

## Exploration of Relationship Patterns and Family Functioning in Polygamous Families: A Pilot Study

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The mostly Muslim nation of Malaysia has been unwavering in its perceptions about the practice of polygamy. These perceptions remain negative, reflecting the lamentable experiences of various families involved in polygamy. The lack of exploration of positive elements in polygamous families causes conflicts and household problems to be difficult to resolve. Therefore, this study was conducted to ascertain the suitability of the interview questions and test the study objectives. This pilot study used a fully qualitative method and one family was interviewed. The results revealed that, harmonious environment, sharing open communication, responsiveness, sharing fun things, focusing on themselves, complementing each other, provision of God, not rigid, good communication, accustomed and integrating and understanding their role are the several major themes in the pattern of the relevant relationships. Further, all family members tend to perform very well, have mature minds and enjoy broader and better social networks to describe family functioning in the general context. This pilot study portrayed a functioning family involved in polygamy but also suggested some improvements to the content of questions, the criteria of potential respondents, and the time allocated, as well as an enhancement of communication between researchers and respondents.

*Keywords:* relationships; polygamy; family; functioning

Polygamous marriage is common in the Middle East and some Asian countries, in particular those in which Sharia Law is practiced. Indeed, polygamy is acknowledged as a valid form of alliance in many countries and communities around the globe (Al-Krenawi, 2012; Thobejane, 2014), including in Asian countries like Malaysian, Brunei and Indonesia. In fact, the practice of polygamy is growing every

year and, as a consequence, affecting family

systems. According to major historical records, early Malay society accepted polygamy as a normal societal characteristic just as many other countries had for thousands of years (Raihanah Abdullah, Silmi Abdullah & Nahid Ferdausi, 2015).

Asiya (2011) points out that polygyny was a matter of much contestation and debate during the colonial period. Discussions on polygyny raised questions about the nature of husband and wife relationships, child rearing, property inheritances (Asiya, 2011), the experiences of individual family members (Thobejane, 2014), family functioning, marital and life satisfaction (Al-Krenawi, 2012) and the rearrangement of family structure (Charsley & Liversage, 2013).

Several studies have found that the social environment of children from polygamous families is adversely affected (Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Caridine, & Abu Saad, 2002). For example, children from polygamous families were found to have higher levels of family dysfunction than children from monogamous families (Al-Krenawi, Graham & Slonim-Nevo, 2002), while adolescents from polygamous families reported poorer relationships with their friends, poorer family functioning, and poorer relationships with their fathers than those from monogamous families (Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008). Systematic reviews done by Al-sharfi, Pfeffer and Miller (2016) showed that when compared to children from monogamous families, children or adolescents from polygynous families had a variety of problems, such as mental health disorders, scholastic difficulties and social problems. Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo (2008) revealed that a polygynous family structure negatively affects a family's socioeconomic status and interpersonal relationships and impairs the psychological and social functioning of the children involved.

Moreover, women who have entered into polygamous marriages were found to have a different set of experiences to those in monogamous marriages. Studies have reported that women endure more disadvantages in polygamous marriages than those in monogamous marriages

(Thobejane, 2014). The experience can be painful both for wives, especially, in polygamous relationships that work well as well as those that don't. There are however many methods and techniques that can be used by families to help the relationship to work well. Among them is the acceptance of polygamy as the will of God or destiny, making sure equal resources are allocated to the two families by the husband, the maintaining of a good relationship between the two households, avoiding conflicts and minor disputes, the maintaining of respect between wives, and allowing open interaction of siblings, other children and mothers (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006). The findings also revealed significant differences between senior wives in polygamous marriages and wives in monogamous marriages with regard to family functioning, marital satisfaction, self-esteem and life satisfaction (Al-Krenawi, 2012).

### **Objectives**

The aims of this pilot study were to identify and examine the patterns of relationships and family functioning in polygamous families. This study also sought to improve the suitability of the list of interview questions used for respondents.

