U.S. society.

My research fits well with the tradition of feminist anthropology and makes good use of existing feminist frameworks and values. As I have discussed, to analyze and interpret the data I

have collected from my research on the polygamy website, I use a feminist intersectional and political economic approach, Hine's (2000) idea that culture can be enabled by technology, Taylor's (2006) theory that a rigid dichotomy does not exist between online/offline, and Moore's (1994) idea of dominant and subdominant discourses. I also used a thematic approach to analyze my research data, which I elaborate on in Chapter 4. Additional theoretical approaches will be discussed in coming chapters as they become relevant to the discussion and analysis. In the chapter that follows, I discuss the methodologies I used during the course of my research.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discuss the methods and processes I used to collect data and analyze the material I gathered in relation to my research questions. What is the polygamy website used for? Are polygamous relationships being formed? Are offline connections being made through the website? Is the Internet impacting the practice of polygamy in the U.S.? I also discuss my research setting, how I gained entry to the research site, the challenges and benefits of conducting Internet research, and the challenges of researching polygamy in the U.S.

Methods

For this research, I used a methodology known as virtual ethnography or virtual anthropology, through which I conducted my field work primarily on the Internet through the use of email³, the chat room, and discussion boards of the polygamy website. I also conducted a community survey in a city in the Western U.S. I collected primary and secondary historical documents and information from the Internet and media, other websites addressing polygamy, and government reports and laws regarding polygamy and marriage. I also reviewed the relevant literature published on polygamy and Internet relationships.

Boellstorff's research, published in 2008, served as a guide for ethical and methodological conduct for virtual ethnography, and showed that conducting anthropological research on the Internet is valid and meaningful. I employed many of his approaches in my own research of the polygamy website. For example, like Boellstorff, I posted on my personal profile on the polygamy website that I am an anthropologist researching the website and made clear my purpose for joining the community. I also made the protection of privacy and anonymity of the

³ The email service was through the polygamy website.

members of the website in my study a high priority by using pseudonyms and not collecting any personal, identifying information like names or places of work.

Constable's research, published in 2003, provided an example of how the Internet can aid in the study of relationships of friendship and marriage that manifest in an online community and through virtual correspondence, which is similar to my research topics. Constable asserted that although the ethical issues are complicated and contested, Internet studies allow the researcher to observe, participate, and communicate, and have the option to "listen in" unobserved (Constable 2003:340). She expressed her astonishment at the honesty and emotions some of the men in her study conveyed to her, and she believed this is due to the safety and anonymity the Internet provides users (Constable 2003:36). The Internet does provide a certain level of anonymity that face-to-face interactions do not, and the study of polygamy in the U.S. can benefit from this sense of security by allowing website members to feel safe and comfortable in sharing information about their personal lives. Polygamy is illegal in the U.S., so the anonymity provided via the online community opens the possibility that website members might be more open and honest without feeling judged or at risk.

Virtual ethnography is still a relatively new way to conduct research for anthropologists, so best practices and ethical guidelines are still being explored. I followed the examples of both Boellstorff and Constable and the ethical guidelines of Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board while also using my best judgment to guide the ethics of my research. I felt it was important to be completely open about my research intentions with website members, answer any and all of their questions honestly and openly, and maintain the privacy and anonymity of website members. I chose to conceal the name of the website and its actual website address in an attempt to further protect the anonymity of its members, and I use pseudonyms in all of my field

notes, transcripts, and analyses. In the presentation of chat room conversations and quotes I decided to edit these for minor spelling and grammar corrections only for the ease of reading. If a mistake did not detract from the meaning of the conversation, then I left the text in its original state.

Entry into the Research Site

I first learned about the polygamy website while doing some Internet research before I even started graduate school. My interest in this topic was spurred by exposure to polygamy in the U.S. through television shows like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives*. The polygamy I had learned about in many of my anthropology classes happened in Africa or the Middle East, and I was curious about how polygamy functions in the U.S. My choice to study polygamy was also influenced by my own life events and changing relationship status. I was monogamously married in the fall of 2011, during my first semester of graduate school, and I became increasingly interested in researching different relationship and marital structures in the U.S. I knew that monogamy worked for my husband and me, but what about other Americans? The fact that polygamy is illegal also interested me from a human rights angle.

My purpose in conducting this research and analysis is not to argue for or against the superiority of polygamy or monogamy; however, I do believe that it is a human right for consenting adults to choose how and with whom they want to express love and sexuality, without discrimination. If this expression includes entering into marriage, then the structure of the marriage and the partners involved should be left to individuals to decide what feels right for them. The federal or state governments should not have the authority to dictate what the appropriate expression of marriage, sexuality, and love is for every citizen of the U.S. I myself am a heterosexual woman who is monogamously married, and because my type of expression of

love is recognized as “normal” or “natural” by the larger U.S. society and legal system, I am awarded certain privileges that accompany legal marriage. I have never experienced any discrimination based on the type of relationship I chose to be in or for the love and sexuality I express with my husband. This is not the case for everyone in the U.S., and I think it is important to examine why this is in an attempt to challenge the status quo.

I became a member of the website just like any other participant on the website would. I completed the free registration through the website by creating a username and password, which gave me access to the chat room and the ability to communicate with other website members through an email function provided by the website. I used my first name as my username in an attempt to be as transparent as possible. I sent an email to two website administrators to explain who I am, my research intentions, and ask their permission to conduct research on their website. I received permission to conduct research on the polygamy website from one of the website administrators. On my personal profile I posted an introduction of myself and made clear my research intentions. As I progressed in my research, I added a picture of myself to my profile, which was customary among many other website members. I also thought this would provide a face with my name and help to personalize my research. I also came across a discussion board used for members to introduce themselves, so I posted an introduction of myself and my research in this forum as well.

Data Collection and Analysis

My analysis is based in a number of research methods pertinent to ethnographic research with participants on a website. One of these methods was my observations of four main discussion boards on the polygamy website over a seven month period, from October 2012 through April 2013. I spent approximately one to two hours collecting data from discussion

boards per week. I chose these four discussion boards because they encompassed general polygamy topics, those centered on Christian or Mormon polygamy, and political or legal issues regarding polygamy. I also included posts from other discussion boards on the polygamy website that I came across in my observations if they seemed relevant to my research questions. I believe my research could have been enhanced if all discussion boards were observed and reported on, but due to the time it takes to examine each post, I did not think this was a feasible endeavor. I did attempt to participate on the discussion boards by posting an introduction of myself and my research intentions. I also posted some questions to spark discussion for my research, but this only generated two responses from the same website member.

In addition to observing the discussion boards, I conducted participant observation in the chat room over a five month period, from January 2013 through May 2013. I spent approximately three to 15 hours per week in the chat room observing and participating in the chat conversation and informally interviewing website members. I also had private chats with website members that were initiated by the website member or myself. During chat conversations, I took notes regarding topics of discussion, and I introduced myself as a researcher collecting information. On occasion I copied and pasted chat conversations into a word document and changed usernames to pseudonyms. I only did this if the conversation included pertinent information for my research and to capture direct quotes of website members.

I also conducted a total of eight formal, semi-structured interviews, with three men and three women from the website, and one man and one woman who were website administrators as my key informants. I ended up interviewing half women and half men, but this was not intentional as I attempted to interview all website members who showed interest in being interviewed. All interviews were conducted using the private chat feature in the polygamy

website's chat room. I did attempt to do an interview using Yahoo Instant Messenger, but due to technical difficulties, this was not successful. Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours. I recruited members of the website for interviews through emails, interaction in the chat room, through a discussion board post that asked individuals who were interested in being interviewed to contact me, through my own personal profile on the polygamy website, and by asking individuals I interviewed if they would refer any other members to be interviewed. These methods are similar to the methods used by Boellstorff (2008) in his research of the virtual world *Second Life*.

I limited formal, semi-structured interviewees to individuals who live in the U.S. I collected data regarding age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, socioeconomic status, state residing in, religious affiliation, education level, job field, marital status, and number of children. I asked a number of in-depth questions regarding the individual's thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions of website usage and polygamy. For the two key informant interviews with website administrators, I recruited these participants by directly emailing them through the polygamy website, and they were interviewed with a different set of questions. I still collected demographic data and information about polygamy, but in addition, I asked about website operations and more specific questions about the purpose of the website. The full set of interview questions I used to guide each interview with website members and website administrators can be found in Appendix I. I also directly emailed both a polygamy activist group and an individual polygamy activist to request an interview, but none of my attempts resulted in an interview. I had planned to collect demographic data, information about polygamy, and questions about activism and politics.

In addition to the formal interviews and other research methods I discussed, I conducted a self-administered, non-random survey in a city in the Western U.S. My purpose in conducting this survey was to contextualize the data I collected online by examining what a small sample of Americans actually think, feel, and know about polygamy in the U.S. I surveyed a total of 37 individuals, 19 women and 18 men, in front of a public library in February 2014. I chose to conduct the survey in front of a library because a variety of people of different ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and racial/ethnic groups utilize public libraries. As my formal interviews were conducted with half women and half men, I attempted to mirror this in the distribution of the survey materials. The community questionnaire requested survey respondents' demographic information, and inquired about their feelings, opinions, views, and knowledge about polygamy and other marriage structures in the U.S. The survey respondents are anonymous as no identifying information was requested or recorded. The questionnaire, with instructions, and an informational letter about my research, was given to respondents to fill out and return to me when completed. I personally administered two surveys to two different respondents by reading the questions out loud to the respondents and recording their answers. I did this because the two respondents wanted to fill out the questionnaire, but did not feel comfortable completing it on their own. Though there are obvious limitations to this survey, such as the small sample size and the fact that only one location was surveyed, I was able to collect valuable and relevant information. The community survey questionnaire can also be found in Appendix I.

To analyze the research data, I used a thematic analysis approach to identify categories or themes that were evident in the data I collected. I coded and analyzed my field notes, discussion board observations, interviews, and survey data to discover patterns and themes that relate to the

research questions. I use direct quotes from interviews with polygamy website members and responses from the community survey, and descriptions of interactions that occurred on the website, to explain and exemplify the themes that emerged from the data collected.

Despite the limited number of formal interviews I was able to conduct, the information I collected from the polygamy website's active and ongoing discussion boards and chat room, along with the rich interview data I was able to collect, provided ample data and information to allow me to learn why people are using the website, if polygamous relationships are being formed, if offline connections are being made through the use of the website, and if the Internet is impacting the practice of polygamy in the U.S. I faced several challenges in relation to conducting ethnographic research online and investigating an illegal and often secretive and secluded marriage practice in the U.S.; some of these challenges are discussed below.

Challenges and Benefits of Internet Research

The Internet can be a challenging environment to conduct research in, and there were definitely a few obstacles that I faced while conducting research. Along with these challenges there are also so many benefits and rewards of conducting this type of research. As the concept of Internet research is still fairly new in anthropology, it is important to discuss both the challenges and benefits of conducting virtual ethnography.

As I progressed through my research, making observations and participating in the chat room of the polygamy website, I was constantly meeting new members of the website every single time I logged on. While this certainly can be seen as a benefit, it did serve as a challenge throughout my research because I would have to introduce myself and explain my research intentions almost every time I logged on to do research. I did not view this as a nuisance at all, but due to this circumstance, I was unable to establish a higher level of rapport with a consistent

group of individuals as is often customary with more traditional anthropological fieldwork. Just as I encountered many new members, individuals that I had introduced myself to and had informal interviews with would seem to disappear, and I would never see them on the polygamy website again. It is easy for people to flow in and out of the polygamy website, so I interacted with an individual on one day, and then never had the opportunity to do so again.

Another challenge that I faced was maintaining constant communication with potential interview participants. I often think of email as a very quick and convenient means of communication, but several potential interview participants did not respond to email messages I sent to them at all, or after exchanging an email or two with me, just stopped responding. This can be very frustrating and challenging to deal with. I still wanted these individuals to participate in my research, but at the same time I had no idea why they were not responding to my emails. In a more traditional field setting, I might have had other means of directly contacting a participant, like calling or visiting them at work or their home, but in an online setting, my only means to directly contact a participant was through the use of email or “run into” them by chance in the chat room, which never occurred. I also faced scheduling conflicts with potential interview participants due to work schedules and other life events that impacted some individuals’ and my ability to log on to the polygamy website simultaneously. I also faced interview appointments being broken and being unable to reschedule these appointments due to a loss of communication with potential participants.

Along with all of these communication issues, there is the very obvious fact that there is a lack of a physical field site while conducting virtual ethnography. Unlike traditional anthropological field work, I am unable to provide a rich physical description of the research setting. The polygamy website is set against the larger context of American culture and society,

but there is no tangible physical location to really “take in” or experience and describe to readers. This aspect of Internet research is challenging, but it also allows more focus to be paid to human interactions and dialogue. This lack of a physical location can cause problems with communication between people in an online situation as well. Because I did not meet any website members face-to-face, I was unable to rely on body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice to guide conversations and decipher the meaning of communications. It can be difficult to distinguish humor or sarcasm from a serious comment without hearing the tone of voice or seeing facial expressions.

Even though there are many challenges that accompany virtual ethnography, there are also many benefits to conducting research online. The Internet is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so research can literally be conducted at any time and on any day. Research can also be conducted from any location with Internet access; one can do research from home, at a library, while traveling, or at a multitude of other various locations. The ease of accessing the Internet in most areas of the U.S. makes virtual ethnography extremely convenient and low cost for U.S. based anthropologists, as compared with more traditional anthropological field work. Those that have familial obligations, a need to maintain employment, health or physical restrictions, or have other responsibilities might also find Internet research a more attractive option than traditional fieldwork because one does not need to travel thousands of miles from home to conduct important and meaningful research.

Along with the personal benefits this type of research can provide, conducting research online offers researchers a chance to conduct research in a new and different manner. It is an unconventional way for anthropologists to do fieldwork, but it is indeed a largely unexplored frontier. The possibilities of research topics are endless, and new and emerging online

communities can be reached through virtual ethnography. The Internet also provides access to an enormous number of people and the potential to meet diverse groups of people from across the country, and even the world.

Challenges of Researching Polygamy in the U.S.

In addition to all of the challenges the Internet provides, researching polygamy in the U.S. has its own set of obstacles. These challenges, in addition to those I discussed related to virtual ethnography, assist in explaining why the number of formal interviews I was able to conduct is limited. Polygamy, as I have mentioned before, is illegal in the U.S., and many who practice it, or have the desire to practice polygamy, do so in secret. This opens up a whole new set of obstacles to overcome, like issues of suspicion, distrust, and secrecy, and a general unwillingness to participate in research. Many website members were reluctant to be interviewed as demonstrated by the following conversation I had with two website members:

John: Janet should do an interview, she sees all knows all.

Kristen: If she is interested, then I would love to do one with her.

Janet: Lol, I don't do interviews, sorry. You will find that most that come here don't do them.

Kristen: Janet--I am finding that, and I completely respect that.

Janet: Well we still welcome you Kristen.

As this conversation shows, some website members were welcoming and friendly towards me, but some were not interested in participating in a formal, semi-structured interview. The illegal nature of polygamy may have also influenced the responses of website members and administrators to questions that I asked in both formal and informal interviews and discussions. I believe that people were honest with me in general, but may have chosen to keep certain aspects of their lives or website activity private.

In addition to the challenges described above, I also had to answer a multitude of questions about my own feelings towards polygamy, my husband's views of polygamy, my

political views, where I go to school, where I live, if I have found a sister wife for my family, and many other questions. I felt it was important to be open and honest about all of my views and answer each question truthfully; after all, that is exactly what I was asking every participant to do for me. I embraced website members' questions as opportunities to explain my research intentions, show that I am nonjudgmental of polygamy, and engage members in conversation. There were times when I was accused of being a spy or simply referred to as "the writer" or "the researcher," which I felt was impersonal and cold behavior, but for the most part the website members were curious about my research and very friendly towards me, even if they did not want to participate in an interview. As a result of these circumstances, I had more success with both participant observation on the website and informal interviews and discussions with website members. Given the illegal status of polygamy in the U.S., and my research taking place primarily on the Internet, these were the most appropriate and effective research methods that I employed with polygamy website members. In the chapters that follow, I continue to describe the challenges I faced while conducting research on the polygamy website. In the next chapter, I discuss the cultural, historical, political, and economic context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S.

CHAPTER 5: PROHIBITION OF POLYGAMY: A HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF POLYGAMY IN THE U.S.

Using a feminist anthropological perspective, specifically a feminist political economy approach in anthropology, this chapter explores the historical and cultural context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S. by examining the intersection of politics, economics, religion, marriage, sexuality, and gender. I also use Henrietta Moore's (1994) idea of dominant and subdominant discourses, which may be both reproduced and in some ways resisted in a society, to help understand how pro-polygamist and anti-polygamist discourses could exist simultaneously in the U.S. and in other Western societies during particular historical time periods. Although the dominant discourse of marriage in the U.S. is heterosexual monogamy, this does not mean that other competing discourses did not exist in the past or do not exist in the present. I argue that the particular historical, cultural, political, and economic context of the U.S. during the 19th century led to polygamy being viewed by mainstream society as socially and morally unacceptable and illegal to practice in the U.S., historically and today. To understand this process, the following two sections provide a brief overview of the historical roots of polygamy in Europe and the U.S.

Polygamy in European History

Historically, polygamy has been practiced by many religious groups, including some Christian groups, and is allowed by Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism (Kilbride 1994:60). In this chapter, I focus mainly on Christian groups and their perspectives and practices of polygamy and monogamy because of the U.S.'s pervasive Christian roots.

Religious law in the Hebrew Bible allowed for concubinage and polygamy, specifically polygyny, and the Law of Moses recognized both monogamy and polygamy and generally did not distinguish between the two (Dixon-Spear 2009:8). According to the Bible, David, Abraham, and Jacob practiced polygamy. Levirate is an ancient Hebrew custom in which a widow would marry her deceased husband's brother who may already be married, so polygamy and levirate were often found in conjunction with one another (Kilbride 1994:53).

According to a Greek Christian Church Historian in the fifth century, Roman emperor Valentinian I authorized Christians to take two wives in the fourth century, and also had two wives of his own; however, this is disputed by some later scholars who suggest that most likely Valentinian I divorced his first wife before marrying the second (Clinton 1850:111; Gage 1893:383; Gibbon 2003). Charlemagne, emperor of Western Europe, practiced polygamy in the eighth century, and depending on the scholar, he had either six or nine wives (Becher 2003:144; Gage 1893:383; Lecky 1897:343). There is evidence that polygamy was practiced among pre-Christian Germanic Tribes of Northwestern Europe⁴, though it was rare, and in the time of Gaelic Irish society, from prehistoric times to the 17th century, polygamy was a common marriage arrangement, particularly in aristocratic households during the later historical period (Kilbride 1994:55, 59; State 2009:16-17, 107; Young 2009:17) In the 16th century, marriage was officially recognized as a sacrament or religious rite and is believed to have become much more central to the Catholic Church at this time, which enabled the church to define what constitutes a marriage (Kilbride 1994:58).

