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Happiness in Plural Marriage: An Exploration of Logic

Audrey McConkie Merket
Utah State University

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logic (läj'ik) n**. 1** the science of correct reasoning **2** correct reasoning; valid induction or deduction **3** a way of reasoning whether correct or incorrect [to use faulty *logic*]

It is difficult for any monogamous person, but especially a monogamous woman to understand how living a life of polygamy could be considered joyful and fulfilling. Being a young woman, happily married to my "true love," the idea that the same kind of happiness I feel could exist in a plural relationship at first seemed completely illogical to me. However, as Kathleen Flake pointed out in the 2009 Arrington Memorial Lecture, "logic is not an absolute set of assertions about something. People that share your premises will think you're logical, whereas people that don't believe the same things as you will think you are illogical." Although the historical consensus is that polygamy was an instrument of social control that oppressed women and led to a monopolization of power and resources, when successful Victorian marriages are compared to successful polygamous marriages, the Mormon polygamous marriages produced more empowerment for women, whereas traditional Victorian marriages produced dependency that only oppressed women.

Admittedly there were cases where polygamist wives felt neglected, but there were many instances where women flourished and for the most part Mormon "women saw the anxieties and frustrations of polygamy as no greater than the tensions of the monogamous marriages some of them had known in their younger days" (Arrington 230). Even when polygamist communities were under attack and it would seem logical to see signs of disaffection, "there [were] few such signs" (Logue 9). Like Flake, I think that these instances that seem to defy ideas of logic deserve our attention just as much, if not more, than the marriages that suffered. As a society, we have inherited monogamy. It is what we know and for the most part we "have practiced it as a matter of course, without any special examination or inquiry" and to "insist on the condemnation of this system, without hearing its defense, is oppression" (Whitney 41). The only way to understand how polygamy could work is to set aside our

own personal ideas, essentially prejudices, about what constitutes a healthy relationship and try to understand another point of view.

Polygamy was first instituted in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints during the 19th Century, a time of high romance when ideals about marriage were changing. For centuries, marriages had been arranged primarily for political and personal gain. While love did exist, it simply was not the reason why people married. As time progressed and civilizations changed, marrying for love began to be not only more common, but desirable. Flake describes the Victorian marriage ideal as a symbiotic relationship where love was shut in as earthly strife was shut out, allowing "two hearts [to] beat in one breast."

In comparison, love in a successful plural marriage extended beyond the relationship of husband and wife, and existed between all the wives. In essence, polygamy was not simply a man involved in multiple marriages, but a group of people in a "network of marriages" (Flake). Instead of focusing on the oneness of a couple, plural marriage cleansed the practitioners of selfishness and other mundane or worldly attributes by forcing them to focus outward (Flake).

While the ideal polygamous union does not seem as romantic, the marriage had bigger ambitions than to simply rule one another's hearts (Flake). Mormon temple marriages ordained couples with rights and blessings, conferring on them a "mutually independent priestly identity . . . that defied the oneness of Victorian marital views" (Flake). Powers were given in the ceremony and they extended into the way the Mormons lived. Both men and women were in charge of bringing souls to God, women through birth and men through baptism, or rebirth. Without one another, neither responsibility could be fulfilled; there were no patriarchs without matriarchs. In contrast, the typical Victorian era marriage did not give couples rights, but duties. Marriage was ordained as a remedy against sin, not as a saving ordinance (Flake).

For Mormons, plural marriage was seen as a commandment from God, a necessary way of living as long as God required. Similar to many cases in the Bible where polygamy was temporarily "practiced as a corrector of evils and a promoter of purity," Mormons believed that the majority of mankind had neglected their spiritual duties and they needed to repopulate the earth with people that believed in pure religion (Whitney 7). Plural marriage was not simply a matter of having too many women, male ego, or even fulfilling sexual desires, but something ordained by God as a saving ordinance. It was believed that had the human race not fallen into sin, "there would have been husbands for all womankind" and polygamy would not have been required (7).

Polygamy not only served to purge the human race, but it did a lot to purge individuals of sin. While no realistic marriage, either monogamous or polygamous, could be free of strife, polygamy did not try to avoid common marital issues of envy or jealousy, but met them directly. Human nature would typically demand jealousy in a polygamous situation, but a polygamist wife could not "only care about her husband or be indifferent to where his affections lie" (Flake). For a polygamist union to work, each member had to feel love for every member involved in the marriage. Since polygamy was a network of marriages, it required each individual to overcome their own personal doubts and selfish objections, something that was not necessarily a requirement of a monogamous union. Commenting on this shortcoming of monogamy, polygamous wife Helen Mar Whitney said the "monogamic mode . . . led to the greatest vices and social evils . . . making both husbands and wives a perpetual prey to the 'green eyed monster,' and the more awful torment of a guilty conscience" (4). While polygamous unions were not exempt from these vices, for the Mormons, "polygamy [was] not the worst trial in the world, for it [had] been made honorable among [their] people" (11). Without all the self-sacrifice and conscious increase of commitment, the practice probably would not have been as successful or rewarding.