### **Methods**

The study used and adapted a case study as a preliminary research. We used a qualitative approach to the case study as a research design in order to explore more thoroughly and comprehensively the individual experiences within the family concerned, in view of the limited research in case studies in exploring the phenomena to be studied (Yin, 2013). The study used a qualitative approach (in-depth interviews) to get an overview and a deeper picture of the forms of relationships seen in polygamous practice. Previous studies also mostly used qualitative methods

(structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews) to collect research data. Research by Bachand and Caron, 2001; Al-Krenawi and Nevo, 2006; Mitchell, 2010; Troy, 2008; Profanter and Ryan, 2009) used qualitative interviews to explore, understand and obtain deeper information from the perspective of the real-world orientation of the families involved.

### **Data collection**

The data were collected by means of individual interviews, carried out face-to-face and containing open-ended questions. Open-ended questions generally ask respondents to describe their situations in greater depth and tend to produce wide-ranging responses (Bowling, 1997). The interviews were done in two steps. In the first step, we introduced the main objectives of the study, gave an explanation about ethical considerations, and then asked whether respondents would be prepared to sign an informed consent form to make sure they were willing volunteers in the interview sessions until completion.

In the second step, we focused on research questions to explore five main areas were:

- a) Patterns of relationship (e.g., Can you tell me about your relationship?)
- b) Quality and family satisfaction (e.g., Can you describe how satisfied you are with the first wife's marriage?)
- c) Examining the patterns of relationships that may contribute to family satisfaction. (e.g., Can you describe what makes you happy about polygamous life with your first wife?)
- d) Examining adaptability and cohesiveness. (e.g., How do you treat the wives in accepting them as part of your responsibility?)
- e) Family functioning in polygamous families (e.g., How is your performance at work? Have you ever had a problem at work?)

The respondents were free to say as much or as little as they wished, and the researcher did not impose her own ideas. The interviews were 45–90 minutes long and were digitally recorded. The author of this research made a transcript of each interview and coded them. We used the thematic analysis method and information from data was analyzed through several coding methods. The researcher would look for the main words in the transcript as an indicator giving meaning to the phenomenon studied so that it could be categorized and produce a new concept. The data encoding process consisted of three phases, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), namely, open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

## **Results**

### **Profile of the Respondents**

The sample included one polygamous family, consisting of a husband, first wife and second wife, as well as the oldest child of the first wife. The first and second wives are living together in the same house. We selected this family by media social and ensured that they were willing to participate in the study to share their experiences. The sample for the study was selected from the area of Kajang in Selangor State. The respondents' careers were similar in that the husband, first wife, and second wife all worked as teachers, while the child was a matriculation student. In terms of age, the husband was 44 years old, both his first and second wife were 45 years old, and his oldest son was 19 years old. Meanwhile, the duration of marriage with the first wife before polygamy was 21 years with 13 years spent together with the second wife. Thus, this family had experienced about 13 years living in a polygamous situation. This study was conducted in the respondents' residence and they completed an informed consent form to participate in this study.

## Objective one: The Patterns of Relationships

In general, two general themes have emerged in this section and they are harmony and open communication.

### Harmony

All family members responded positively to each other. Most of them said that their relationships between fellow family members are good and harmonious. Here are some examples:

*My relationships with my first and second wife are very good and have been full of understanding from the beginning of marriage. We all complement each other, and the relationships are fine (husband)*

Meanwhile, the first wife and child stated that a harmonious relationship was seen as a tribute to the wife and provided support to the child.

*My relationship with my husband is good because my husband respects me as a wife, and I understand him as a husband. So, of course I always maintain this relationship (First wife)*

*My relationship with my father is good and he always supports me in pursuing what I want to do (Child)*

The findings of this study are different to those of western researchers on polygamous family relationships, which tend to highlight household problems and unhappiness. According to Al-Krenawi (2012) and Al-Krenawi (1999), harmony in a polygamous arrangement is difficult to achieve as most family members suffer from low self-esteem which contributes to other psychological problems. In contrast,

however, harmonious relationships are described in detail in the Sussman, Steinmertz and Peterson (1999) study, where it is stated that family members can assimilate and function well when there is equilibrium between the dimensions of adjustment and consolidation.