During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, a man petitioned Martin Luther to marry a second wife while his first wife was still alive. Luther formed a church council, and

⁴ Germanic tribes were mostly converting to Christianity from the fourth century to the eighth century; as part of the conversion, there was an attempt to ban polygamy and concubinage (Young 2009:19).

came to the decision that “. . . ‘as the Bible nowhere condemns polygamy, and as it has been invariably practiced by the highest dignitaries of the church,’ the marriage was legitimate and permission was granted” (Gage 1893:384). Many reformers felt that polygamy was not inconsistent with the Bible or the principles of the Gospel. The Reformation in Europe generated several arguments to recreate the marital structure of the Old Testament as a way to recover genuine Christian primitivism (Gordon 2002:28). The issue of polygamy was not settled by the Catholic Church until the Council of Trent in 1563 which opposed polygamy and concubinage; this action was thought to be a direct attack on Luther (Kilbride 1994:64).

According to African American studies scholar Patricia Dixon-Spear, before Christianity, there are no known laws prohibiting the practice of polygamy, and the Romans made the first known prohibition against it in the sixth century, though polygamy was considered to be illegal prior to this official law (Dixon-Spear 2009:8). Contemporary Western conceptions of marriage have been largely influenced by Greco-Roman marriage. Many Western wedding traditions stem from this culture, like the giving of a ring for the engagement, the wearing of a veil, the bride being handed to the groom by her father, the expression of mutual consent by the bride and groom saying “I do,” the expression of the permanence of marriage by the bride and groom saying “until death do us part”, the eating of cake, and the carrying of the wife by the husband over the threshold (Dixon-Spear 2009:13-14). Exclusive monogamy in marriage was also a feature of Greco-Roman society, which influenced Christian ideologies of marriage and spread as the Catholic Church gained power and influence in the fourth century (Dixon-Spear 2009:14, 16).

Even though monogamy was the norm, this did not stop groups or individuals from practicing polygamy or endorsing it. In Munster, Germany, John of Leiden established what has

been referred to as the polygamous kingdom of Munster in 1534; this occurred within the Anabaptist movement (Kilbride 1994:65). Anabaptists had puritanical views on sex and advocated producing many children without sin or lust, and adultery was considered a serious transgression. The Anabaptist belief system, combined with a focus on the Old Testament, patriarchal social structure, and a population of three times more women than men due to the ejection of those who were not Anabaptist from Munster, set the stage for polygamy to be practiced openly in Munster (Kilbride 1994:66). After only 11 months, the practice of polygamy, conflict with Catholic Church officials, and other political and economic factors contributed to the siege of the polygamous kingdom by a Catholic bishop's army.

In 1646, Lord John Selden of England wrote *Uxor ebraica* with the purpose of proving that polygamy was allowed according to the Hebrew Bible (Gage 1893:385). English poet John Milton wrote in favor of polygamy in the 17th century, and found support for it in the Bible. In a work published after his death, Milton wrote: "It appears to me sufficiently established by the above arguments that polygamy is allowed by the law of God; lest however any doubt should remain, I will subjoin abundant examples of men whose holiness renders them fit patterns for imitation, and who are among the lights of our faith" (Milton 1825:241). In the 19th century, Henry Ward Beecher, an American Protestant clergyman, found scriptural basis for the practice of polygamy. A number of other Protestants wrote in favor of polygamy, including John Lyster and Rev. Dr. Madden (Gage: 1893:387). The American scholar, William Ellery Channing, also found no prohibition to polygamy in the New Testament as he wrote in *Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton* published in 1826.

As discussed above, for those who practice Christianity and Judaism, there are several biblical examples as well as historical evidence that suggests that monogamy was not always the

only accepted marriage style. The unfavorable view of polygamy in Europe most likely stems from the practice being subsumed under the term bigamy in the 16th century; bigamy, being married to one person while legally married to another, is viewed as adultery and sinful in the eyes of most Christians (Kilbride 1994:61). It is evident that the influence of the Greco-Romans on Christian ideas of marriage and the power play made by the Catholic Church to oppose polygamy also play a role in shaping Western views of polygamy. Many European countries were largely responsible for conquering and expanding into the New World, so these culturally constructed views of marriage became part of the American colonies and, later, part of mainstream culture in the U.S. Cultural influences of the Greco-Romans, new religious ideologies, and issues of power created by competing religious groups all influenced changing attitudes towards polygamy in Europe and among Christians.

Polygamy in American History

Ideals for marriage, gender, and sexuality in the American colonies, which later became the U.S., were heavily influenced by their Puritan roots. In 17th century New England, the Puritans viewed sex as a natural and joyous part of marriage, but were opposed to sexual behavior that occurred outside of the marital bonds they believed to be ordained by God and society; polygamy would have fallen outside the spectrum of acceptable sexual behavior (Kilbride 1994:57). During the 19th century, U.S. culture was influenced by Victorian era notions of sexual restraint and religious morality. Polygamy appeared to pose a threat to Americans because it was so different from Victorian family ideals that established the validity of monogamous marriage (Kilbride 1994:66). In line with Puritan and Victorian ideals, polygamy was not accepted by the majority of U.S. society, the members of which were mostly Christian, and was viewed as the desecration of Christian morality (Cracroft 2008:234). Polygamy was, and

often still is, associated with promiscuity, lust, impurity, and prostitution (Kilbride 1994:50, 70). Polygamists were thought to be infidels who gave into their passions while using fraudulent arguments of religious freedom to disguise their self-indulgence (Gordon 2002:39).

Matilda Joslyn Gage, a 19th century women's rights activist, said, “. . . under the light of advancing civilization, it [polygamy] has somewhat fallen into disrepute with the majority of men and women, yet its renewal as an underlying principle of a new Christian sect, need not be a subject of astonishment” (Gage 1893:408). Among other scholars, this idea of advancing civilization that Gage references was established by American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's work *Ancient Society*, published in the late 19th century. Morgan described savagery and barbarism as stages each society advances through to reach the stage of civilization, which is the desired level of progress. According to Morgan, monogamy is the marital style of the civilization stage, and he describes it as a “moral development.” Morgan also supported women's equality with men. Polygamy is described by Morgan as the “right of the males” and existing alongside slavery; he associated polygamy with barbarism (Morgan 1877). It is important to note that Morgan's unilineal evolutionist views, while an important step in early cultural anthropology, are seen as ethnocentric and flawed by modern anthropologists.

In contrast, German socialist philosopher Friedrich Engels, a contemporary of Morgan, described monogamy as “the subjugation of the one sex by the other,” and a result of the need for men to produce heirs for the purpose of passing down ownership of private property (Dixon-Spear 2009:30). Engels viewed monogamy as the first marriage structure based on economic needs rather than natural ones (Dixon-Spear 2009:27). He wrote that because monogamous marriage is not based on love or sexual desire, men need an outlet for their sexual needs, so prostitution and concubinage exist in conjunction with monogamous marriage (Dixon-Spear

2009:28-29). Engels also viewed slavery existing alongside monogamy as another sexual outlet for men through the use of their slaves (Dixon-Spear 2009:28). Engels and Morgan are examples of two competing discourses existing simultaneously in the 19th century regarding monogamous marriage. Morgan viewed monogamy as civilized and a sign of societal progress and morality, and Engels viewed it as the subjugating of married women alongside the potential sexual exploitation of women through prostitution, slavery, and concubinage. Morgan's viewpoint was shared by mainstream American culture during this time.

For 19th century Americans, monogamous marriage was also tied to conceptions of liberty. Christian moral truth was the basis of liberty in the U.S., and the Christian faith of the country's founders was intertwined into the Constitution (Gordon 2002:69). Religious freedom and free thought were viewed as components of liberty as long as they upheld Christian ideals held by the majority of society; actions seen as anti-Christian were not protected under the concept of religious liberty (Gordon 2002:38,71). It was believed that the welfare of the country and the protection of the "home of liberty" were dependent on Christian monogamy, sexual restraint, and the protection of women and children (Gordon 2002:30, 33). Anti-polygamists like Metta Victor, a popular novelist in the mid-1800s, thought liberty would disappear if the Constitution was not protected against the abuses by heretics and zealots (Gordon 2002:30). The arguments of anti-polygamists played on Americans' emotional logic, visions of Christian religious liberty, and the importance of monogamous marriage (Gordon 2002:31).

Protestant beliefs of marriage as a holy sacrament intimately tied the institution of marriage to that of religion. The wife and mother's spiritual wisdom was thought to make her God's representative in the family, and the glue that binds the family unit together. Husbands and wives were thought to find God in matrimonial love, which made adultery an act of sacrilege

(Gordon 2002:40). Trust was thought to be at the heart of monogamous marriage, and polygamy was viewed as adultery and a betrayal of matrimonial trust and the emotional integrity of the relationship (Gordon 2002:32).

Women were expected to be wives and mothers and be obedient and faithful to their husbands. Devotion to the Christian faith, fidelity, and sexual restraint were important moral values during the 19th century. Womanhood and femininity, during the Victorian era, were defined by domestication, religious devotion, chastity, and submissiveness (Pisarz-Ramirez 2008:59). Evil was associated with women who departed from traditional roles of sexual expression and Christian faith to experiment with new and different sexual practices, and they were ostracized by the larger society (Batton 2004:613; Gordon 2002:38). Women who strayed from “proper” mainstream ideals were labeled harlots, and embodied the definition of licentiousness. Men were thought to naturally need sexual variety and were more sexual than women, so men needed to practice self-restraint in order to overcome sexual urges. Although extramarital sexual activity was viewed as immoral for both men and women, this did not stop many men from visiting prostitutes or committing adultery. White males had unrestricted sexual access to their female slaves and servants, and rape committed by a white man on a black woman was not considered a crime under slave law (Dixon-Spear 2009:42). Any deviation from what was deemed as proper sexual behavior by the larger society was met with hostility. For example, men who practiced polygamy were thought to be greedy for money, power, and women; polygamist men were viewed as failures, fools, self-indulgent, and in some cases, criminals (Gordon 2002:45). Still, there were many groups in the U.S. that were experimenting with marital structure and sexuality in the 19th century.

The country's Puritan roots, Victorian era morals, ideas about progress and civilization as they related to marriage forms, dominant culturally constructed gender roles, Christian ideology, and ideas about "proper" sexual behavior intersected to create and reproduce a mainstream culture of heterosexual monogamy in the 19th century. Moore's (1994) theory of dominant and subdominant discourses, which states discourses are hierarchically ordered resulting in the domination of one discourse over other emerging subdominant and oppositional discourses, is useful in this analysis. Though the dominant discourse regarding marriage was Christian heterosexual monogamy, other competing discourses about marriage and sexuality also emerged in the 19th century. Polygamy among the Mormons was one of these competing, subdominant discourses. It is essential to examine the establishment and early history of the Mormon Church in order to fully understand the cultural, political, and economic context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S. The move by the U.S. federal government to criminalize the practice of polygamy was fueled by anti-Mormon and anti-polygamy sentiments and rhetoric in the 19th century and the rising political and economic power of the Mormon Church.

Mormon Polygamy and Other Alternative Marriage Structures in the U.S.

The Mormon Church or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) was founded in upstate New York in 1830 by Joseph Smith. Mormonism was a new religion that emerged out of Christianity and members follow the *Book of Mormon*, which is believed to be the word of God revealed to Smith (Gordon 2002:2). The *Book of Mormon* explains that two families fled to the New World hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. This story seemed to resonate with the desire to reconcile American history with religious truth (Gordon 2002:21). Mormons insisted that their church was the true Christian church (Gordon 2002:11).

In 1843, Smith received the “Revelation on Celestial Marriage” from God, and this revelation officially associated polygamy, also known as celestial marriage, with Mormonism; however, it is rumored that Smith was practicing polygamy long before receiving this revelation (Gordon 2002:22). The revelation regarding polygamy was kept a secret for 10 years and only shared with Smith’s inner circle, and during this time, polygamy and any association with it was denounced and denied by Mormons (Gordon 2002:23). In 1852, the Mormon Church acknowledged the practice of polygamy at a conference at which an elder, Orson Pratt, delivered a sermon on the religious and social superiority of polygamy (Gordon 2002:27). The practice of polygamy was reserved for church leaders and thought of as the most exalted form of marriage. Acceptance of polygamy was difficult to swallow for many members including Smith’s wife Emma who, after Smith’s death, stated she never consented to any polygamous marriages (Gordon 22:22).

Mormons were not the first religious nonconformists to challenge traditional structures of marriage, but they were the biggest, most powerful, and best organized. Groups experimenting with marital structures, sexuality, and religion were popping up often in the 19th century. In the early 1800s, Jacob Cochran founded the Conchranites in Maine. Legal marriages were not considered valid, and members believed in spiritual wifery or affinity which dictated that members could form and dissolve relations as they or Cochran, their religious leader, saw fit (Gordon 2002:28). Spiritual wifery helped to explain free love movements in the 19th century as well.

The Progressive Union Club practiced free love or Passional Attraction which denied the traditional marriage system and the state’s right to interfere in the matter; in 1855 this group had 300 members. Marriage could be limited to one partner or thought of as a life partnership that

could begin and end at the discretion of the man and woman involved. The group believed that a woman had the right to choose the father of her child, and many members were involved with extramarital sexual relationships with other members (Barnes 2008:139).

In the 19th century, some thought that the institution of marriage was no different from that of slavery or prostitution, and marriage was thought of as the economic enslavement of women. In line with this view of marriage, Fanny Wright, writer and feminist, combined religious free thought with the philosophy of free love in her establishment of the community of Nashoba (Barnes 2008:138). Wright opposed marriage and its restrictions, and she encouraged free sexual relations within the community (Barnes 2008:138; Gordon 2002:38). To mainstream American culture, she embodied sexual and religious danger, and challenged the rights of husbands and the law of marriage. Wright was called the “voluptuous priestess of licentiousness” and the “Red Harlot of Infidelity” (Gordon 2002:38). John Humphrey Noyes also promoted free love and the opposition to marriage in the Oneida Perfectionists group he founded in the mid-1800s in New York (Barnes 2008:138). The Oneida community practiced spiritual affinity or complex marriage and selective breeding (Gordon 2002:28).

These differing marital structures and ideas of love and sexuality were under scrutiny from the larger society. Mainstream U.S. culture found polygamy to be immoral and uncivilized which helped to make Mormons seem foreign, exotic, and frightening (Sturgis 2003:78). In 1838, two Mormon boys and 17 Mormon men were killed in a massacre in Missouri; the Federal government could not offer protection from or punishment for the state official who allowed the violence to occur (Gordon 2002:9). Mobs tarred and feathered the Mormon’s prophet, harassed missionaries, pillaged fields, and even murdered women and children in the 1830s and 1840s (Gordon 2002:8). By the 1840s, Mormons had maximized their political and economic strength

by bloc voting, forming a private militia, and dealing only with approved merchants. These activities in combination with rumors of polygamy, aggressive proselytizing, and unquestioning obedience to their leader, Smith, made Mormon settlements unpopular and threatening to nearby residents (Gordon 2002:24-25).

In 1844, Smith ordered a printing press in Nauvoo, Illinois, be destroyed because the owner published a story critical of Smith's policies. Smith was arrested by Illinois law enforcement and was murdered by a mob of anti-Mormons who attacked the jail (Gordon 2002:25). After Smith's death, members of the Mormon Church migrated to the Great Salt Lake Basin in 1847 with their new leader, Brigham Young, seeking refuge from political and religious persecution. Young settled the area between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada and the Columbia River and the Gila River (Sturgis 2003:77-78). At the time, the area belonged to Mexico and offered the isolation and space the church needed for its growing congregation of converts (Gordon 2002:25-26).

After the land settled by Young came under the possession of the U.S. government in 1848, the Mormons petitioned the U.S. federal government for statehood as the state of Deseret in 1849. However, the organization of the Territory of Utah in 1850 crushed this request (Gordon 2002:26). Mormon leaders applied the same principles of local majority rule used in the states to dictate that they had the same rights to self-governance in their own jurisdiction because the Territory of Utah was not entirely under federal or state governmental control (Gordon 2002:9). Intertwining religious, economic, and political power was necessary in order to build the new Zion, the kingdom of God as envisioned by Mormon doctrine (Gordon 2002:27). Creating an economically independent, theocratic community was the goal of the Mormon Church, and they

developed a city, factories, farms, dairies, foundries, iron works, machine shops, textile mills, and coal mines in Utah (Dixon-Spear 2009:44).

In the late 1850s, polygamy became a large issue on the Republican Party's agenda, and they aimed to eliminate the "twin relics of barbarism," slavery and polygamy (Cracroft 2008:234; Dixon-Spear 2009:45). President James Buchanan sent U.S. troops to the Territory of Utah in 1857 to establish U.S. rule in the area and end what he considered to be a rebellion in Utah. By 1860, there were over 150 self-sustaining Mormon societies established in the territory. Many non-Mormons came to the area in a miners' rush during the Civil War era, and tensions flared between the two groups and their ways of life (Sturgis 2003:78). William H. Hooper, U.S. congressional delegate from the Territory of Utah and member of the Mormon Church, defended polygamy as a religious right sanctioned by the authority of the Old Testament. Hooper defended the Mormon settlements in the Territory of Utah as being safe, Christian communities without gambling, drinking saloons, or brothels, and affirmed that the community members were good people (Kilbride 1994:71).

Six different bids were submitted for the creation of a Mormon state to join the union and all six failed (Sturgis 2003:78). It became clear that the U.S. government would not grant Utah statehood while it remained a Mormon theocracy. Members of the Mormon Church, like Hooper, were very involved in the government, and Young was even the first governor of the Territory of Utah (Gordon 2002:28). President Chester A. Arthur supported anti-Mormonism and referred to polygamy as a "barbarous system." Arthur made the following statement in his Third Annual Message on December 4, 1883: "I am convinced, however, that polygamy has become so strongly entrenched in the Territory of Utah that it is profitless to attack it with any but the stoutest weapons which constitutional legislation can fashion" (Sturgis 2003:80).

Reformers, women's rights advocates, educators, Christian church leaders, and politicians of the 19th century condemned polygamy (Cracroft 2008:234; Killbride 1994:70). There was an abundance of anti-Mormon and anti-polygamy rhetoric and literature circulating in the mid-1800s. Anti-polygamists could not compete with the revelations that inspired the Latter Day Saints, so they used the story telling approach of abolitionists. Popular literature like novels, short stories, and newspaper exposes created the initial rhetoric. Middle class, women authors from the East wrote stories about the imagined pain and humiliation that polygamy must inflict on women; the authors were obscure, but the impact of their writing endured for decades (Gordon 2009:29). Ridicule of Mormon polygamy was also supplied by 19th century comedians in the form of traveling performances and newspaper columns (Cracroft 2008:236-237). Almost 100 novels, including the first Sherlock Holmes story, and hundreds of magazine and newspaper stories built a market for anti-polygamy fiction (Gordon 2002:30). Victor's novel *Mormon Wives* sold 40,000 copies during the 1850s (Gordon 2002:31). The works of fiction were often about women who were tricked into or followed their husbands reluctantly into polygamy and eventually died or escaped from terrible conditions.

A flaw of the anti-polygamist movement and works of fiction available in the 19th century is that they assumed that women could not be morally different from one another. Anti-polygamist advocates believed that women whose husbands converted to Mormonism had little choice but to follow them to Utah due to the inherent desire of women to obey their husbands. The literature also insinuated that the plan for polygamy was concealed by the husband until the opportunity for escape was long gone (Gordon 2002:43). The problem with this view is that it assumed that there was a universal way of being a woman. If women in the East could not fathom the thought of being in a polygamous marriage, then how could any woman fathom it?