While polygamy obviously varied in structure from monogamy, Victorian ideals of love still survived. When Elizabeth Kane visited Utah, she found that despite the multiplicity of partners, there

was still a great exhibition of romantic love (Flake). Many women even commented that they "not only retained the affection of their husbands, but to see such a great sacrifice made by the wife of his bosom increased his love and exalted her in his eyes" (Whitney 9). While the result may be somewhat unexpected, a significant number of polygamous unions led to an increase in love rather than a decrease. As an outsider reasoned, how could "taking a second wife rob the first wife of any part of the love her husband had for her, any more than the birth of a second child robbed the first born the love of its parents had for it" (5-6).

Not all Mormon men were equal candidates for polygamy, and those that were invited into its practice were instructed to consult with their wife before taking on an additional partner (Logue 3). Whitney recounts, and many other similar stories exist, that when her "husband was advised by [her] father to take another wife. He studied [her] feelings and took one whom he had cause to believe loved [her] and [her] children, and would cause [her] the least trouble" (11). Many polygamous wives developed such deep friendships with the other wives that it was said "if there has ever been any jealousy . . . it was on the husband's side, on account of [the wives] mutual devotion" (10-11). Perhaps the reason why these relationships experienced an increase of commitment and love was because they required more self-sacrifice and patience than the typical marriage. By giving more love instead of expecting more love, both women and men found that an increased amount of love was returned.

Even if it seems counter-intuitive, polygamy also provided an opportunity for women to be empowered. In Victorian marriages, "the husband was the dominant, controlling figure and the wife was supposed to be quiet and submissive to her husband's wishes" (Ziemba). The union was not an equal partnership since the man "controlled all wealth and property, including her personal effects and the money she had before marriage" (Ziegenfuss). For the most part, married women were expected to stay in the "private sphere" tending to household chores while men attended to the more serious matters of the "public sphere" (Ruckert). Mormon women worked side by side with men to establish "Zion" in the

Utah territory and were not confined to the domestic sphere that confined many of their Victorian counterparts. Although it may be argued that this was a necessity for many Western settlement wives of the time period, it appears that "more than economic necessity under laid their independence" (Flake). According to Mary Isabella Horne, a Stake Relief Society President and plural wife, since her husband's second marriage she could do "individually things she never could have attempted before; and work out her individual character separate from her husband'" (Arrington 230). Helen Whitney also said, "I could say truly say that [polygamy] had done the most towards making me a Saint and a free woman, in every sense of the word . . . it has proven one of the greatest boons – a 'blessing in disguise'" (24).

Mormon women were anything but oppressed in their communities. From the institution of the church, "they attended meetings and exercised spiritual gifts along with men, voted in general church assemblies, and contributed time and means to such projects as the Kirtland temple" (Arrington 220). Statistics on women's involvement in the community abound, both women and men were named as trustees of Brigham Young's colleges, in 1869 46% of the enrolled pupils at the University of Deseret were women, and two women were admitted to the Utah bar in 1872 (228). Dr. Martha Hughes Canon, a physician and the first woman state senator in the U.S. who also happened to be a plural wife, observed "that the plural wife was not a slave" (230).

As the women of the U.S. began to petition for their rights, Utah women did join and support the national suffrage movements, but it did not seem that Mormon women viewed themselves as being as generally oppressed as other women nationwide. Proof of this belief is present in the literature produced by Mormon women. Addressing the national movement, Reba Pratt penned the words, "While the women of this great land / For 'equal rights' to do call / Without the seeking we now stand / Far, far above them all" (1-4). These women did not see themselves as oppressed; this perception matters. As Eliza R. Snow said, "Were we the stupid, degraded, heartbroken beings that we have been

represented, silence might better become us; but as women of God . . . we not only speak because we have the right, but justice and humanity demand that we should" (Arrington 226).

True, there were women that were dissatisfied with their plural marriages, but there were many "Mormon women [that] spoke and wrote in its defense, holding mass meetings and sending several petitions to Congress demanding that their families not be destroyed by antipolygamy legislation" (Arrington 230). From today's perspective, "polygamy, with its reliance on ancient tradition and patriarchal authority, [may seem] out of place within a church [that] emphasize[s] self-determination and individual progress," but this argument can only be sustained when viewing the situation from a current monogamistic perspective (Logue 8-9). Historically this is an improper view for the women and men that thrived in plural marriages. Their lifestyle more readily led to self-determination and individual progress than the monogamic code of that time period logically could.

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