### Open communication

All of the family members use different approaches to communicate with each other in receiving and transmitting information within the family system itself. The child and father seemingly often speak together, bilaterally, as is the case with the first wife. Here are some examples:

*With my father, I talk and use two-way communication. If I did not agree, I would say. Meanwhile with my mother and stepmother, it is the same, I use two-way communication (Child)*

*With my husband, I use lots of open communication, much more of the communication is open. Meanwhile, with my co-wife, I tend to chat more and treat her like a buddy (First wife)*

*With my first wife, there is a lot of open and two-way communication. In fact, when it comes to talking about polygamy-related issues, I try to be honest and frank. I do likewise with my second wife (Husband).*

In family relationships, open communication is essential in expressing each other's feelings and building trust with one another. Open communication contributes to a healthy climate within the family system. These findings are in line with Slonim-Nevo, Al-Krenawi and Shani (2008), who found that polygamous

husbands use open communication to avoid creating spaces or gaps between family members, especially between children and stepmothers.

### **Objective two: Marriage Quality and Satisfaction**

Based on the data obtained, there are four categories that pertain to quality and satisfaction in a polygamous family environment. These are responsibility and gentleness, sharing fun things, and complementing each other.

All the family members stated that, as a whole, their experience being part of a polygamous arrangement is very satisfying. Here are some examples:

*If you could measure it, you would say that the most accurate figure is 100. If there was 200 percent, I would say 200 percent (Husband)*

*I am very grateful that this polygamous marriage provides a lot of things which allow us to complete and complement each other (First wife)*

*I am very happy and content, because polygamy seems beautiful to me (Second wife)*

According to Al-Krenawi (1998), satisfaction in polygamous marriages derives from having strong economic resources, robust social support, good social relationships between families, and fairness of treatment. However, in this study, some new themes emerged in terms of describing the quality and satisfaction derived from a polygamous marriage.

### **Responsibility and Gentleness**

*Alhamdulillah...I am happy because he is responsible and*

*kind and gentle, and he does not get easily angry (Second wife)*

*I feel happy and am enjoying life. I am also thankful because my husband is not grumpy or irresponsible (First wife).*

The first and second wives both portray the husband as a responsible person and good to his wives in various family affairs. It seems that wives in polygamous marriages tend to be happy if their husbands serve them well and are responsible when it comes to their welfare. Bachand and Caron (2001) finds that the factors of happiness and satisfaction in a polygamous marriage are linked to a high level of responsibility in providing love and friendship to those involved.

### **Sharing fun things**

*A husband should listen to his wife. My wives are always sharing their stories about what happened at their work and I do the same (Husband)*

*It's a coincidence that my husband and his second wife work in the education field. So, he's happy with what he's doing at school, and I'm just as happy with that (First wife).*

*We like to share things, especially about work-related issues. If I get an award or promotion at school, I will share my happiness with my husband (Second wife)*

*My dad likes to badger me, and he always makes jokes and does fun things to me to make me laugh. He also likes to entertain and cheer up all of us (Child).*

All the family members share fun things about work, having fun with one another, entertaining each other, and doing other enjoyable things to improve the quality

and satisfaction of their marriage. The findings of this study were also consistent with those of Slonim-Nevo and Al-Kromawi (2006), whereby children and wives in polygamous families found their father to be less serious and to knowingly serve the will and intentions of their children and wives, while also retaining a sense of self.

### Complementing Each Other

Most family members also feel more satisfaction from a polygamous marriage if they all are able to complement each other. This means that every family member knows how to compensate for the shortcomings and weaknesses of their fellow family member. This pertains especially to the attitude and character of fellow family members. This finding is supported by Slonim-Nevo and Al-Krenawi (2006) who state that a good polygamous marriage is one characterized by the acceptance of shortcomings, compensation for weaknesses, and adaptation to each other. Here is a relevant example of this:

*I'm happy with my stepmother because she complements my mother's life. My mother is a quiet person and not very talkative, which contrasts with my stepmother who is cheerful and talkative (Child).*

*I am as satisfied with my second wife as I am with my first wife, because each has their own strengths. So, I know the power of each of my wives and we celebrate this. We celebrate each of their characters because they are not all the same (Husband).*

*We are a human and, of course, we have a lot of inadequacies. So, my*

*partner (husband's second wife) is not perfect. That's why we are sharing a husband and living together. We are not perfect, we have some weaknesses, so with such an attitude, the negative things are replaced by the good ones. (First wife).*

### Objective three: Forms of relationships that contribute to polygamous satisfaction

The findings show that there are two themes illustrating the forms of relationships that contribute to polygamous satisfaction, namely, accepting polygamy as a provision of Allah SWT as well as good communication and lack of strictness.