Moore's (1994) framework allows for the possibility of the existence of multiple femininities and masculinities within a society that are potentially contradictory and competing. The anti-polygamists of the 19th century failed to recognize that not all women share the same views, that there are multiple ways to express femininity and perform the role of woman and wife, and some women may have enjoyed and willingly chosen polygamous marriage.

In fact, the Mormon women of Utah were one of the most vocal feminist groups in the 19th century; these women defended their right to practice polygamy and their territorial right to vote, opposed the idea of women as passive objects, and advocated the education of girls (Iversen 1984:505, 510). Mormon women of Utah even published the *Woman's Exponent*, a feminist periodical that displayed a masthead of "The Rights of Women of Zion, and the Rights of Women of All Nations" (Iversen 1984:505). Although anti-polygamist activists used a platform of women's rights to argue against polygamy, Mormon women viewed polygamy and their feminism as linked and used women's rights rhetoric to defend their marriage practices (Iversen 1984:506). Modern feminist critique of the *Woman's Exponent* shows that polygamy allowed for female bonding, increased independence, closer mother/child bonds, and challenged the idea of dependent womanhood by promoting an image of competent womanhood (Iversen 1984:507, 512). From a 19th century Mormon woman's perspective, polygamy offered a way for all women to become wives and mothers, have their own homes, have a social position, have freedom from sexual obligations, practice sexual abstinence during pregnancy and lactation, and plan spacing of pregnancies (Iversen 1984:508-509). The practice of polygamy was also viewed by Mormon women as keeping men from committing adultery and licentious behavior (Iversen 1984:508).

Young, second leader of the Mormon Church, warned against the falsehoods of the anti-polygamy fiction, but the purpose was to arouse sympathy from the general public and inspire activism for legal intervention (Gordon 2002:30). Often, the only way Mormons could respond to anti-Mormon and anti-polygamy rhetoric was through their own pamphlets and publication, which were not as widely circulated or well received by non-Mormons (Grow 2006:112). Anti-polygamists appealed to mainstream America's ideals of religious liberty as this intersected with the importance of monogamous marriage (Gordon 2002:31). Congressional debates in the 19th century regarding polygamy revealed mainstream America's feelings towards the practice as a violation of natural law or god given monogamy, an unethical practice, and the enslavement of women (Kilbride 1994:81).

It was decided by the federal government that in order for Utah to be awarded statehood, the Mormon Church had to discontinue the active role it played in the politics of Utah, Mormon leaders had to stop doing business only with fellow Mormons, and the practice of polygamy had to end (Sturgis 2003:78). The Edmunds Act of 1882 was a federal statute passed to prohibit bigamy and unlawful cohabitation, unmarried people living together, which removed the need to prove that an actual marriage had occurred (Utah Commission 1884). The Edmunds Act revoked polygamists' right to vote, made them ineligible for jury service, prohibited them from holding political office, and implemented fines and prison time as punishment (Kilbride 1994:70). This act reinforced the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act passed by congress in 1862 and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln, which prohibited polygamy in U.S. territories, disincorporated the Mormon Church, and restricted the church's property ownership to \$50,000 (Dixon-Spear 2009:45). Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887 which disinherited children born in polygamous marriages, required wives to testify against their husbands, and provided an

instrument through which church properties could be confiscated (Dixon-Spear 2009:46; Kilbride 1994:70). The official ban on polygamy occurred in 1890 as the result of a Supreme Court decision that ruled the Edmunds-Tucker Act was constitutional (Kilbride 1994:70).

The enactment of legislation criminalizing polygamy caused Mormons to decide between practicing religious beliefs that were thought to be given straight from God himself to the founder, Smith, or partaking in the rights of citizenship, like voting, holding political office, and jury duty. The U.S. government was eventually successful in forcing the Mormons to submit to its demands by withholding civil liberties (Sturgis 2003:78). This forced polygamy into the underground especially when the Mormon Church decreed on September 25, 1890 that followers should abide by the laws enacted by the U.S. government (Kilbride 1994:70). Some families relocated to secluded parts of Arizona, Canada, Colorado, Mexico, Nevada, and Wyoming in order to continue the practice of polygamy, keep their families intact, and avoid arrest (Dixon-Spear 2009:46). Utah finally gained statehood in 1896, but during the process, many Mormons were subject to time in jail, separated from their families, and experienced economic hardship (Sturgis 2003:78).

The Mormon Church faced some backlash because the practice of polygamy continued after it was officially renounced by the church. As a result of this, the Mormon Church released a public document upholding their loyalty to the laws of the U.S., the separation of church and state, and the idea that polygamy is a violation of civil and church law (Dixon-Spear 2009:46). Church leaders that continued to practice polygamy were relieved of their positions and some were even excommunicated which led to the development of factions within the Mormon Church. At this point, the Mormon Church's conflict started with the Mormon fundamentalists, the factions continuing to practice polygamy. The fundamentalists left the Mormon Church and

some eventually settled in towns of Hildale, Short Creek, and Colorado City located on the Utah-Arizona border (Dixon-Spear 2009:47). Raids by various government agencies were made on fundamentalist Mormon communities in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s; as a result of the raids, arrests were made, families were split up, children were put into foster homes, and women were forced to give their children up for adoption (Dixon-Spear 2009:47-48). In 1991, Utah's attorney general made the following statement: "Unless it is associated with child abuse, welfare fraud or any other illegal act, polygamy for its own sake has not been a crime susceptible of successful prosecution and uses up an awful lot of resources" (Dixon-Spear 2009:48). Various fundamentalist Mormon communities are still in existence today despite the raids made in the distant and recent past, the practice remaining illegal in the U.S., and persisting negative attitudes towards polygamy from mainstream American society and the Mormon Church.

In the 19th century, the Mormons were viewed as a threat to the political and economic order of the U.S., to Christianity, to the dominant discourse of gender and sexuality, and to monogamous marriage. The intertwining of religion, politics, and economics by the Mormon Church threatened the very foundation the country was built on. The unrestrained political independence exercised by the Mormon Church was in complete opposition to the nation's democratic political system (Cracroft 2008:234). Because the Mormon theocracy wanted statehood so badly, the U.S. government was able to use its power to achieve a separation of church and state and end church sanctioned polygamy in Utah. Polygamy, during the 19th century, was viewed through a lens of progress, civilization, and Christian morality. It was viewed as a barbaric practice that must be ended, so the federal government took the opportunity to criminalize the practice in order to crush the Mormon Church's political and economic influence. Mormon polygamy also threatened the established and dominant discourse of gender

and sexuality shaping ideals of womanhood, femininity, and marriage. The actions of the federal government during the 19th century solidified the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamous marriage as the only legal and “right” way to express love and sexuality in the U.S.

Polygamy in 21st Century America

The legislation criminalizing polygamy is still in place to this day, but people are actively working to change this. Mark Henkel, National Polygamy Advocate™, is a non-Mormon advocating for the repeal of anti-polygamy laws on the behalf of consenting adult polygamy. According to his website he is pro-marriage, pro-woman, and a pro-Bible Christian (National Polygamy Advocate™ 2013). Other activist groups lobbying for the decriminalization of the practice of polygamy are the Centennial Park Action Committee and the Principle Voices, a Utah-based group run by wives of polygamous marriages (Barnes 2008:154).

Polygamy is still very present in the media, particularly on television, such as HBO’s *Big Love* and TLC’s *Sister Wives*. Also, the topics of polygamy and polyamory⁵ are being examined on television episodes of *Taboo* and *Strange Sex*. The National Geographic Channel recently featured several polygamist families in the community of Centennial Park on its series titled *Polygamy USA*, which aired in May 2013. Families who practice polygamy and live in mainstream society are “going public” and sharing their positive experiences, such as the Darger family, an independent fundamentalist Mormon polygamous family living in Utah. The Dargers co-authored a memoir entitled *Love Times Three: Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage*, which was published in 2011. That is not to say that negativity in the media has waned completely, or that polygamy is a positive experience for all who practice it. There are many diverse groups and families from various religious and secular backgrounds who practice

⁵ Polyamory refers to being in a romantic or sexual relationship with more than one person at the same time with the consent of all involved.

polygamy in the U.S. today. Those who do choose polygamy do so for religious reasons, personal preference, a combination of the two and other varying reasons. Some who practice polygamy live in intentional communities surrounded by others who also practice polygamy, while other individual families live within mainstream American society either hiding their marriage structure or making it public.

One of the most notable cases involving polygamy in the media was the coverage of the Warren Jeffs trial, which brought to light the abuse of young women that occurred within the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS). Jeffs is the leader of the FLDS and the prophet of the church, and he is currently serving a sentence of life in prison plus 20 years. He was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault against two girls, aged 12 and 15, that he claimed were his wives. Jeffs was only one of several men from the FLDS compound in Eldorado, Texas, who were convicted of sexual assault (CNN Wire Staff 2011). Women who have had negative and traumatizing experiences within the FLDS are speaking out, like Carolyn Jessop who in 2008 published her memoir *Escape*, which provided a detailed account of her life in a polygamous marriage and within the FLDS community and how she escaped. TLC also aired two new television series, *Breaking the Faith* and *Escaping the Prophet*, in November of 2013 and January of 2014. *Breaking the Faith* follows the journey of young men and women who escaped the FLDS church and their attempt to adjust to life outside of the FLDS community. *Escaping the Prophet* features Flora Jessop, an ex-FLDS member turned social activist, whose goal is to “take down” the church by working “. . . with law enforcement, the Attorney General of Arizona, and a network of inside informants to help rescue runaways and extract victims within the community, as well as to help empower families who chose to stay and fight” (TLC 2013).

While atrocities like sexual assault of a child have occurred within the FLDS, it is important to remember that this group does not represent all people who identify as Mormon fundamentalists or all people who practice polygamy. What has been condoned in FLDS communities under the rule of Jeffs can be interpreted as more attributable to unequal power relations, patriarchal rule, a cult-like environment, and seclusion from the outside world, rather than merely the marriage practice of polygamy. Polygamy is not the root cause of sexual assault of children or other abuses that can and do happen in some marriages and families. Domestic violence, rape, incest, and child abuse can and do happen in and outside of any type of marital or family structure and among persons of varying backgrounds.

The culmination of the right social, cultural, and historical circumstances may be approaching that will allow for all marital structures and relationship types to co-exist and be acknowledged as legal in the U.S. Opinions about homosexuality and same-sex relationships have changed drastically over the last century; many gay rights activists are fighting for marriage equality, and in several states they have won. The achievements of the gay rights movement and the positive media exposure of polygamy and polyamory may open the door for changing perceptions and acceptance of other expressions of marriage and love in the U.S. besides the established norm of heterosexual monogamy. Until that time comes, it is important to continue to examine and acknowledge the cultural, historical, political, and economic context in which polygamy and other expressions of love and marriage became socially and morally unacceptable and illegal, in order to have a better understanding of the various mechanisms at play.

One change that has recently occurred is the ruling made by U.S. District Court Judge Clark Waddoups on December 13, 2013, which essentially decriminalized polygamy in the state of Utah. The ruling is a result of a lawsuit filed by the Brown family, a polygamous family

featured on the reality television show *Sister Wives*, in 2011 on the grounds that the law violated their right to privacy. Waddoups ruled that the cohabitation portion of the anti-polygamy law in Utah was unconstitutional according to the First and 14th amendments because, unlike the 19th century concept of “religious cohabitation,” living together does not equate to marriage (Dalrymple II 2013). The act of bigamy or legally marrying more than one individual simultaneously is still illegal.

The intersection of religion, politics, economics, marriage, sexuality, and gender was crucial in creating the context in which polygamy was made illegal in the U.S. A religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening, anti-slavery and abolitionist movements, and women’s suffrage were all occurring during the 19th century. The political, religious, and cultural climate of the time set the stage for anti-Mormon and anti-polygamy rhetoric, anti-polygamist advocates, and the condemnation of free love and its proponents. In the U.S. a culture of heterosexual monogamy was created and reproduced by the country’s Puritan roots, Victorian era morals, ideas about progress and civilization, dominant culturally constructed gender roles, Christian ideology, and ideas about “proper” sexual behavior. I argue that this particular historical, cultural, political, and economic context of the 19th century led to polygamy being viewed as socially and morally unacceptable and illegal to practice in the U.S., and influenced the contemporary persistence of these views today. The decision of the federal government to criminalize the practice of polygamy in the U.S. in the late 19th century is better understood as a multi-faceted and intricately woven string of events set within a particular historical and cultural context. By criminalizing polygamy in the 19th century, the federal government solidified the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamous marriage as the only legal and “right” way to express love and sexuality in the U.S., but polygamy has persisted despite being illegal and

viewed as abnormal by mainstream American culture. There is a possibility for multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses of love, marriage, gender, and sexuality to coexist, as they have historically and do contemporarily in the U.S., but rights of a legal spouse and social acceptance are reserved only for those conforming to the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamy, and recently in some states, same-sex partners and spouses.

CHAPTER 6: PERCEPTIONS OF POLYGAMY IN THE U.S. AND THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE POLYGAMY WEBSITE

Using discourse analysis, this chapter examines the views, opinions, and beliefs that respondents to the community survey hold to be true about polygamy and other marriage structures in the U.S. The analysis of the dominant discourse regarding marriage, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. reveals why there is a need for an online space to openly discuss and support polygamy. Additionally, I outline the purpose and function of the polygamy website, and how website members view and define polygamy.

In order to contextualize the research I conducted on the polygamy website within the larger U.S. society, I surveyed a total of 37 individuals, 19 women and 18 men, by administering a questionnaire in a Western city in the U.S. I collected demographic information and inquired about community survey respondents' feelings, opinions, views, and knowledge about polygamy and other marriage structures in the U.S. I use philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of discourse analysis to analyze the community survey responses in relation to the cultural discourse of marriage, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. By using this framework to analyze the community survey responses, the influence of the dominant discourse of marriage, gender, and sexuality on individuals' beliefs and practices can be identified. This type of analysis allows for privilege and power to be examined in relation to a society's culturally constructed discourses (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000:82).

Perceptions of Marriage in the Western U.S.

I asked each community survey respondent how they personally define marriage in order to construct a picture of how marriage is perceived in the U.S. Survey respondents provided a

number of characteristics that they believe define marriage. According to the most recurrent survey responses, marriage involves love or desire (7⁶), a commitment (6), involves support or working together (5), is recognized by law (5), is intended to last a lifetime (5), is a covenant with God or involves a spiritual element (5), is a bond (4), and is monogamous (3). Other elements of marriage noted by individual survey takers were unity, balance, honesty, living together, involves a physical relationship, provides a foundation for children, is an advantage, and is an agreed upon set of expectations and boundaries. These characteristics identified by the community survey respondents reflect the dominant discourse that defines marriage in the U.S. According to this dominant discourse, marriage must embody certain characteristics, like love, commitment, honesty, and support, and entail a legal or spiritual ceremony and a monogamous bond to be viewed as legitimate or meaningful by the larger society. The hegemony of this discourse is evident in the privilege and benefits that are awarded to heterosexual, monogamously married couples in the U.S.

In addition to the dominant characteristics of marriage discussed above, when questioned about the definition of marriage, 32% (12) of respondents, five men and seven women, included the gender of partners involved in the marriage. Out of this 32%, only one man indicated same sex partners were included in his definition of marriage. The other 11 respondents, that indicated a gender, noted that marriage was defined by a heterosexual relationship. For example, a 32 year old female defined marriage as, “Husband and wife in one union.” The need to clarify the gender of marital partners in their definition may be due to the growing acceptance of same sex marriage and a desire of some individuals to distinguish and separate heterosexual marriage from same sex marriage.

⁶ This number indicates the actual number of community respondents who provided this characteristic.

Other survey respondents did not indicate the gender of marital partners in their definition of marriage. Thirty-two percent (12) of respondents, five men and seven women, used gender neutral terms, such as “people,” “individuals,” or “consenting adults,” in their definition, which I interpreted as an attempt to include both same sex and heterosexual marriage in their definitions. I came to this conclusion because 70% (26) of survey respondents, 14 men and 12 women, believe same sex couples should have the right to marry. Nineteen percent (7) of survey respondents, four men and three women, used no terms in their definition to describe the individuals involved in marriage. This silence surrounding the gender of married persons, or the neglect to include this information in their definitions, may speak to the dominance and privilege of heteronormativity in U.S. culture. Still, 70% of survey respondents indicating their support of same sex marriage also points to significant change occurring in regard to the dominance of heteronormativity in this society.

Sixty-two percent (23) of community survey respondents, nine men and 14 women, indicated in their definition of marriage that only two individuals were intended to be married. This was conveyed by specifically stating the word “two” in their definition or by saying “one woman and one man.” For example, a 24 year old man said marriage is, “A legal binding of two people who are supposed to be in love.” I also included, in this group of 62% of respondents, those whose responses used singular language to describe the people involved in the marriage, such as “man and woman” or “husband and wife,” like this 26 year old woman who said marriage is, “Between a man and woman.” This need to emphasize the number of persons in the marriage, either by explicitly stating it or using singular language, reflects the cultural norm and dominant discourse of monogamy in the U.S. and excludes other marital structures, like polygamy or group marriage.

Perceptions of Polygamy in the Western U.S.

When community survey respondents were asked if they believe polygamy (specifically the marriage of one man to two or more women) is immoral or moral, 51% (19) of respondents, nine men and ten women, found this marriage type to be immoral, and the reasoning behind this belief varied. For example, many respondents said that polygamy was in conflict with their Christian beliefs. One response from a 32 year old woman was “The Bible teaches against it,” and another response from a 28 year old woman was polygamy “. . . breaks the design of God's definition of marriage, one person cannot be bound to more than one person at the same time; cannot give themselves fully to the other. Is a state of adultery which is immoral.” Many survey respondents viewed polygamy as a form of adultery and noted issues with commitment. For example, this 49 year old man said, “I don't believe a person can be fully committed to another, when others are involved in the relationship.” Others took issue with the number of people involved in a polygamous relationship and believed a person can only commit themselves to one person at a time, expressing comments such as: “Marriage is a partnership not a team effort.” Another response from a 25 year old man was, “The commitment to loving one and only one person is a commitment that cannot be shared to be as strong. True love and marriage should only be devoted to one person to be as strong as possible.” Others viewed the overall family structure of polygamy and its potential impact on children as a problem, such as this respondent who said, “It does not teach or instill family values and build on healthy relationships.” To summarize, those who believe polygamy to be an immoral marital structure attributed various reasons to this, including perceiving conflicts with Christian beliefs and viewing polygamy as a form of adultery and entailing a lack of commitment and family values, which speaks to the dominant discourse of marriage, sexuality, and family in the U.S.

Twenty-two percent (8) of survey respondents, two men and six women, found the practice to be neither moral nor immoral and occupied a more neutral standpoint. For example, a female respondent age 56 said, “No judgment if they are consenting adults.” Some of these respondents distinguished their actions from those of others, and noted that for them personally the practice was immoral but they would not judge others for being in a polygamous relationship. For example, a 20 year old female respondent said, “Based on my personal beliefs, it is immoral but who am I to tell someone to believe what I believe? I will support anyone's religious beliefs because I expect the same.” Along these same lines, a 38 year old male respondent said, “I do not make the decision for others.” The idea that others practiced polygamy did not seem to trouble this group of survey respondents, but some did note that they would not want the practice forced on them. Others provided caveats to this viewpoint, stating that there needs to be respect among all parties involved or there is a need for healthy relationships. While the dominant discourse of marriage in the U.S. is heterosexual monogamy, these responses show that there is some openness to alternative marital structures.

Only 11% (4) of survey respondents believe polygamy to be a moral form of marriage, and it is important to note that they were all male. A 32 year old male respondent said, “Don't practice it, don't really care what others do; moral.” Offering a different perspective, a male age 24 said, “It is in the eye of the beholder but logically it seems to be alright. Many animal species are not monogamous.” This respondent seemed to approach the question from what he sees as a place of logic rather than of morality. A 26 year old male respondent said, “It is moral in the definition as long as no one is coerced and understands.” Again, a caveat is presented with his answer, stating that it is a moral marriage structure as long as no one is forced or pressured into practicing it. The fact that only men believe polygamy to be a moral marriage choice may reflect

a persisting sexual double standard in the U.S., in which it is more socially acceptable for men to take on more than one sexual partner at a time than it is for women.

The belief that polygamy is either immoral or moral may be influenced by what people believe to be true about the practice and those that live in polygamous relationships. I asked community survey respondents to list five things they believe to be true about polygamy. I organized the answers survey respondents provided by assigning a positive, neutral, or negative connotation to the response in the table. If responses were listed by more than one community survey respondent, it is indicated in parenthesis following the response in the table.

Table 1: Community Survey Respondents’ Beliefs about Polygamy

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Women manage and share household and child rearing duties (4)	Affiliated with religion (5)	Involves fear and the control and dominance of women (5)
Happy	Found in Utah (4)	Jealousy among wives (3)
People should not be persecuted for practicing it	Mormon affiliated (3)	Is confusing for children (3)
Close-knit families	Have many children (3)	Complicated or creates conflict (3)
Women enter in voluntarily	Rarely practiced (2)	Biblically wrong or ungodly (3)
Some women are not made jealous as long as the man loves them and takes care of them	Very common in other countries (2)	Is adultery (2)
Marriages last a long time	More common than polyandry (2)	Difficult to support financially (2)
Polygamy is a great “idea”	Common in the past in some religious sectors, but not as acceptable today	Lack of commitment (2)
	Practiced during war	Perverse
	Kept secluded	Associated with sex addiction
	Muslim affiliated	Causes mental health issues

	Separate sexual ties with each woman	Associated with sexual diseases
	Not supported by all Mormons	Children have limited education
		Marriage arranged for girls at young age
		Involved brainwashing
		Cult-like activity
		No equality in relationships
		Takes away from first wife
		Leads to incest
		Challenging
		Man is insane
		Women will menstruate at the same time
		Women are submissive
		Greed
		Not marriage
		Sad
		Insecurity
		Laziness
		Immoral
		Challenging to spend quality time with family and spouses
		The man is the ruler of the household
Total: 11 Positive Responses	Total: 27 Neutral Responses	Total: 46 Negative Responses

According to the community survey respondents, this wide array of beliefs about polygamy and the people who practice it came from various sources in their lives, such as the

respondents' own personal opinions, television, teachings from different religious texts and persons, "common sense," and the book *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* by Jon Krakauer published in 2003. Only one survey taker indicated that he personally knew someone who was in a polygamous relationship. Some of the responses provided point to a more positive viewpoint of polygamy, such as polygamous people being happy, sharing household duties, having close-knit families, and women entering relationships voluntarily. But a large majority of these responses can be interpreted as negative views or opinions of polygamy. As can be seen in Table 1, respondents identified more negative beliefs about polygamy than positive or neutral ones, with 55% (46) of the responses negative, 32% (27) of the responses neutral, and only 13% (11) of the responses positive. Some of the responses may be associated with what people learned or perceived was happening in some FLDS communities through television news coverage of the Warren Jeffs trial, like marriage being arranged for young girls, the practice kept secluded, a lack of education for children, brainwashing, cult-like activity, and the control and dominance of women. Other responses, such as polygamy being associated with laziness, greed, and perversion, and causing mental illness and sexual diseases, may be a result of the persistence of beliefs about those who practice polygamy established in the 19th century, as discussed in the previous chapter. The strong negative views revealed by the survey generate a powerful perspective of marriage that is severely restrictive of polygamy. Monogamy is the dominant discourse of marriage in the U.S., specifically heterosexual monogamy. Believing polygamy is a form of adultery or the inability to commit reveals the inferior status it holds in American society. The dominant discourse of sexuality in the U.S. is that of marital and sexual monogamy, which is enforced by viewing polygamy as a perversion or a cause of sexual addiction or disease.

Perceptions of Polygamy among Friends and Families of Polygamy Website Members

The legal status of polygamy in the U.S., along with pervasive negative views and opinions of the practice and the hegemony of the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamous marriage present in the larger society, make for a difficult environment for those who support polygamy in which to find a space to discuss the practice and connect with others who share their views. This can become even more difficult if one's friends and family also exhibit disapproving attitudes towards polygamy. Aaron, a 40 year old polygamy website member, said that most of his friends and family view polygamy with "condemnation." Abby, a 24 year old website member, said, "My friends are confused often, full of questions, and alternately happy for me/angry," but she also said, ". . . my family supports my decision to enter the lifestyle." Abby's family and friends have accepted the type of relationship she is looking for, but she still has to face many questions and concerns regarding her choices. Lydia, a 25 year old website member, is in a somewhat similar situation as is evident in our conversation below:

Lydia: My family has been negative in the past, but I believe they know it is something that is possible to come about, and I think that they have come to terms with that.

Kristen: What specifically do they find negative about it?

Lydia: Just what society views it as I suppose. Thinking that it is womanizing, that it is wrong.

Lydia's family may harbor some negativity about the possibility of adding a sister wife to her marriage, but like Abby's, they have made their peace with it.

Taking these revelations into consideration, along with the dominant discourse on marriage in the U.S., it is not hard to understand why a website that provides a space for people who support polygamy to connect would develop. Anti-polygamy sentiments continue to dominate the opinion of polygamy that many Americans have, and it could prove difficult for those that practice and support polygamy to find a place to discuss, express support for, or reveal

the desire or intention to practice polygamy offline, let alone state that one is living in a polygamous relationship. Taylor's theory that both the offline and online worlds are intricately woven together and inseparable helps to explain why an online space like the polygamy website has emerged (Taylor 2006:153). The polygamy website provides an online space in which members can support the competing and counter discourse of polygamy openly and anonymously without condemnation from a wider disapproving society that is offline. Below I discuss some of the various views of polygamy held by website members found on the polygamy website.

Meanings of Polygamy Online

Many website members refer to polygamy as "poly" for short on the discussion boards and in the chat room, and the marriage practice is also referred to as plural marriage or the Principle. In contrast to many of the negative viewpoints expressed by the community survey respondents, website members have a very positive view of polygamy. Website members' ideas about what it means to be polygamous are somewhat varied, but those who are members of the site generally support the practice of polygamy and many desire to be in a polygamous relationship.

Lydia is not in a polygamous relationship, but her husband was raised in a polygamous family. She said, "I believe polygamy is a good thing, and a God given right. I see many benefits to the lifestyle, religious, and not." I asked her what benefits there are, and she said, "Help with household deeds, cooking, cleaning, etc. Having a bigger family, more kids, with less strain on my body. Knowing there is someone there to take care of your family who you know and trust as opposed to a babysitter etc." Like many of the survey respondents, Lydia recognizes some of the benefits of having more than two people in a marriage like extra help with household duties, but

she also notes an added benefit from a woman's perspective which is the ability to have a much larger family than she would want to physically produce. The potential benefits of adding another wife to a family that Lydia discusses reveals the gendered elements of a polygamous marriage. Based on Lydia's response, women in a polygamous marriage are expected to be responsible for maintaining the house and cooking for the family. In addition, for Lydia, child bearing can only be accomplished by the body of a biological female, so a desire for a large, family can be more easily achieved by adding another reproductively active woman to a marriage. Other means of adding children to a family, such as adopting children or utilizing new reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization, and contracting a surrogate mother, are not considered by Lydia.

On the discussion boards, website members noted that sharing sexual duties and having more financial stability from additional income are benefits of polygamy as well. This idea that women will share the sexual "duties" of marriage is perceived as a benefit, which reveals some website members' beliefs about women's sexuality. The idea that women possess less sexual desire or drive than men is a reflection of the dominant discourse of sexuality in the U.S., as well as the prescription that marriage entails a wife's responsibility to provide sex to her husband. In addition to child bearing, maintaining a sexual relationship with their husband, and household duties, women in a polygamous marriage may be expected to work outside of the home as well. While Naomi is currently monogamously married, she also found several things attractive about a polygamous lifestyle such as, "The support of another adult friend and family member that would be committed to a future together." She went on to say, "I like the idea of being able to look back on a lifetime of shared memories. I didn't think of it in a personal way until after I was

married though.” Naomi sees the benefit of sharing a life with an additional marriage partner, specifically a woman whose roles are friend and family member.

Some of the community survey respondents commented that polygamy does not uphold or teach family values, but many website members strongly disagreed with this. For instance, Chris said, “I feel it’s a great way to raise a family and build strong ties.” Along those same lines, Abby said, “I think that polygamy is a very strong family model. I think that it takes a village to raise a child, and the most supports in a person’s life, the better. I believe that through polygamy, we glorify our creator, and live as he expects us to, here on earth . . . I know polygamous marriages work very well because it is communal living.” Family and commitment are important to most, if not all, the website members. Many website members also feel that polygamy is Biblically condoned and is a religious calling rather than a sin, unlike many survey respondents.

Even though website members support polygamous marriage, many also acknowledge the very real struggles that can occur in a polygamous relationship. On the discussion boards, there is talk about issues involving a husband or wife not being open to pursuing a plural marriage, a first wife having a hard time coming to terms with living polygamously, and wives experiencing jealousy. Paul is currently monogamously married, but he explained, “It’s not an easy choice to make. . . Well, it doesn’t really start with polygamy. A monogamous marriage is not an easy thing to do . . . so try to make that work with three people or four.” Paul believes that marriage in general is difficult and the addition of more wives can make it an even bigger challenge. Daniel is polygamously married and said, “Most people don’t understand the level of commitment and understanding it takes.” A website member commented in a discussion that polygamy can be a burden and is a great responsibility. Other website members have shown

some concern on the discussion boards about individuals being disowned by their families for choosing to live in a polygamous relationship.

While website members recognize many common benefits and challenges that come along with a polygamous relationship, not all website members agree on what constitutes a polygamous relationship. As I noted earlier, Moore (1994) theorizes that there is the possibility of the existence of multiple femininities and masculinities within a society that are potentially contradictory and competing. I draw on her theory to also encompass the existence of multiple discourses of marriage and sexuality within one society and even among individuals of a subculture. There is evidence that within the polygamy website itself, multiple discourses of polygamy are present; there is great variation and diversity in how website members believe polygamy should be practiced. Obviously, the definition of polygamy⁷, as perceived by the polygamy website members, is one man married to two or more women, but how this plays out in practice can take many forms. Some website members have acknowledged on the discussion board that polygamy can take on different meanings for different people and polygamous relationships can take many forms.

This heterogeneity may be influenced by the website members' religious or non-religious motivations. Website members come from different religious backgrounds and some are non-religious, so they have different ideas of how polygamy should be practiced. Different spiritual traditions or religious texts may have different rules or beliefs regarding polygamy. For many fundamentalist Mormons, living a polygamous lifestyle is believed to be a calling from God. Many Muslims interpret the Qur'an to allow men to marry up to four wives, providing he is able

⁷ Again, they are referring specifically to polygyny here.

to treat all wives fairly. Others believe that the Christian Bible condones polygamy and examples of the practice can be found in the Old Testament.

In regards to sexual intimacy, the most common idea on the website is that the man will maintain a separate intimate or sexual relationship with each woman, but not all website members are seeking this type of arrangement. An alternate way to practice polygamy has also been discussed on the website. Some website members are interested in a polygamous relationship in which the women engage in sexual activity with each other and also with the man. In regards to this arrangement, a website member posted on a discussion board that, in Biblical polygamy, sister wives engaged in sexual relationships with each other in order to prevent adultery while a husband was away, but this is not believed to be true or “appropriate” by all website members. Another member posted that same-sex relationships among women and bisexuality are forbidden by the Bible. I asked a website administrator about the acceptance of bisexuality and polyamory on the polygamy website, and he said:

Well, a lot of them [website members] are fundamentalist Christian in their views . . . Again, if people come here and abide by the terms of the site, they are welcome to stay regardless of their sexual orientation. I can't speak to them getting along with others in the chat though. I respect anyone who aims to respectfully make a point.

While these members are not banned by the administrators, this type of relationship is not valued by all of the website members, which reflects and reinforces the dominant discourse of heterosexual marriage in the U.S. Even though polygamy in general is a counter discourse to heterosexual, monogamous marriage in the U.S., a dominant discourse regarding the “proper” sexual practice of polygamy is evident among members on the polygamy website. This view may be imposed on others who do not share this view. While website members’ definitions, meanings, and actual practice of polygamy may vary greatly, the common thread that brings

them to the polygamy website is the general support of polygamy as a practical marital structure. Below I discuss the purpose and function of the polygamy website.

Purpose and Function of the Polygamy Website

Exploring what mainstream Americans actually think about polygamy, which reflects the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamous marriage, and the ideas about polygamy held by those who practice it exposes why a website focused on the support of polygamy would come to exist. Finding a space in which one feels safe enough to express his or her views openly without condemnation, or reveal that one is living or desires to live in a polygamous relationship, could be nearly impossible in mainstream American culture. So people have turned to the Internet and created the polygamy websites to find this. According to a source close to the creator of the site I participated in, the polygamy website was designed with the intention to provide a space for people to find information and meet others. This website was created because of dissatisfaction with the management of another similar website approximately ten years ago.

When I asked a website member what the purpose of the website is, Lydia said, “To be able to meet and socialize with other people who share similar beliefs.” She went on to say most people use the site “to talk to friends, and I think a majority hope to find a second wife by spending time here.” The website states on the home page that it is not a dating website, but the potential to meet an additional wife does attract many members. For example, Aaron joined the polygamy website because he is “seeking an additional spouse.” People who have already found multiple wives or a polygamous family also come to the website. Daniel is in a polygamous relationship with three women. He said he joined the website because he “wanted to meet with others like me” and that the website is “more like just a place to chat and hang for a few.” Other members that join the site may do so out of curiosity about polygamy or to learn more about the

marriage practice. Naomi said she joined “. . . to meet other people who were accepting of the poly lifestyle and for more info.” The website offers a chat room for members to meet and communicate with each other to fulfill the purpose of connecting people who support polygamy.

Based on the responses from the website members I interviewed, chat room use ranges from daily to once every several weeks. Things that interviewees said could impact chat room usage are their being busy with things offline, who is logged into the chat room, their schedule or work load, or if the members know anyone who is in the chat room. Chat room conversation topics also greatly vary, and polygamy is not a central topic of discussion most of the time. Interviewees responded that they like to discuss the following topics in the chat room: religion, politics, day-to-day stuff, relationships, lifestyles, cooking, homeschooling, food, and polygamy. Paul and I had the following conversation about the discussion of polygamy in the chat room:

Paul: We actually don't talk about polygamy very often. Lol.
Kristen: Yeah I've noticed that. Is it more of a common bond that brings people together?
Paul: Yeah, we all support it. No reason to beat a dead horse, preaching to the choir, etc.

During my time in the chat room, I observed website members mostly just chit-chatted about everyday life and other ordinary topics. There was discussion of polygamy while I was in the chat room, but it is hard to tell if this is a normal occurrence as it was discussed in relation to the research I was conducting and questions about my intentions and thesis topic. Polygamy is what draws people to the website, but in the chat room specifically, it seems that members are not consumed with the repetitive discussion of the topic. The chat room seemed to function as more of a space to make friends and get to know other website members better. Polygamy was more frequently discussed on the various discussion boards dedicated to different topics like Christian polygamy, politics, Mormon polygamy, polygamy in the news, and other similar issues.

Other scholars have emphasized the male dominance present on various chat rooms and discussion boards and the Internet in general. In contrast to earlier studies, the dominance of men was not obvious or overt as I observed on the website and participated in the chat room and discussion boards. The absence of male domination is important because the idea that women are being oppressed or dominated is often associated with polygamy. In opposition to this idea, I observed many women asserting agency through their seemingly unrestrained use of the chat room and discussion boards. Many women participated in discussions in the chat room and expressed their views, just as many men did. This is not to say that male dominance does not occur on other websites or that no women feel dominated on the polygamy website, however, if any control or dominance by men was present, it was not obvious or noticeable during my participant observation on the polygamy website.

People come to and join the website to access information about polygamy, communicate with others who are accepting of polygamy, and search for polygamous relationships, within the social and cultural context of polygamy being illegal and viewed as socially unacceptable in the U.S. I asked some of the website members I interviewed if they felt the site provided a safe environment to share information about themselves and their relationships. Chris's response to this question is below:

Chris: Yes or I wouldn't be talking to you. Lol. Although some think the feds are here to spy. Lol.

Kristen: Are you cautious in what information you share or make available to others?

Chris: Yes for the most part but most in here who I talk to on a regular basis know a lot about me.

Kristen: Do you believe that people are being truthful about their identities and experiences?

Chris: Most but there are some scammers but people do hold back too.

Chris feels safe enough to share information about himself with other website members, but he is cautious to an extent and is aware that people may not be truthful in their self-representation. Abby responded to this same question by saying, “I hope so . . . we haven’t committed any crime by simply expressing desires and I don’t give out much of my information.” Again, there is a hint at using caution against revealing too much personal information. Rachel also said that she was cautious, but that in “generic terms” the website was a safe environment to share information about herself because it “affords enough anonymity for that within reason.” Naomi, on the other hand, did not feel the website was an entirely safe environment and stated that to a point she is cautious. She said, “I have talked to too many weirdos to not be cautious . . . you have no idea if the person you are talking to is who or what they claim to be.” Even though website members are cautious about information they reveal about themselves and what they believe to be the truth about others, they still come to the website to connect with others who support polygamy. There may be a certain level of risk involved because other website members may not be truthful or there might be spies from the federal government participating on the website, but the website still provides a type of space that may not be available offline for all who support polygamy.

Hine’s theory that culture can be enabled by technology really plays out on the polygamy website (Hine 2000:8). The use of the Internet facilitated the creation of the polygamy website that may enhance website members’ ability to learn and communicate about polygamy in a relatively safe environment. This environment may not be widely available offline due to the largely negative social opinions about and illegal status of polygamy in the U.S. Having this forum, which enables discussion and connection with others who support polygamy, can aid in the website developing into a space that can provide a sense of community for some members

that may not be available offline. Without the Internet and the creation of the polygamy website, this cultural group may not have a space to exist or grow. In the next chapter I discuss the friendship and community found by some website members and the pursuit of polygamous relationships through the use of the website.

CHAPTER 7: FRIENDSHIP, COMMUNITY, AND FORMING POLYGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE

In this chapter, I examine the friendship and community that is created and acknowledged by some members of the polygamy website, and the website's potential for aiding in the formation of polygamous relationships. I argue that the polygamy website provides an online space that is not available to everyone offline in which website members can make friends, create community, and form polygamous relationships. I also discuss the potential social and cultural influences on views and opinions of polygamy in the U.S.

Valentine (2006), professor of geography, asserted that the Internet can foster the development of new relationships, and can provide a space for those who have traditionally been excluded from public spaces. Valentine specifically pointed out the benefits of the Internet for gay and lesbian people (Valentine 2006:378), and I argue that this idea can be expanded to include other diverse groups, specifically those who practice, are interested in practicing, and support the practice of polygamy. Because polygamy is illegal in the U.S., most families who practice this lifestyle do so in secrecy or in secluded polygamist communities. The secrecy involved may lead to some families or individuals feeling socially or geographically isolated from others who are also interested in polygamy. The Internet can provide a much needed space to create new friendships, community, and even polygamous relationships.

Friendship

I asked five of the website members I interviewed what they had gained overall by being a member of the polygamy website. Out of these five website members, four of their responses included the gain of friends. Paul, a website member, said, "Well, I think most come in here with

the hope they will find a sisterwife. Some of us old timers, we just come here to BS with each other. I have what I consider good friends in here. It's a lot like crackin' a beer and talkin' small talk." Most of the members I interviewed said they have friends on the website that they communicate with regularly, and some have even met offline or would consider meeting other members offline. In the following conversation, Lydia, a website member, describes how it felt when she met some of her online friends face-to-face for the first time:

Kristen: Does it feel different than when you're talking online?

Lydia: Sometimes. It can always be strange to meet someone in person after meeting them online. To an extent you feel like you know them, but yet . . . you are meeting them in person for the first time. After that initial meeting though, things seem normal. I know there are quite a few who have met. Some have had, and talked about having annual get-togethers.

For Lydia, the experience of meeting her online friends offline was a bit strange, but she felt as though she knew the person before actually meeting them face-to-face. For some of the website members, friendships can definitely bloom on the website and a feeling of actually knowing who a person is without meeting them face-to-face is possible.

The discovery that website members are forging online friendships that spill into the offline world really showcases Taylor's theory that a rigid dichotomy between online/offline does not exist (Taylor 2006:9). The offline concept of friendship translates to the online world as friendships are formed on the polygamy website. Some website members are experiencing a sense of knowing and closeness with others without having to meet people offline. How valuable or deep these friendships are or the shape they take varies greatly from one website member to another.

Naomi, a website member, describes how she feels about her online friendships, "It's hard to borrow a cup of sugar from someone who lives in another state . . . but having that person

as a friend means as much to me and we usually talk on the phone.” Naomi recognizes the obvious constraints of online friendship, but the meaning of having the online friend was the same as having an offline one. Abby was a new website member at the time of our interview, but she had already made some online friends. She said, “I have only been a member of the site for a few weeks, but the friendships that I have made, if they are allowed to grow and have more time, as my offline ones do, then yes I think they will certainly be as valuable.” Just like offline friendships, Abby notes that online friendships take time to gain value and mature. For these two website members, the value of online friendships are equivalent to those they have offline.

Another website member, Chris had an alternate view about the value of online friendships:

Kristen: Do you consider friendships that you have made on the website to be as valuable as your offline friendships?

Chris: Not quite does not have the same interaction but if we started hanging out then yes.

Kristen: So it would require some offline interaction to make them as valuable?

Chris: I think so. It’s hard to get to know someone really well online.

Chris believes that his online friendships have the ability to be valuable if they are allowed to develop offline as well as online. Chris points out that the interactions of online friendships are not quite the same as offline, which seems to diminish the value he places on them.

Other website members did note more explicitly the difficulties of maintaining online friendships. Aaron, a website member, said, “. . . internet relationships are even more fragile than real life ones, and prone to fade.” Aaron went on to say, “I greatly enjoy some of my online friendships, but online friendships have some significant barriers/limits that simply impair them from being comparable with the best of real life friendships.” In line with Aaron’s feelings, Rachel said:

I don't really think solely online relationships hold the same place [as offline friendships]. I don't think you can truly connect with someone on an intimate scale solely through electronic means. I think it takes a lot of in person conversation to know someone well; body language, eye-contact, etc.

Some website members find their online friendships to be as valuable as their offline ones, even though there are some limitations like a lack of face-to-face contact, while other website members feel that online friendships need to have some level of offline interaction to be of equal value as their strictly offline friendships. Regardless of the value or meaning that website members assign their online friendships, the polygamy website does provide a space in which individuals interested in polygamy can connect with others who share the same interest.

Community

Like Valentine's idea that, in cultures where homosexuality is forbidden, online communities can be especially important due to freedom provided by the Internet and its lack of physical borders (Valentine 2006:380), I argue that this can also be true for those who are members of the polygamy website. Online communities play an important role for some people in crafting a type of "third space" for connecting with others in ways that were previously not possible (Hick and McNutt 2002:41). "Third places"⁸ are generally thought of as locations like town halls, parks, or coffee houses in which people can organize for discussion and political action, but because the Internet does not occupy a physical place, it can provide this type of "space" for some (Hick and McNutt 2002:37). Particularly relevant to this study, a sense of community can be created online that may be lacking or unable to form offline due to the limitations of the social and cultural context an individual or family lives in.

⁸ One's "first place" is the home and the "second place" is where one works (Oldenburg 1997).

No matter how community members interact, whether face-to-face or online, examination of a wide range of communities, from the organized to the dispersed, can benefit from an anthropological approach (Wilson and Peterson 2002:456-457). However, the term “community” can prove to be problematic. Communities are often viewed as a collective of individuals, which can be homogenizing for varied and diverse groups (Wayland and Crowder 2002:233). Western, romanticized definitions of community are frequently imposed on populations and are often in conflict with local ideas of community (Wayland and Crowder 2002:231). I asked community members how they personally define community and if they feel the polygamy website serves as a type of community for them, in an attempt to avoid the problems discussed above and showcase the voices and experiences of website members. It is important to emphasize that there is much variation in the way people define community and interpret its meanings. Also, a virtual community, like the polygamy website, is just one form of community that exists alongside others, and individuals may belong to several different communities simultaneously.

A male website administrator, said, “Yeah, it was intended as that [a community], and really IS that. People like the community, having people who have similar views.” For this individual, community is clearly defined as people with similar views coming together, and this website really provides a place for people to do this in a way that may not be available offline to everyone who supports polygamy. The website administrator hits this point home when he said, “I can’t just go to the grocery store and be like ‘Hey, you dig polygamy yeah?’” Because polygamy is illegal and not widely accepted in the U.S., community may be more difficult to find offline. The website members I interviewed agreed that a sense of community was created on the website, but how community was defined and the purpose it served was different for each of them.

Website member Naomi described her experience on the polygamy website as follows:

I think of community as neighbors . . . Well, meeting here in the chat room is a bit like a visit at the local post office or general store . . . barber shop of old times. Each individual brings something from their life or experiences and they are happy to share if you have questions. It is a place where I can speak freely about this rather uncommon belief without having to defend it and that is something I do appreciate.

Naomi's sense of community on the polygamy website is created by socializing with others in the chat room and sharing life experiences. The common bond that most of the website members share is the support of the practice of polygamy, and it may be difficult for people without the aid of the polygamy website or Internet in general to find others who feel this way. Chris said, "It [the polygamy website] links me to people who feel the same way about poly as me provides friends to talk with." Again, the website is providing a space for people to connect and form community ties with others who support polygamy. The following conversation I had with Abby further illustrates this idea that the polygamy website provides a space to build community that may not exist for all who support polygamy offline:

Kristen: How do you define community?

Abby: A group of people with a common goal and purpose.

Kristen: Does this website serve as a type of community for you?

Abby: Yes, absolutely. I wouldn't have an arena to talk about this in if I didn't have this place.

Kristen: So it gives you a place to communicate?

Abby: Yes, and compare ideas with the other women.

Kristen: Does it serve any other functions of a community for you?

Abby: There are supports here, it disseminates information . . .

Abby finds a sense of support and a place to communicate freely about polygamy that she could not find elsewhere, but for others, the idea of community was more loosely applied to the polygamy website. Rachel's comments are an example of this:

Kristen: Does this website serve as a type of community for you?

Rachel: In a sense, a broad sense I think so.

Kristen: Maybe more like a network of friends?

Rachel: An extended network, I think so. There are a couple of girls around my age that I am friendly with.

Rachel's differing perspective may be rooted in her reason for joining the polygamy website. She originally came to the website to conduct academic research about polygamy, much like myself, but she has continued to participate on the website and in the chat room in a social capacity after her research was concluded. However, she is not necessarily interested in living in a polygamous family herself. Perhaps if Rachel was seeking a polygamous relationship, the website would provide more of a community for her.

In contrast to the points of view previously presented, my conversation with Aaron shows a completely different side of the community and how one's freedoms may be restricted in some aspects.

Kristen: Do you find a sense of community on this website?

Aaron: a little bit . . . there is a danger of being banned by admin but it's nice to talk to the old familiar friend occasionally.

Kristen: Is there a reason why they would ban you?

Aaron: I assume if I was openly derogatory to someone for being stupid, that might be so offensive as to ban me, I mentioned earlier there was a man that frequents here that has chased a lot of women away, and caused various problems, he is a friend of admin, so if I attempt to chastise him too strongly or move against him to restrict his behavior that could have a negative repercussion for me.

While Aaron's comments show a somewhat darker side of this online community, he still finds some value in coming to the website. His response brings to light the personality conflicts that can arise in online communities and, specifically for this site, competition or rivalry that can emerge between men searching for women to pursue romantically. As long as participation conforms to the restrictions that may be felt by some website members, a sense of community can still be found.

Another issue that may impact the sense of community felt by website members is the constant flow and movement of people in and out of the website. I did not ask the website members I interviewed if they felt that this influenced the formation or feeling of community, but I imagine that the continual introduction and then withdrawal of new members could be problematic. Members who continuously log on and participate on the polygamy website have the best chance of creating and fostering a sense of community on the polygamy website despite the steady inflow and outflow of individuals.

Both women and men feel a sense of community on the polygamy website. For many website members, the site serves as a social space, like that of a local bar or corner store, where members can come together to socialize and communicate in the chat room. The heartbeat of the community is the shared support for and the desire of some to practice polygamy, which can be difficult to find offline. Having similar views was an important indicator for feeling a sense of community for both men and women I interviewed on the polygamy website. The website is often used as a means to search for a plural wife or a polygamous family to join, so community is also created in relation to this search. Both men and women seek advice or support from other community members during their search, share experiences, and create friendships. It is evident that how website members define community and the level to which it is felt is different for each member, but the community that is built and perceived by website members provides a space for people who support polygamy to come together that does not necessarily exist offline for everyone.

Forming Polygamous Relationships

Another aspect of the polygamy website that is challenging and blurring the rigid separation between the “real world” and the “virtual world” is the large number of website

members searching for polygamous relationships. In bold red lettering on the home screen, the polygamy website explicitly states that it is not a dating service; however, the website features a discussion board where members can post personal ads. The board description states that while the website is not a dating service, as explained during the registration process, the website administrators also recognize that the majority of people who join the site are searching for polygamous relationships. There are also numerous posts in the Introductions forum that indicate that website members are searching for multiple wives or a polygamous family to join. While connecting potential spouses and families was not the intention of this site, it is a result of providing a space for those who support polygamy to meet, communicate, and form online and offline relationships.

Much of the content on the discussion boards is related to how one can form or join a polygamous relationship. Just to reiterate, the website focuses specifically on polygyny, which is the marriage of one man to more than one woman. For example, website members post on the discussion board to seek advice about how to court, how to talk about becoming polygamists with their spouse, how to deal with jealousy and sharing a husband, and how to approach a woman to join a polygamous family. Many people who find their way to this website are looking for information about living a polygamous lifestyle, and part of this search is finding a family to come into or a woman to join an existing family. This search for a polygamous family can come in many forms, and on the discussion boards I observed wives searching for a woman to join their families, husbands looking for a woman to join their family, husbands and wives searching for multiple wives together, and single women, with or without children, seeking a family to join. Also, these families and individuals are of varying ages and ethnic and racial backgrounds

and come from many different religious backgrounds including liberal Muslims, Pagans, Christians, Pentecostals, Messianic Jews, Mormons, Wiccans, and many others.

Many members are in pursuit of a polygamous relationship, and the website seems to allow space in which people can do this in a way that is not available offline, as the website enables people to connect from all over the country, and internationally, in one online place. Even though there is potential for creating an offline relationship on the polygamy website, some of the website members I interviewed did not know of any successful relationships that started on this site. Paul said, “I have yet to see a successful marriage from this site. Yet, we still have a lot of traffic here.” In step with Paul’s thoughts, Naomi said, “I know of no one who has met on this site and formed a successful poly relationship . . . I’m sure it does happen but I am not aware of any personally.” The website may provide a space for connecting with people interested in living in a polygamous relationship, but it does not necessarily mean that successful relationships will be formed.

In contrast to some of the other website members I interviewed, Chris believes that the polygamy website makes meeting pro-polygamy people easier, and he said, “I know some people have had success in meeting someone.” The website provides a forum for those that support polygamy to connect and potentially form romantic relationships. As Abby noted, this website could theoretically facilitate the creation of polygamous marriages because “. . . you can find people, and if not on this site, find resources to help you find people.” This website can provide the means in which to meet a potential family or a multiple wife or at least provide information or links to other websites that do offer polygamy dating services. Abby went on to say:

I posted a personal ad and took it down after I was inundated with messages. I feel that I’m rather geographically isolated; the website

helped me connect with people. I also feel like this website has a greater chance of having Mormon fundamentalists since it is run by MF [Mormon fundamentalists].

Obviously there are individuals and families who are serious about pursuing women on the polygamy website as Abby received numerous responses to her personal ad.

Rachel acknowledges the website's potential for providing a space for polygamous relationships to start:

Kristen: Do you think this website facilitates the creation of polygamist relationships?

Rachel: I can think of one relationship that started here so yes, in some instances.

Kristen: Does this website make it easier to be or become a polygamist?

Rachel: I think the Internet in general makes that true. It provides a plethora of forums to engage people you wouldn't otherwise interact with. Between chats, forums, email, etc. one can seek out almost anyone they wouldn't otherwise know.

Expanding from the benefits of just the polygamy website, Rachel notes that the Internet in general is really making polygamy a more attainable marital structure for some. Using the Internet, people interested in practicing polygamy can connect more easily. Abby expressed similar views as Rachel when she said:

The Internet allows us to exchange information, and filter what people see, so that there can be a flow of good advertising. People see positive images of polygamy. It also influences families because people can find wives from across the country or over the ocean, not just from their community anymore.

The Internet is making information more accessible in general and perhaps this polygamy website and others like it are providing a space for polygamy relationships to form that may be largely unavailable offline.

Even though the polygamy website is a great tool to make romantic connections and form polygamous relationships, there are recognized problems with meeting a potential wife or family

online, and these frustrations are often voiced on the discussion boards. Individuals searching for a spouse in Constable's study of electronic correspondence relationships between Chinese and Filipina women and men from the U.S. also faced some problems. For example, a Chinese woman in an online relationship with a man from the U.S., sent money to help the man fund his trip to China so they could meet in person. After he arrived in China, the woman financially supported the man for three months; this issue, along with the man's drinking problem and a violent altercation with the woman's brother, led to the failure of their relationship (Constable 2003:150). The woman believed that if they had met in person, rather than online, she may have been able to recognize some of the man's faults before becoming so emotionally and economically invested in the relationship (Constable 2003:151).

Like the woman from Constable's study, many polygamy website members discuss issues they face when meeting potential romantic partners online, such as misrepresentation of one's identity or women they are pursuing not following through with plans to meet or communicate offline. And even if a relationship is eventually solidified offline, website members note that they do not always work out because the courtship could prove to be unsuccessful or the husband or one of the wives could always leave. Aaron reflected on some of the issues he has faced in searching for a second wife:

A lot of girls see *Sister Wives* or *Big Love*, and like the idea but it's just a fad for them. The FLDS girls are better prospects but I'm not Mormon so that's a bit of a hurdle . . . The other big group is girls looking for another daddy for their babies . . . finding Christian women interested in poly is pretty difficult, most Christians think your (sic) scum, that leaves non-Christian women which leads to other problems for those who are strongly religious.

Aaron touches on a prevalent idea on the polygamy website that some individuals are interested in polygamy for the "wrong" reasons, and one should be cautious in pursuing women like this.

Though Rachel was not seeking a polygamous relationship, she made the following observations:

I think quite a few people that get involved in polygamy have ulterior motives. Like in any subcultural group, some people get involved to exploit it. Here on this site I see a lot of older men trolling for much younger women seeing this lifestyle as a justification for it. I haven't seen that as much other places.

Again, there is the idea that there are some individuals who do not have the “right” intentions behind their pursuit of polygamy. As discussed in Chapter 6, there is a dominant discourse regarding the practice of polygamy found on the polygamy website. This dominant discourse dictates what constitutes “right” and “wrong” intentions and interactions of site members.

Although some website members may want the freedom to practice polygamy without legal or social repercussions, the actual tolerance of ideas, behaviors, and practices that fall outside the scope of the “right” way to pursue or practice polygamy may not be accepted by all members of the website. In the U.S., the dominant ideologies of marriage, sexuality, and gender are so powerful, that they even dictate what some members of the polygamy website believe about marriage, such as that spouses should have similar ages, bisexuality is unacceptable, and equality among spouses should be realized by attempting to treat wives fairly. Although website members recognize the potential issues of searching for a spouse online and may have had their own bad experiences with attempting to form polygamous relationships, they continue their search for a sister wife or polygamous family to join.

Social and Cultural Influences

In this section, I analyze the potential social and cultural influences on website members' and community survey respondents' views of polygamy. I inquired about website members' interactions with other website members living outside of the U.S. in order to examine if these

interactions had any impact on shaping their views or practice of polygamy. I also asked if website members think the media featuring polygamy is changing Americans' views of the practice in the U.S., and I compare these responses with data from the community survey.

Most of the website members I interviewed did not believe that their limited contact with website members outside of the U.S. had any influence on their or others' thoughts, views, or experiences of polygamy. Several interviewees mentioned having communicated with people from Canada, Australia, and Europe, and considered these people to be part of Western culture and really no different from other people they interact with from the U.S. Naomi was the only person I interviewed that thought contact with people from outside the U.S. had any influence on her at all, although it was not specifically regarding polygamy. She said, "Hearing about that person's life and experiences gives me additional information about real life people and situations. Basically the more you talk to people, the more you realize we are all human." Since website members I interviewed were not in regular contact with people living outside of Western culture, it is hard to conclude if interactions with website members from other parts of the world have any influence on their ideas about polygamy within the website. This topic could benefit from further research, and perhaps should include contact with people from non-Western cultures that now live in the U.S.

In contrast, some of the website members did feel that media featuring polygamy could possibly influence some change in the views of Americans towards polygamy. Some of the television programs featuring polygamy, like *Sister Wives* and *Polygamy U.S.A.*, have the potential to create awareness of polygamy in a positive way and show the diversity that exists among polygamists. Naomi made the following comments on this topic:

. . . Most people are so ignorant of how varied poly families are and can be, that they never form an original question of any substance

about the subject . . . or the people that live it. The TV shows did the poly world a huge service by putting a human side to the subject of poly . . . and forming many of those questions for people who would not have otherwise. (My opinion of course).

Naomi touches on how these television programs can bring a more “human side” to polygamy. Abby said, “. . . I think that it represents ‘normal’ families, and takes away the cloud of mystery from polygamy somewhat . . .” This type of media can really help to “normalize” the idea of polygamy and those who practice it. This “normalization” could potentially lead to a greater understanding and acceptance of those that practice polygamy in the U.S. By shining a light on what polygamy in contemporary U.S. looks like, television shows featuring polygamy in a more “mainstream” context could help people recognize similarities between their families and polygamous families. Paul also expressed that shows like *Sister Wives* are swaying opinions about “. . . sexual independence from federal law in a more wider view.” These website members realize the potential role that media can play in shaping or changing Americans’ views of polygamy.

While at first glance the idea of portraying “normal” polygamist families on television, as discussed above, could seem like a positive approach, the concept of “normal” families can be problematic. Foucault termed discourses that gain power through the production of knowledge, “normalizing discourses.” What is considered “normal” or “abnormal” is dictated by the particular type of knowledge produced by normalizing discourses. This is problematic because individuals find meaning and identity within these discourses, which reproduce power relations and domination (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000:82). Although polygamy, specifically polygyny, is a counter discourse to the dominant discourse of heterosexual monogamous marriage in the U.S., in many ways, the cultural meanings given to polygamy by members of the polygamy website and the recent television shows depicting polygamy in the U.S. uphold many of the same values

as “normal” heterosexual marriage, with the exception of the husband having more than one wife. For example, the media do not feature polyandry, the marriage of one woman to two or more men, as often or in the same context as polygamy has recently been featured.

Polyandry and other alternative marriage and relationship structures, like group marriage and polyamory, have been featured as specials or on a single episode of television shows like *Taboo* or *Strange Sex*, but they are not the main focus of multiple television series like polygamy has been. Highlighting polyandrous, polyamorous, or group marriage relationships that exist in the U.S. would challenge the hegemony of heterosexual, monogamous marriage and ideals about sexuality and gender in America in a way that polygamy does not. Normalizing polygamy through media exposure without also representing other alternative marriage and relationship structures, like polyandry or group marriage, only reflects and reinforces gendered power relations in U.S. society, such as dominant ideologies that women should be sexually reserved and chaste. The process of normalizing polygamy does not necessarily challenge existing gendered power relations because in the U.S., the dominant ideology is that men are allowed and often expected to be more sexually driven and active than women.

Ten out of 37 community survey respondents indicated that they had viewed one of the following television programs featuring polygyny (the marriage of one man to two or more women): *Sister Wives*, *Polygamy USA*, *Escaping the Prophet*, *Big Love*, *Breaking the Faith*, any specials on *20/20*, *Dateline*, *Taboo*, or *Vice*, or other programming that could be written in by the respondent. Out of these 10 individuals who had viewed one or more of these television programs, three of the community survey respondents said that viewing shows featuring polygamy did change their perception of the practice.

A 68 year old female community survey respondent said that viewing *Sister Wives* did change her perception of polygamy somewhat, noting that, “Sister Wives—all seem happy and experience life just like I do.” Another female survey respondent age 36 said that after viewing *Sister Wives*, *Big Love*, and *Breaking the Faith* her perception of polygamy was changed. She said, “I love the idea of communal living--it takes a village; however, I don't think I could do it. My friends and I joke about being Sister Wives when we go out and watch out for each other's kiddos. Again, great concept filled with flaws.” These two survey respondents point out the happiness of the family featured on *Sister Wives* and the possible benefits of living in a communal type relationship in which many people are available for child care. They both recognized similarities between themselves and the women featured on the shows they viewed, whether it was the way they live life or seeing the resemblance of a sister wife relationship with their own friendships. Perhaps viewing some of these television shows allowed these women to see polygamy from a different perspective.

A 24 year old male respondent provided a very different perspective on how viewing the fictional HBO series *Game of Thrones* changed his perception of polygamy. He said, “Suppose at different times in history it was not considered immoral and a king had many wives that he cared for. Why is it right to only allow monogamy now if people can't even handle one spouse (divorce rates).” Rather than drawing on similarities between his life and those depicted practicing polygamy on television, this respondent notes that historically, polygamy was not always an immoral marriage option and it could be an alternative to monogamy and divorce. This idea of opening up the option to allow for multiple spouses could lower divorce rates and keep families together, as I discussed in Chapter 2.

While many website members feel that media featuring polygamy in a positive light can help to change the negative opinions of polygamy in the U.S., and in some cases are, as discussed above, some do not agree with the perceived motives behind those families who are “going public” on television shows and specials featuring actual polygamous families. One website member posted on a discussion board that he or she found it offensive that the Dargers, a polygamous family featured in several polygamy-positive television shows and authors of their family memoir, would cash in on their relationships by doing a television show on TLC. In the next chapter, I discuss an alternative view of the “motives” behind families like the Dargers who “go public.” In contrast to this post, another website member posted that the Dargers were showing how polygamy can be successful and normal, and promoted positive attitudes about the practice.

Even though there are some disapproving opinions about the people featured in various polygamy media, there is potential for changing the negative attitudes that Americans have and opinions they believe to be true about polygamy to a more open-minded and positive perspective than has previously been the dominant discourse in the U.S. Anthropologist Ellen Lewin discussed how non-gay individuals’ perspective of same-sex relationships and marriage changed after witnessing same-sex commitment ceremonies or weddings. She said:

Non-gay people in our society may not understand or sympathize with homosexuality when they have no choice but to think of it as some set of sexual practices they probably cannot imagine, but they are very likely to ‘get it’ when the issue is commitment, loyalty, domesticity—in short, ‘love.’ [Lewin 2006 [2004]:139]

This could also be true for those who watch media like *Sister Wives* because viewers have an opportunity to see polygamy in practice beyond a man having sexual relationships with two or more women. *Sister Wives* and *Polygamy USA* depict real families living in polygamous

relationships that have loving and meaningful marriages, religious faith, and strong family connections and this could really speak to someone who finds these elements important in their own life. Continuing to produce polygamy-positive media, whether it is in the form of reality television shows, family memoirs, or news or educational specials, is necessary to help demystify the practice of polygamy in the U.S. and show the diversity and variation among those that are polygamous. The addition of media featuring other alternative marriage and relationship structures, like group marriage, polyandry, and polyamory, is also necessary. Not every American will have access to this type of media or be interested in consuming it, but it could possibly help to change the commonly held stereotypes about polygamy and other alternative marriage and relationship structures in the U.S. and create more open-minded opinions. In the next chapter, I discuss the polygamy website's potential for cultivating activism in regards to the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy and the presence of polygamy advocates online.

CHAPTER 8: POLITICS, THE INTERNET, AND POLYGAMY IN THE U.S.

In this chapter, I discuss the political aspects of the polygamy website along with the website's potential for fostering political involvement and activism in regards to the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy in the U.S. I also explore the work of polygamy activist groups found on the Internet, the potential for working with other marginalized groups, and my suggestions for future activism. First, I turn my attention to the discussion of political involvement and the Internet found in academic literature relevant to this study.

Political Involvement and the Internet

The meaning of political advocacy and activism has been widened by feminist scholarship to include household and social relationships; an awareness of social problems is brought to light in the workplace and home, which encourages individuals to address the problems they find in these domains (Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine 2007:78). Feminist geographers, Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine (2007) define activism as the everyday actions of individuals that cultivate new power dynamics or social networks. Using this definition of activism, doing small acts or activities, which may normally be too minor to count as activism because of their narrow reach, have the potential to change social relations in a way that might promote social change (Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine 2007:79). Building new relationships that foster social change, even if on an unorganized, everyday level, is a key factor in advocacy and activism, and the new connections made may eventually lead to organized movements or political activities. Activism can mean getting involved whenever and wherever an individual might be, such as helping at-risk youth or changing the norms of gendered behavior (Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine 2007:90). Using this explanation of activism when analyzing the

polygamy website can reveal how interactions on the website may have the potential to promote social change.

The Internet and Activism

Collective action has historically been made possible in social contexts, like the factory, university, and neighborhood, but with the advent of the Internet, collective action can now be facilitated online (Cloward and Piven 2001:93). The Internet allows for the quick spread of information, ideas, strategies, and tactics between individuals and groups without regard for geographical location or national borders (Ayres 1999:133). Local and foreign political situations often influence Internet motivated protests (Ayres 1999: 135). Political scientist Ayres stated that the Internet has itself become an “international opportunity” by providing the means to different groups around the world to jointly challenge new and emerging global arrangements (Ayres 1999:136). The Internet allows activists to post messages on discussion forums, join listservs, send email to politicians, government agencies, and other activists, and search for relevant information (Ayres 1999:137). Barriers created by geographic place have been significantly reduced by the Internet; for example, the Zapatista rebels of Chiapas, Mexico benefited from supportive protest on the Internet in New York City, without having to leave their location (Ayres 1999:137-138). The Internet can also be effective for those concerned with a specific cause, like the hemophilia (a blood clotting disorder) activists in North America. These activists used the Internet to develop a sense of community and to draw attention to the issue of tainted blood supplies (Ayres 1999:138).

The Internet offers the potential for more extreme forms of activism as well. Hacktivists, individuals thought of as activists with hacking skills, have emerged and are arranging acts of “cyberdisruption” to aid rebel groups (Cloward and Piven 2001:92). These hacktivists reveal the

vulnerability of information and communication technologies by manipulating and disrupting the system on a large scale. Hacktivists even provide instructions on how to create “cyberdisruption” to individuals who have limited computer skills. An example of this extreme form of Internet activism was seen in 1999 at a World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle, Washington. A group called the electrohippies claimed to have interrupted the WTO’s servers by blocking the computer network used for the meeting for two days and causing slowing on two additional days in an attempt to disrupt the meeting and protest negative impacts of globalization; the group claims that 450,000 people were involved in this “cyberdisruption” over a period of five days (Cloward and Piven 2001:92). In 2001, sociologists and political activists Cloward and Piven believed that working class strategies, like strikes and sabotaging, could be adapted by hacktivists to create user friendly and accessible online equivalents of these actions for people to utilize (Cloward and Piven 2001:93). Although the political activity on the polygamy website is not as extreme and overt as arranging “cyberdisruption,” as I will discuss later, the work of some hacktivists serves as an example of how the Internet can really aid activism efforts.

A longitudinal study conducted by political scientists Jennings and Zietner found that having Internet access had positive outcomes on several markers of civic engagement, when socioeconomic factors and pre-Internet levels of civic engagement were taken into account (Jennings and Zietner 2003:311). Civic engagement was defined broadly as behaviors and attitudes in relation to political and seemingly political processes and institutions using 14 actions assigned to four different categories (Jennings and Zietner 2003:316). The four different categories used were media attentiveness, political involvement, volunteerism, and trust

orientations⁹ (Jennings and Zietner 2003:316-318). The findings of this study showed that 25 percent of individuals with Internet access followed politics and public affairs online, and Internet use did not lead to a reduction of civic engagement (Jennings and Zietner 2003:315-316, 330). Although this study did not take gender, race, or ethnicity into consideration, the findings indicate that the use of the Internet can result in obtaining political information and can have positive impacts on civic engagement for some individuals.

Political scientists Tolbert and McNeal conducted a study using data from the American National Election Studies (NES) to determine the role the Internet plays in political participation. After controlling for socioeconomic status, partisanship, attitudes, traditional media use, and state environment factors, they found that participants with Internet access were more likely to indicate voting in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. The study was guided by media system dependency theory which proposes that the difference between media with a direct effect on the public and the media with none is based on needs and resources of the public. Types of media that are more likely to be adopted and change behavior patterns are ones that provide information faster, less expensively, and more conveniently (Tolbert and McNeal 2003: 175). Media provide voters with enough adequate information to make them feel like they are making an informed decision, which can increase voter turnout (Tolbert and McNeal 2003:176). An important finding of this study indicates that online election news seems to be an important source of information, which potentially propels new voters to participate in presidential elections (Tolbert and McNeal 2003:183). Tolbert and McNeal asserted that the Internet may fill a gap in coverage of political elections that may be unfilled by mainstream media. This could be due to changes in coverage by television and newspaper media or as a response to voter needs

⁹ Trust orientations are also referred to as trust in others or social trust. This is important because individuals may not be able to work together for the common good unless they trust one another (Jennings and Zietner 2003:318).

(Tolbert and McNeal 2003:183). Following the framework of media system dependency theory, the Internet meets demands of the public for political information in a more convenient and low cost way than other forms of media (Tolbert and McNeal 2003:184). In the case of the polygamy website, the Internet is providing a means of obtaining information and connections with individuals who may not be locally available offline.

The possibilities of the Internet in aiding efforts of activism and advocacy can seem endless, but it is necessary to discuss some of the negative potential that comes along with Internet use. Most, if not all, scholars discussing the Internet, address issues of Internet access in their work. Barriers to access range from socioeconomic status, education level, skill level, attitudes towards technology, gender, age, race, and the list could go on and on. The reality of the matter is that access is not equal among all, for a variety of reasons, and this, in turn, impacts Internet norms, practices, discourse, content, and design and the individuals and groups who lack access. This lack of access can affect some groups of people's potential for political involvement and activism through the Internet. Other issues that Internet users might face are flaming or hostility and insults from other Internet users, harassment, hacking, and exposure to unreliable and unverifiable information. While the administrators of the polygamy website work to reduce the occurrence of these issues, the members of the website reported being impacted by these issues, and the polygamy website is void of the voices of those who do not have Internet access.

Polygamy and the Law in the U.S.

As discussed previously in Chapter 5, the U.S. government passed a series of federal laws in the mid- to late 19th century that criminalized and prohibited the practice of polygamy and punished those who did practice polygamy. The first of these laws was the Morrill Act of 1862,

which prohibited the practice of polygamy. This act specifically targeted the Territory of Utah, which was the home of the Mormon Church, also known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). During this time period, leaders of the Mormon Church believed polygamy to be a superior and exalted form of marriage (Gordon 2002:27). However, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives disagreed. The following is an excerpt from the Morrill Act:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That every person having a husband or wife living, who shall marry any other person, whether married or single, in a Territory of the United States, or other place the United States have exclusive jurisdiction, shall, except in the cases specified in the proviso to this section, be adjudged guilty of bigamy, and, upon conviction thereof, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars, and by imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years. . . 'An ordinance incorporating the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,' passed February eight, in the year eighteen hundred and fifty-one, and adopted, reenacted, and made valid by the governor and legislative assembly of the Territory of Utah. . .and all other acts and parts of acts heretofore passed by the said legislative assembly of the Territory of Utah, which establish, support, maintain, shield, or countenance polygamy, be, and the same hereby are, disapproved and annulled. [37th Congress 1862:501]

The Edmunds Act of 1882 was passed next, which reinforced the earlier Morrill Act and included the prohibition of unlawful cohabitation, which prevented a man from cohabiting with more than one woman; this act removed the requirement to prove that an unlawful marriage had occurred (Utah Commission 1884). The Edmunds Act also stripped men practicing polygamy, bigamy, or unlawful cohabitation of their rights to vote, serve on a jury, and hold a political office (Gher 2008:576). Lastly, Congress enacted the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887, which among a number of other things, disinherited children born from illegitimate polygamous marriages (Kilbride 1994:70).

In 1878, George Reynolds was prosecuted on a charge of bigamy, and was convicted. In the case of *Reynolds v. United States*, the Supreme Court upheld Reynolds' conviction, and

asserted that the constitutional protection of the free exercise of religion did not extend to the legislation prohibiting polygamy. This case allowed the Supreme Court to make a distinction between religious beliefs and religious acts, and the court established that religious freedom only pertains to beliefs not acts (Gher 2008:576). Today, there are some attorneys who proclaim that *Lawrence v. Texas*, the case in which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the sodomy law in Texas in 2003, protects adults' rights to make their own decisions about intimate relationships making the "extramarital" relationships of those that practice polygamy protected by privacy guarantees of the constitution (Gher 2008:572). The thinking behind this idea is that under *Lawrence v. Texas*, private relationships among consenting adults are protected under the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment, which bars the government from denying individuals life, liberty, or property without due process of law (Gher 2008:582). Therein the strength of the current argument for decriminalization of polygamy held by some groups lies in claims of religious freedom and the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the 14th Amendment (Gher 2008:581).

The historical and cultural context in which the enactment of the legislation prohibiting the practice of polygamy in the U.S. occurred is a complex one. There was a convergence of cultural ideals and values about religion, gender, sexuality, marriage, economics, and politics that led to the U.S. government outlawing polygamy in the mid- to late 19th century, which is discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. As I noted earlier, the legislation discussed above appears to have specifically targeted the Territory of Utah, which was the home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. It is important to note that this church officially banned the practice of polygamy in 1890 (Kilbride 1994:70), which, again, occurred due to a complex set of events, and still today the Mormon Church does not condone or support the practice of polygamy. The

official ban of polygamy by the Mormon Church led to fundamentalist groups splintering off from the church. Today, the practice of polygamy in the U.S. is often associated with the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), but it is not the only fundamentalist Mormon Church in the U.S., nor are fundamentalist Mormons the only people to practice polygamy in this country. Polygamy is practiced by individuals who are members of a variety of religions and faiths, as well as atheists, and it is important to recognize the diversity of those who practice polygamy in the U.S. Regardless of the religious affiliation or lack thereof of individuals who practice polygamy, their marriage structure is not legal in the U.S. and a desire to change this may lead some to take interest in political involvement or activism.

Decriminalization or Legalization

All the members of the polygamy website that I interviewed resoundingly agreed that at the very least polygamy should be decriminalized. Paul, a 28 year old Mormon website member, expressed his disgust for the laws prohibiting polygamy during our interview. He said, “I think it is a sick injustice exacted upon people of my faith with the Edmunds-Tucker Act and should be decriminalized right now.” As revealed by his strong and passionate language, Paul is very aware of the discrimination that Mormons and those that practice polygamy in particular have endured due to the criminalization of polygamy. There is, however, some debate among members of the polygamy website on whether polygamy should just be decriminalized or if it should be legalized as a valid marriage structure recognized by the U.S. government.

Aaron, a 40 year old Christian website member in the financial planning industry said, “I think there should be less laws. I think it’s silly that the government needs to regulate marriage and families, so if you mean should they pass a law making it [polygamy] legal, no, should they revoke laws criminalizing it, yes.” Along these same lines of thought, Naomi, a 39 year old

Christian stay-at-home-mom said, “I really don’t care for legal . . . that would mean the government would try and regulate it [polygamy].” Some website members are only calling for polygamy’s decriminalization so that this marriage arrangement could be practiced in the open without fear of prosecution. Legalizing polygamy to the status of monogamous, heterosexual marriage would mean that the government would maintain its power to regulate kinship ties.

On the other side of the debate, Rachel, a 25 year old Catholic woman in the education field, had the following thoughts on the issue of decriminalizing polygamy versus making the practice legal:

The legal issue just drives people into hiding making it impossible to make sure other societal ills don’t permeate people living in polygamous families . . . (by other social ills I mean genuinely harmful things like welfare fraud, abuse, etc. not implying that polygamy is itself an ill) . . . Legalizing makes a great deal of sense but I think decriminalizing is more likely to happen in our lifetime. It’s a larger step to go from illegal to government sanctioned in one fell swoop. Plus it would create a lot of work for the government to sort out. And then there are different types of polygamy. Will all be allowable? Etc.

Rachel argues that with polygamy’s legalization, the practice could be better regulated and no longer forced underground, which may decrease actual abuses. Chris a 30 year old Christian website member also wants polygamy to be legalized. He said, “I don’t like its [polygamy’s] legal status at all I’m for it being legal not just decriminalized. But that [decriminalization] would be a step in the right direction.” Decriminalization seems like a logical first step in what I am sure would be a very long process to legalize polygamy in the U.S.

There seems to be at least two schools of thought regarding this topic on the polygamy website. Some members are for polygamy’s full legalized status, and others just want the practice to be decriminalized. The point of contention seems to be the idea of government regulation within the private lives of individuals. Some website members think the government

has no place in their private lives; this is exemplified by one website member's comment during a chat room conversation: "I'm for the government getting out of our lives." Other website members, on the other hand, welcome the regulation of the practice and recognize that this would allow polygamy to be practiced in the open and may prevent other issues from occurring alongside it, such as welfare fraud or abuse.

I also asked the community survey respondents if they believed polygamy (specifically the marriage of one man to two or more women) should be made legal in the U.S. In contrast to the polygamy website members' views, only 24% (9) of survey respondents answered that polygamy should be made legal in the U.S., and 68% (25) of respondents replied that polygamy should not be made legal. Respondents were also asked if they believed that the federal or state government should have the right to decide who adults can or cannot marry. Holding similar views as some website members, an overwhelming 84% (31) of respondents did not believe that the state or federal government had any place in deciding who adults can or cannot marry. On the other hand, 14% (5) said they did believe the government had this right and some noted, as some website members did, that there was a need to protect people. For example, a 28 year old female respondent said, "Need to protect those who can't make healthy decisions. Ex. I want to marry my sister or a cow or a building." The survey results provide somewhat of a contradictory outcome, with the majority of respondents agreeing that polygamy should not be made legal, while, at the same time, a large majority of respondents believe the government should not regulate who adults choose to marry. These findings show clearly Moore's (1994) idea that multiple and contradictory discourses exist within a single society, and even within an individual. While there was no question to address why respondents felt this way, I speculate that polygamy is still viewed as unacceptable to some Americans, but there is also a desire to

decrease the government's overall regulation of individuals' personal lives and relationships. This conflicting view within individuals may also be due to very slow changes occurring in attitudes towards varying sexualities and relationship styles.

Political Involvement and Activism on the Polygamy Website

The Internet has widened the scope of available information and people to connect with all over the globe, opening up new opportunities for individuals interested in polygamy. The polygamy website is one online space in which a sense of community is being created by some of the website members who practice polygamy, are interested in practicing polygamy, or support the practice of polygamy, which is discussed in more depth in Chapter 7. The polygamy website claims to be a source for polygamy information and in a statement on its front page, the site welcomes everyone to join together for respectful discussion and friendship in support of and for the advancement of polygamy.

The creation of a network of individuals is facilitated by online communities, which can work to magnify and support the impact of community ideals and values using electronic communications (Hick and McNutt 2002:13). The polygamy website uses electronic communication, whether it is by email, discussion board, or chat room, to discuss many topics within the scope of polygamy while creating a network of people who practice, are interested in practicing, or support the practice of polygamy.

The creation of community, sought out and perceived by some website members, fits in with the definition of activism as the everyday actions of individuals discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine argued that activism needs to be perceived as something that materializes from situations of everyday life and involves individuals creating new relationships with people that change power dynamics in existing social networks (Martin,

Hanson, and Fontaine 2007:80). I argue, from an outside perspective, that the activities and information provided on the polygamy website seem to have qualities resembling advocacy and activism as defined by Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine. The website can facilitate the possibility of creating new power dynamics and social networks that may lead to a change in social relations and might promote social change. The website offers a space for people to interact and possibly change perceptions and stereotypes others hold about polygamy by sharing life experiences and educational information. People who are just interested in learning more about polygamy also participate on the website. The website may also bring together people who have not interacted before, which can foster new social connections that could potentially lead to organized political action. For example, in January 2013, on the discussion board dedicated to the topic of polygamy law and decriminalization, a link was posted to a petition on the White House's website to address decriminalizing polygamy. The petition did not obtain the required 25,000 signatures in order for the Obama administration to address the issue, but it is an example of how the polygamy website enables organized political action.

In addition to engaging in activism and advocacy through communication and connecting with others, the polygamy website offers more politically oriented information as well. Under the section entitled "Polygamy News," which appears on the home page, links can be found to news stories about polygamy and polygamy in politics. There are articles and comments posted about various topics, such as a polygamous man elected mayor in Big Water, Utah, and discussions of the Warren Jeffs trial. Also, links to blogs or other forums that discuss polygamy can be found on the website.

On the discussion boards, political issues in relation to polygamy or polygamy news stories are discussed as well. For example, the adult child of a polygamous family commented on

a discussion board that he or she thinks of his or her parents as civil rights pioneers. Other discussion board comments draw attention to the need to work towards legalization, and one person posted about Jewish women calling for polygamy to be legalized in Israel. It has been my experience that the politics of polygamy are occasionally a topic of discussion in the chat room as well.

Most of the website members I asked about activism are not currently involved in any polygamy activism groups, but three of the website members revealed that they had been involved in a group in the past. One member indicated that he is searching for a polygamy activism group in his geographic area, and another member said, in a humorous way, that she was her own group. She followed this remark by saying, “Most anyone who knows me knows how I believe about it [polygamy],” which I interpreted to mean that she is vocal and open about her views on polygamy. By expressing her views openly, this website member is taking an opportunity in her everyday life to act in a certain way that may change opinions of polygamy and lead to cultural and social change.

While some political activism occurs on the polygamy website, such as the circulation of the political petition, most website members do not perceive themselves to be involved in activism in support of polygamy. Only one of the polygamy website administrators I interviewed said that he was involved in a polygamy activist group. He said, “Well, I would consider helping run this site being part of an activist group.” The website administrator was only one of two website members that I interviewed that considered participation on the polygamy website as a possible form of activism. As previously noted, in addition to some overt activist activities, belonging to the polygamy website opens up the possibility of creating new social ties as individuals come together to discuss polygamy. If activism is born out of the conditions of

everyday life, then the sharing of life experiences, struggles, and advice on the polygamy website might change existing power relations or lead to more organized social change. In response to my question about participation on the polygamy website being a form of activism, Naomi said, “I guess it could be in a way . . . since I do talk and share with people and my views are positive about poly. I never really thought about it as such though.” Although Naomi may not classify her actions of sharing her positive views of polygamy as activism, she is, according to Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine, getting involved in supporting polygamy “whenever or wherever” she is, in this case, on the polygamy website.

In contrast to the website administrator and Naomi, Aaron seemed to have more of a conflicted response to my question. He replied with the following statement:

Active yes, activism . . . I assume you mean societal level, i.e. to bring about change, so no. I’m doing an interview for you that hypothetically could make it to a scholarly journal. Is that activism on my part? . . . If I wanted to help the poly cause, I’d find movie stars and politicians that were closet poly and get them out . . . but then they would suffer horribly to pioneer the cause, so I don’t do that.

Aaron could see the potential for activism in doing an interview with me, but did not consider his participation in general on the polygamy website a form of activism. Aaron’s response reveals that, in his opinion, activism invokes the idea of change at the societal level and the help of celebrities or political figures is needed. Aaron’s view is in contrast to the definition provided by Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine (2007) that I discussed above; therefore, even though Aaron does not acknowledge his actions as activism, he is still intentionally participating on a polygamy website that has the potential to facilitate change.

Abby did not think her participation on the website was considered activism either, but for a different reason. She said, “Not really. I’m not loud and proud in the community about my decision at this time, and I would consider that activism.” Abby is not vocal about her choice in

pursuing polygamy in her local community, but she is still a member of the polygamy website where she does share her views. In line with Abby and Aaron's responses, another website member Chris agreed that his participation on the polygamy website is not a form of activism but had different reasoning for this stance. Chris said, "No you're not reaching people who think different than you so you're not going to change anybody's mind." Chris seems to be referencing the idea that most people who come to the polygamy website have a positive view or perception of polygamy, but this may not always be true. Also, joining together and communicating with other website members who support polygamy may lead to the development of a more formalized and organized way to engage in activism.

Some of the website members may not consider their participation on the polygamy website a form of activism, but some acknowledged the potential the website has for organizing activism efforts. I asked Chris if the polygamy website offers a forum to organize people who are also interested in activism, and he responded by saying "There are some posts about activism, but nothing recent, so kind of." Abby replied to the same question by saying, "I believe that it could in a circumstance if we were closer together or had more people not looking solely for sister wives. We don't have a lot of constant membership in the chat. I would say 20 people that filter through all the time." Although these website members may not recognize the full potential of the polygamy website in organizing activism efforts, the website does indeed provide a sense of community to some, which leads to the creation of new relationships that are changing existing social networks. When new members come to the website, for whatever reason, the communications on the website may change opinions or perceptions about polygamy at the grassroots level.

The polygamy website provides the space in which its members can potentially spread positive views of polygamy or organize more formal activist efforts, but the website has its own set of problems that administrators have to deal with regularly. For example, I wanted to know what happens to people who come to the website to spread anti-polygamist messages. A website administrator said, “When we get folks that come in here to simply bash on polygamy, I ban them.” The website is a welcoming place as long as one abides by the rules and supports the dominant pro-polygamy discourse, or at least does not openly challenge it in what can be interpreted as a disrespectful manner. In this way, the website administrators exert a form of power to regulate discourses allowed on the website, and, thereby, attempt to shape the views and context of the discussion and formation of social networks and community, that emerge through the activity on the website.

I also asked what other problems the administration faces, and one website administrator said, “Well, they come in here to cause problems. Take people’s money. Lie to couples . . . We had one couple send a girl \$2000. You get that with any site though, scammers, trouble makers.” Many people join the website to search for a plural wife or polygamous family to join, as discussed in Chapter 6, which makes them vulnerable to others online looking for people to take advantage of. The website administration works to mitigate the impacts of these “troublemakers.” The website administrator said, “I have put a lot of time into trying to keep the site a safe place,” and “Most of the time is spent deleting spam and trying to keep spammers out and dealing with drama in the chat room . . . We get a lot of strong personalities in here” Another issue that the website deals with is the clashing of personalities and quarrels among website members. Even though the polygamy website has great potential for activism, it is not without flaws or risks due to these ongoing problems that the website administration attempts to regularly

moderate. These issues and forms of regulation and control may impact the ability of website participants to freely collaborate or debate, in order to effect positive social change for polygamists. Through these examples, we can see that relations of power are enacted in a variety of ways, through discourses and practices that transpire as a result of participation on the polygamy website.

Despite the fact that the Internet comes with its own set of challenges, some members of the polygamy website are also aware of and acknowledge the positive impacts of the Internet on the advocacy for polygamy in general. In a chat room conversation, one website member said, “I feel like polygamy wouldn’t have any activism if not for the internet. . . The polygamist bands are so widespread and mostly rural the internet does wonders!” In our interview, website member Aaron said, “The Internet has connected Protestants to have community, where before I think it was probably incredibly rare.” The Internet in general does have the potential to connect people in a way that no other technology or media has before by increasing the speed and convenience at which people can meet, communicate, network, and organize with other people from all around the globe. I think that those who practice, are interested in, or support polygamy can use the Internet as a way to connect, share experiences, change perceptions, and organize activist efforts. There are some individuals and groups that are taking advantage of the Internet’s many benefits when it comes to activism in regards to polygamy; a couple of these individuals and groups are discussed below.

Polygamy Advocates Online

Self-identified advocates and advocacy groups of polygamy also have a presence on the World Wide Web. National Polygamy Advocate™ Mark Henkel is a professional polygamy advocate for the National Polygamy Rights Movement for Consenting Adults. His website,

<http://www.nationalpolygamyadvocate.com/>, mainly advertises his advocacy and speaking services for hire and showcases his various media appearances and professional writing. His website claims that he is a “history-changing iconoclast” and states the following in regards to his advocacy efforts:

Mark Henkel has consistently stepped up in public leadership for political activism, from being the sole national voice publicly educating the masses and the media that normal consenting adult polygamists oppose criminals to giving public testimony before a Legislative committee. [National Polygamy Advocate™ 2014]

Henkel also founded an organization for Christian polygamy called “TruthBearer.org: Continuing the Reformation . . . ,” which claims to be “a Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Scripture-believing organization for Christian Polygamy” (Truthbearer.org 2012). The Truthbearer.org accepts members for a fee of \$29.95 per month, which is used to fund the movement for polygamy rights. The following text appears on the Truthbearer.org website:

True activists organize and communicate here. Tools and other resources are made available. All polygamy questions and Bible doctrine are addressed. Women are protected with love-not-force. Pastors and Christians in various denominations find support. The MEDIA obtain proven, appealing, informative, expert interviews. [Truthbearer.org 2012]

If individuals want to get involved with advocating for polygamy, this website offers a place where they can gain more information and donate money to this cause. The Truthbearer.org website indicates a number of things that Christian polygamy does not embody; for example Christian polygamy is not about under aged marriage, polyamory, group marriage, adultery, redefining marriage, or polyandry (Truthbearer.org 2012). Along with these two websites, Henkel also maintains a presence online with a Facebook page where people can post comments on his wall, send him a message, and stay up to date with his advocacy efforts. Henkel also maintains a LinkedIn account and a Google+ page. A number of videos are available on YouTube exhibiting

his media interviews and speeches. He also has a DVD of a speech he gave at Yale available for purchase on Amazon.com. Henkel utilizes a number of Internet resources to spread his message, which should maximize the audience he is able to reach.

Centennial Park Action Committee (CPAC) is another organization advocating for the decriminalization of polygamy. Their website makes their brochures and other articles available online, which should potentially reach a wider scope of individuals than simply their local community. The mission statement from CPAC's website reads as follows:

CPAC's mission as a committee of volunteer citizens from the polygamous community of Centennial Park, Arizona, is to deliver to the public a correct view of the polygamous lifestyle as practiced in Centennial Park with the objectives of dispelling popular stereotypes commonly held by people at large, of defeating unjust laws which currently exist aimed at the polygamous minority, to overturn, eventually, the Supreme Court decision in *Reynolds vs. The United States*, and to promote more amicable relations with local agencies which have to deal with families. In doing this, the Committee seeks to achieve a political and social environment within which both polygamous and non-polygamous cultures may comfortably fit into an integrated society. [Centennial Park Action Committee N.d.]

The beliefs and practices of those that work for CPAC follow the teaching of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but they do not affiliate with the FLDS (Centennial Park Action Committee N.d.). CPAC's website states the following:

We believe in a God that loves His daughters and is interested in their welfare, happiness, and virtue. He does not prescribe a system of marriage that would bring unhappiness to His children. We wish to define ourselves. We refuse to maintain the stereotypes unfairly placed upon us by hate groups. [Centennial Park Action Committee N.d.]

This organization is working to decriminalize polygamy and dispel commonly held stereotypes about their culture and marriage practices. The website offers a place to contact the organization by email and a link to their blog called the "Merrywives' Blog: Trashing Silly Stereotypes Since

2004.” The blog features articles and commentary on topics relating to polygamy and quite a bit of content is dedicated to polygamy in politics and its decriminalization. CPAC is another example of an activism organization using the Internet to spread their message and to change stereotypes held by people about the practice of polygamy.

Facilitating online discussion of polygamy and changing commonly held misconceptions or stereotypes of polygamy that most American people believe seem to be the main functions of these various online resources. The Internet provides a platform or space in which proponents of the subdominant and competing discourse of polygamy can express their viewpoints and effect social and cultural change. The Internet is aiding in the advocacy of polygamy, the dissemination of pro-polygamy messages, facilitating community building, and dialogue, but what are these advocacy groups’ relationships to other marginalized groups with similar interests? Are polygamy activists partnering with same sex marriage rights activists?

Same Sex Marriage Rights and Polygamy

Opponents to the notion of granting same sex couples the right to marry often fall back on the “slippery slope” argument which asserts that legalizing same sex marriage will lead to the full legalization of bigamy, incest, prostitution, adultery, bestiality, and obscenity (Gher 2008:562). This argument causes same sex marriage advocates to ardently reject any connections between the practice of polygamy and same sex relationships; however, there is a debate within the LGBTQ community that questions the validity of the separation between same sex marriage and polygamy (Gher 2008:562). Polygamy advocates and same sex marriage advocates have similar goals and are both interested in reducing government regulation of extramarital sex and creating an alternative family recognition movement, and committed to decriminalizing relationships that are regulated by legislation (Gher 2008:598-599).

Legal scholar Gher (2008) asserted that it would be beneficial for same sex marriage advocates to continue to separate themselves from polygamy because of societal opinions of the practice, but same sex marriage advocates should avoid criticizing the practice of polygamy and reinforcing cultural ideas that polygamy is barbaric and misogynist. Instead, Gher suggested that same sex marriage advocates should devote their time to promoting messages that respect diversity while continuing to fight for equality (Gher 2008:559). I agree with Gher that the advances of same sex marriage activism cannot come at the cost of another marginalized group. Some members of the polygamy website are aware of the discord between the same sex marriage movement and the idea of decriminalizing or legalizing polygamy. The following dialog occurred in the chat room between two website members:

Member 1: I hear gay rights activists talking bad about polygamy and I just don't understand how their love is different than mine.

Member 2: I don't either [Member 1] . . . we're all a little countercultural.

These two website members seem to recognize a similarity that both same sex and polygamous marriages have in common and that is love. Historically, both homosexuality and polygamy have been marginalized practices in the U.S. and scrutinized by the larger society, so why is there not a sense of camaraderie between those fighting for same sex marriage rights and the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy?

Just as some same sex marriage advocates do not condone the practice of polygamy, some polygamy advocates and polygamy website members may not approve of same sex relationships as they may hold traditional, Christian or Muslim values. These attitudes really speak to the power of the hegemonic discourse of marriage in the U.S. Some same sex marriage advocates may find polygamy to be offensive to their ideals of monogamous marriage and gender equality. On the other hand, some polygamy advocates may believe that same sex

marriage challenges their traditional ideologies of marriage, gender, and sexuality. If these two groups could find some common ground, it would be beneficial for same sex marriage and polygamy advocates to, at the very least, avoid criticizing each other and perhaps collaborate in the future, as both groups have similar goals. Same sex marriage advocates and those working towards the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy are asking other Americans to be tolerant and accepting of diversity, so it would only be prudent for advocates of both same-sex marriage and polygamy to do the same.

In this chapter, I argue that the Internet provides a space in which proponents of the subdominant and competing discourse of polygamy can express their viewpoints and effect social and cultural change. I argue, from an outside perspective, that the activities and information provided on the polygamy website have qualities resembling advocacy and activism as defined by Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine as discussed earlier in this chapter. While some political activism occurs on the polygamy website, most website members do not perceive themselves to be involved in activism in support of polygamy; however, I argue that regardless of this, website members may create social change through communication with others and by building social networks. In the next chapter, I discuss the conclusions of this study and suggestions for further research and activism.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Polygamy and the Internet in the U.S.

My research and analysis regarding the interactions and activities of women and men on the polygamy website have addressed the following research questions: 1) what are individuals using the website for? 2) What are website members communicating about? 3) How are individuals using the website to search for polygamous relationships? 4) Are website members forming connections and meeting people offline through the use of the website? 5) Do members of the website perceive the Internet to be affecting the contemporary practice of polygamy in the U.S.? The naturalization of monogamous heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family has occurred in the U.S. due to a number of historical, social, cultural, political, and economic factors. I argue that the Internet can provide a means to denaturalize these concepts and provide a space for the expression and support of counter discourses of marriage, like polygamy. Individuals who support polygamy, desire to practice polygamy, or who are in a polygamous relationship may use the online space provided by the Internet to make connections, whether those networks result in the creation of friendship, community, polygamous relationships, activism, or political involvement.

I argue that the particular historical, cultural, political, and economic context of the U.S. during the 19th century led to the practice of polygamy being viewed by mainstream society as socially and morally unacceptable and illegal to practice in the U.S., historically and today. The country's Puritan roots, Victorian era morals, ideas about progress and civilization as they related to marriage forms, dominant culturally constructed gender roles, Christian ideology, and ideas about "proper" sexual behavior intersected to create and reproduce a dominant discourse of

heterosexual monogamy in the 19th century. The criminalization of polygamy by the federal government was driven by anti-Mormon and anti-polygamy sentiments and rhetoric in the 19th century and the rising political and economic power of the Mormon Church. Mormons were viewed as a threat to the political and economic order of the U.S., to Christianity, to the dominant discourse of gender and sexuality, and to monogamous marriage in the 19th century.

According to the dominant discourse, marriage in the U.S. must embody certain characteristics, like love, commitment, honesty, and support, and entail a legal or spiritual ceremony and a monogamous bond to be viewed as legitimate or meaningful by the larger society. The hegemony of this discourse is evident in the privilege and benefits that are awarded to heterosexual, monogamously married couples in the U.S. The strong negative views revealed by respondents to the community survey generate a powerful perspective of marriage that is severely restrictive of polygamy. The dominant discourse of sexuality in the U.S. is that of marital and sexual monogamy, which is enforced by viewing polygamy as a perversion or a cause of sexual addiction or disease. There is great variation and diversity in how website members believe polygamy should be practiced. Still, a dominant discourse regarding the “proper” sexual practice of polygamy has emerged among members on the polygamy website, which reflects the influence and power the dominant discourses of gender, sexuality, and marriage have in the U.S.

The Internet and specifically, the polygamy website, provide an online space in which members can support the competing and counter discourse of polygamy openly and anonymously without condemnation from a wider disapproving society that is offline. The polygamy website provides a space in which individuals can discuss the practice and connect with others who share their views. The Internet facilitated the creation of the polygamy website

which may enhance website members' ability to learn and communicate about polygamy in a relatively safe environment. This environment may not be widely available offline due to the largely negative social opinions about and illegal status of polygamy in the U.S.

Online communities can be especially important for societies where polygamy is illegal due to the freedom provided by the Internet and the limitations of the social and cultural context an individual or family may live in. I argue that the polygamy website provides an online space that is not available to everyone offline in which website members can make friends, create community, and form polygamous relationship. There is variation among website members regarding the value or meaning they assign their online friendships, but regardless of this, the polygamy website provides a space in which individuals interested in polygamy can connect with others who share the same interest. It is also evident that how website members define community and the level to which it is felt is varied. Connecting potential spouses and families is not the intention of the polygamy site, but it is a result of providing a space for those who support polygamy to meet, communicate, and form online and offline relationships. The website may provide a space for connecting with people interested in living in a polygamous relationship, but it does not necessarily mean that successful relationships will be formed.

The Internet also provides a platform or space in which proponents of the subdominant and competing discourse of polygamy can express their viewpoints and effect social and cultural change. I argue, from an outside perspective, that the activities and information provided on the polygamy website have qualities resembling advocacy and activism as defined by Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine discussed in Chapter 8. The website facilitates the possibility to create new power dynamics and social networks that may lead to a change in social relations and might promote social change. The polygamy website enables organized political action and offers

politically oriented information. While some political activism occurs on the polygamy website, most website members do not perceive themselves to be involved in activism in support of polygamy; however, I argue that regardless of this, website members may create social change through communication with others and by building social networks.

My thesis research adds to the limited anthropological literature on polygamy in the U.S. and to the understanding of the role the Internet plays in community building, the formation of polygamous relationships, and activism for the decriminalization or legalization of polygamy. As an extension of Lewin's (2006 [2004]) idea, I argue that it is important to legalize polygamy in order to enable individuals in polygamous families to contextualize their relationships within the broader U.S. society and declare the authenticity of their relationships publicly. In relation to Yanagisako and Delaney's (1995) argument of naturalized power, I argue against the assumed "naturalness" of monogamy and the idea of the "traditional" family in the U.S. Drawing on Moore's (1994) framework, I argue that marriage structures, as they are culturally constructed, can come in many forms, not just monogamy, and there is not a single "right" way to express love and sexuality. I have shown how, in recent decades, new technologies, specifically computer technologies, and communication systems have been drawn upon by individuals and groups engaging in the ongoing cultural construction of kinship, marriage, and family in the U.S., to facilitate this cultural process, and to assert power to counter the hegemony and assumed naturalness of heterosexual monogamous marriage. I also argue, though a discourse on polygamy can be viewed as a counter discourse to the dominant discourse on monogamy, in many ways, ideals and values that individuals associate with polygamous marriage can reinforce certain aspects of hegemonic discourses of marriage, gender, and sexuality, as I found was the case among proponents of polygamy I conducted research with in the U.S. This issue is complex and

shows that there is not a clear cut dichotomy between hegemonic and counter discourses of marriage in the U.S.

As I conducted research primarily online, my thesis also adds to the body of knowledge regarding virtual ethnography and Internet studies. I argue that Valentine's (2006) idea that the Internet can provide a space for gay and lesbian individuals who have traditionally been excluded from public spaces can be expanded to include other diverse groups, specifically those who practice, are interested in practicing, and support the practice of polygamy. The Internet can provide a much needed space to create new friendships, community, and polygamous relationships for some families and individuals who may feel socially or geographically isolated from others who are also interested in polygamy. My research also reinforces Taylor's (2006) theory that the real/virtual cannot be separated and are interwoven, Hine's (2000) theory that culture can be enabled by technology, and as other scholars have shown, that online communities provide sites for meaningful and relevant anthropological research.

One of my goals was to provide a counter discourse to the hegemony of heteronormative and monogamous views and practices of marriage in the U.S. I believe that it is a human right for consenting adults to choose how and with whom they want to express love and sexuality, without discrimination. If this expression includes entering into marriage, then the structure of the marriage and the partners involved should be left to individuals to decide what feels right for them. In the U.S., privilege is awarded to those in heterosexual monogamous marriages and is denied to most¹⁰ of those who choose a marriage structure outside of these social and legally recognized unions. My analysis of the dominant discourse of marriage in the U.S. is an attempt to challenge the status quo.

¹⁰ With the exception of those states in which same sex marriage is legal.

Suggestions for Future Activism and Policy Changes

Accomplishments of the same sex marriage movement provide hope that American people are changing their minds about acceptable marriage and relationship structures. The government's role in regulating the intimate and private relationships of adults is up for debate. The *Time* website listed polygamy activism as the number five event under the "Top 10 Marriage Stories" on their "Top 10 Everything List of 2012" (Luscombe 2012). This topic seems to be at the forefront of Americans' interests, and perhaps with the promising headway made by same sex marriage advocates, polygamy and other diverse marriage and relationship structures will one day be accepted by the American people as well. Adding to this hope for acceptance is the ruling made by U.S. District Court Judge Clark Waddoups on December 13, 2013 that essentially decriminalized polygamy in Utah, which was discussed in Chapter 5 (Dalrymple II 2013). However, polygamy advocates need to continue working to fight stereotypes that exist in the minds of Americans and foster a dialogue about the practice of polygamy. The Internet is playing a critical role in providing a space for the formation of online communities around polygamy and disseminating information, but I think that more polygamy advocates could benefit from the use of the Internet in their campaign for decriminalization or legalization of polygamy. Groups and individuals could maximize their existing online presence by creating links from their websites to the websites of other advocacy groups with similar interests. Gher believes that building relationships with other marginalized communities can be beneficial (Gher 2008: 599).

Although some polygamy advocates may be opposed to the idea or practice of polyamory, polyandry, or group marriage, I think organizing with advocates of these and other marriage and relationship structures would be beneficial in drawing support and a larger

audience to the cause of decriminalization or legalization of polygamy. There are some polyamorists who consider fundamentalist Mormon polygamy to be part of the polyamorous community because both are legally prohibited under the same laws; some polyamorists have even renamed polyamory the postmodern polygamy (Gher 2008:572). There seems to be some support and collaboration from the polyamory community, so creating these ties may be possible. The Internet could be a crucial tool in starting a dialogue between the two communities.

Some families are “going public” with their practice of polygamy in an effort to “normalize” polygamy. The Browns and the Dargers are two polygamist families who have made their private lives public by appearing on reality television shows, participating in media interviews, authoring family memoirs, and speaking in public. “Going public” can be viewed as a form of activism because these families are making their illegal life public in order to change the minds of the American people opposed to the practice of polygamy. Although this type of activism comes with its own set of risks, it is a bold way to oppose and resist government regulation. The Internet provides a means to “go public” in a somewhat less risky way by becoming a member of the polygamy website and within the community of the website, one can “publicly” declare that they practice polygamy or support the practice of polygamy, but an individual would not necessarily need to reveal their offline identity to do this. Writing an anonymous blog could serve the same purpose as well. This form of activism fits in with Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine’s idea of getting involved whenever and wherever one can, which was discussed in Chapter 8. Individuals who support polygamy may not have a way to connect or effect social change if they live in an isolated geographic location, but the Internet can provide a bridge to reach others in the U.S. and globally who also support the practice of polygamy.

In conflict with some of the advocates of polygamy discussed in Chapter 8, I believe that a redefinition of marriage needs to occur in order to include and legalize a diverse scope of relationships from same sex couples to polygamy and group marriage. I argue that this redefinition of marriage will not reduce the validity or sanctity of heterosexual marriage, but will merely include all individuals who wish to legally formalize and publicize their union through marriage. Expanding the definition of marriage will not change the meaning of marriage for those who believe it has spiritual purpose or that it is rooted in religious practice. It will allow more individuals who have been marginalized in the past to take advantage of the many benefits of marriage allowed to heterosexual couples who decide to tie the knot. Over 1,000 particular rights are reserved only for heterosexual monogamously married couples, like tax benefits, pension rights, survivor benefits, and child custody. These benefits and rights are extremely important as they are in regards to identifying as someone's next of kin, and they are markers of legitimacy and authenticity in the U.S (Lewin 2006 [2004]:139).

This redefinition of marriage may result in a great deal of work for law makers and government departments, officials, and employees to accommodate the legal recognition of new and different marriage structures, but this change would allow those consenting adults who wish to marry, no matter the relationship structure, a means to legally and publicly do so. Marginalized practices like polygamy, polyandry, and group marriage would finally be able to have the opportunity to take advantage of the same rights and privileges that heterosexual monogamously married couples are entitled to and often take for granted. These changes would require Americans to conceptualize a different type of family and kinship network existing alongside heterosexual monogamy and the nuclear family. Another option would be the deregulation of marriage, family, and kinship, which may not be as feasible a prospect at this

time. At the very least, the decriminalization of polygamy has the potential to improve the lives of many polygamous families who could openly practice polygamy without fear of prosecution or jail time.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research on the topic of polygamy and the Internet in the U.S. will help to broaden the current understanding of polygamy in contemporary U.S. I recommend that additional research be conducted on polygamy websites, like the one I researched, in order to find similarities and differences and provide a greater understanding of the presence of polygamy centered interactive websites and communities online. Following polygamous relationships as they are formed online and then pursued offline will provide data and analyses regarding dating or courting processes and how the Internet may influence these. Examining the role the Internet and other technologies, like Skype or text messaging, may play in established polygamous families or communities, like that of Centennial Park, Arizona or others, would provide an interesting study of how these technologies may be changing or shaping the contemporary practice of polygamy in the U.S. Research on this topic might include questions like: does the Internet or other communication technologies enhance polygamous relationships and marriages by allowing for easier communication; or, do these technologies aid in causing or relieving jealousy among wives? Additionally, researching polygamy as it is practiced among immigrant populations in the U.S. may provide insight on how hegemonic views of marriage, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. may alter or shape the daily lives, practices, and meanings of polygamy among these groups.

Another area that could benefit from further research is why the media is primarily portraying and promoting polygamy but not polyandry, the marriage of one woman to two or

more men. I discuss this issue briefly in Chapter 7, but additional research could help uncover the reasons why this is occurring in relation to gender inequality in the U.S. Also, my research elicited many binaries among community survey and interview respondents, which reflect dominant ideas of marriage, gender, and sexuality in the U.S., such as male/female, husband/wife, heterosexual/homosexual, and monogamy/polygamy. Research into why Americans think about gender, sexuality, and marriage through a binary lens could be a fruitful area for further study.

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APPENDIX I

Interview Questions for Website Members

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Race/Ethnicity:
4. State you live in:
5. Level of education:
6. Job field:
7. Political party affiliation:
8. Religious affiliation:
9. Marital status:
10. What type of marriage (monogamous, polygynous, etc.):
11. Number of wives/co-wives in your family:
12. Number of your children:
13. Number of total children in family (mothered by co-wives):
14. Yearly income level: Under \$25,000, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, More than \$100,000
15. Why did you become a member of the polygamy website?
16. Do you post on or read the discussion boards?
17. Do you participate in the chat room?
18. What topics do you discuss on the discussion boards or in the chat rooms?
19. What days of the week and times do you visit the website? Why do you visit at these times? How many times per week do you visit the website?
20. Do you use any other website that offers a chat room and discussion boards?
21. What do you like about using the polygamy website?
22. Have you made any friends on the website that you communicate with regularly?
23. Do you consider friendships that you have made on the website to be as valuable as your offline friendships?
24. Have you met anyone from the website in person? If you have, then please describe your experience and how your meeting went.
25. Why did you choose to become a member of a website that is focused on polygamy as opposed to another chat room or discussion board website?
26. What are your personal thoughts, views, or experiences of polygamy?
27. How do your friends and family view polygamy?
28. What are your feelings about polygamy being illegal in the United States? Do you think it should be legal and why?

29. Have you used the website to search for or a spouse? Why did you use the website as opposed to a different method of finding a spouse?
30. Does the polygamy website serve as a type of community for you? If so, in what ways?
31. Do you feel that the website serves as a support system or network of friends?
32. Do you feel the website is a safe environment to share information about yourself and your relationships?
33. Do you learn about the feelings and experiences of individuals of a different gender from your own, who are involved in polygamous relationships, that you do not have access to outside of the website?
34. Do most people support polygamy on this website?
35. Has this website changed the way you or others view polygamy?
36. Does this website facilitate the creation of polygamist relationships?
37. Does this website make it easier to be or become a polygamist?
38. How does the experience of the website compare to a time before the website's creation?
39. Do you communicate with anyone outside of the U.S. through the website? How does your communication with that person influence your thoughts, views, or experiences of polygamy?
40. Overall, what have you gained by being a member of the polygamy website?
41. Have people's participation on polygamy websites influenced changes in polygamous communities or among polygamous families in the U.S., in regard to the practice of polygamy or relationships among people who participate in polygamous marriages?

Interview Questions for Website Administrators

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Race/Ethnicity:
4. State you live in:
5. Level of education:
6. Job field:
7. Political party affiliation:
8. Religious affiliation:
9. Marital status:
10. What type of marriage (monogamous, polygynous, etc.):
11. Number of wives/co-wives in your family:
12. Number of your children:
13. Number of total children in family (mothered by co-wives):
14. Yearly income level: Under \$25,000, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, More than \$100,000
15. What are your personal feelings about polygamy?

16. Do you have any experiences with polygamy?
17. How do your friends and family view polygamy?
18. What are your feelings about polygamy being illegal in the United States? Do you think it should be legal or decriminalized? Why?
19. In your opinion, what is the purpose of the website?
20. What do your duties as site administrator include?
21. Do you feel the website provides a safe and judgmental free environment for discussion of polygamy? In what ways?
22. Do you think a community is being created on the website? In what ways?
23. What do people mostly use the website for?
24. Are abuses ever reported to you? If so, what type and how often does this occur?
25. Do you participate in the chat room and discussion boards? If so, how often? How does it make you feel when you participate?
26. Have you met anyone from the website in person? If you have, then please describe your experience and how your meeting went.
27. Do you feel that the website serves as a support system or network of friends?
28. Do most people support polygamy on this website?
29. Have people's participation on polygamy websites influenced changes in polygamous communities or among polygamous families in the U.S., in regard to the practice of polygamy or relationships among people who participate in polygamous marriages?
30. Has this website changed the way you or others view polygamy?
31. Does this website facilitate the creation of polygamist relationships?
32. Does this website make it easier to be or become a polygamist?
33. How does the experience of the website compare to a time before the website's creation?
34. Does communication with anyone outside of the U.S. through the website influence your or other members' thoughts, views, or experiences of polygamy?

Community Survey Questionnaire

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Race/Ethnicity:
4. Sexual Orientation:
5. Level of education:
6. City you live in:
7. Job field:
8. Yearly income level (Please circle one):
 - Under \$25,000
 - \$25,000-\$49,999
 - \$50,000-\$74,999
 - \$75,000-\$99,999
 - More than \$100,000

9. Political party affiliation:
10. Religious affiliation:
11. Marital status:
12. Do you have children?
13. If so, how many?
14. How do you personally define marriage?
15. Do you believe that same-sex or gay couples should have the right to marry? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
16. Do you personally know any same-sex or gay couples who are or want to be married? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
17. Do you believe polygynous marriages (the marriage of 1 man to 2 or more women) marriages should be made legal in the U.S.? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
18. Do you personally know any people who practice polygyny or wish to do so? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
19. Do you believe that the federal or state government should have the right to decide who adults can or cannot be in a romantic or sexual relationship with? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
20. Do you believe that the federal or state government should have the right to decide who adults can or cannot marry? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
21. Please list 5 things you believe to be true about polygyny (the marriage of 1 man to 2 or more women)?
22. Where did you learn about the 5 things you listed in the above question?
23. Do you believe that polygyny is moral or immoral? Why or why not?
24. Do you believe that polyandry (the marriage of 1 woman to 2 or more men) should be legal in the U.S.? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
25. Do you believe that group marriage (a marital arrangement between 3 or more people in which each person is married to each person) should be legal in the U.S.? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
26. Do you believe that polyamory (being in love or romantically involved with more than 1 person at the same time with the consent of all involved) is moral or immoral? Why or why not?
27. Are you aware of the existence of websites that provide a forum for adults who are in a polygynous relationship, would like to be in a polygynous relationship, or who support polygyny to meet, communicate, and form relationships both plutonic and romantic? (Please circle one)
 Yes No
28. If yes, how did you learn about these types of websites?
29. Please describe how you would feel if someone close to you, such as a friend or family member, decided to be in a polygynous relationship.

30. Have you viewed any of the following television shows featuring polygyny? (Please circle all that apply)

Sister Wives

Polygamy USA

Escaping the Prophet

Big Love

Breaking the Faith

Or any specials featuring polygyny on *20/20*, *Dateline*, *Taboo*, or *Vice*

Other _____

31. Did viewing any of the above shows influence your perceptions of polygyny? (Please circle one)

Yes

No

32. If you answered yes to the above question, please describe how the above shows influenced your perceptions of polygyny.