#### Polygamy Is their fate and God's Wish

*Actually, I believe that polygamy is my destiny and a fate bestowed on me by God. Allah gave me this as a provision in my life. We are merely reconciling with our fate (First wife)*

*I accept the second wife of my father because I know my father and his new wife are partners and a good match. I accept this as a provision by Allah. I am just thankful and happy with what he has done (Child)*

These results match a study that was done by Slonim-Nevo and Al-Krenawi (2016) on 10 polygamous families, all residing in a Bedouin Arab town in the south of Israel and consisting of 1 husband, 2 wives, and 1 child. Most of them are accepting of polygamy as God's wish or their destiny. This feeling helps them to release any pain and makes them satisfied with their marriage. In this study, the first wife and child were not dependent on the leader of their family and believed that God had given them a test to ensure they were able

to survive in a well-functioning family, also receiving many rewards from God.

### **Good Communication and lack of strictness**

Good communication is one of the most important things in a satisfying polygamous marriage. The husband and co-wives in the study have been able to adapt their communication effectively, using verbal speech in polite way with every word used to impart joy to the respective partner.

*I feel my wives have completed my life. Everything I need belongs to all my wives. We use good communication. For example, if it is my turn to sleep with my first wife, and then, on another night I need to go out of town when it is my second wife's turn, she will be okay. We are not strict about whose turn it is (Husband)*

*I feel satisfied in this marriage when I can talk more and have good discussions with my husband and his second wife. I like it if they are good listeners, care about my feelings, and just listen attentively to what I want to talk to them about (First wife).*

Moreover, the second wife said that she is satisfied in this marriage when her husband uses nice words and consistently communicates in a persuasive way.

*I like the words my husband uses with me, as well as his actions. He is always giving motivational quotes, and often gives me advice too. At the same time, he doesn't get angry easily and every word that comes out his mouth makes me feel happy (Second wife).*

These findings are consistent with those from a study by Seeley (2012), in that husbands are frequently able to provide intimacy and trust thereby ensuring happiness and satisfaction with their polygamy marriages. Those husbands who are capable of maintaining intimacy and trust tend to contribute to good cooperation and relationships between their wives. Mukhuba (2017) agrees, stating that in a polygamous marriage, husbands who don't provide enough space to their wives to discuss things, and who fail to pay attention to the emotions and feelings of their wives, tend to become easily depressed because of feelings of dissatisfaction, unhappiness and discomfort among family members in adapting to the polygamous system.

### **Objective Four: Adaptability and Cohesiveness**

The family members had similar experiences in adapting to a polygamous system. There were three themes experienced by the family members in this regard, namely, understanding their respective roles, taking one to three years to adjust to the family system, and being open.

#### **Understanding their respective roles.**

All the family members needed to understand their roles to ensure they were able to adapt to the polygamous family structure and achieve a common sense of unity among them. Understanding their roles enabled them to cope with the situation, appreciate the roles of their fellow family members, and improve the way they met their responsibilities. Here are some descriptions given by the family members:

*I feel that my second wife is my responsibility, just like my first wife. I am responsible for guiding*

*and serving her like I do with my first wife (Husband)*

*If I want to adapt, I need to understand myself and my place. For example, my position is as a second wife, right? So, I need to put myself in the right place, so I am able to handle my position (Second wife)*

*Adapting is a process. So, we need to be aware of our polygamy and to learn from it. We need to learn how to improve ourselves. If we do this, we will feel well for a long time (First wife).*

*All of us need to play our respective roles in an appropriate way. For example, doing the housekeeping, tidying my room, assisting my mother, and so on (Child).*

These findings show that an understanding of their roles indirectly enables family members to adjust and achieve an equilibrium in a polygamous arrangement. They are able to deal with the transformation occurring around them and respond to issues in a normal and rational manner. The findings of the study are in line with those of Sussman, Steinmertz and Peterson (1999), where adaptation in the family context is seen as the ability of the family system to deal with the transformation of core structures, understand roles within the relationship, and respond to situations and developments that put pressure on the functionality of family members.

### **One to three year adjusting period**

All the family members said that it required a period of one to three years for them to adapt to the polygamous system. According to Falicov (1988), at the morphogenetic level, family members have the potential to build and develop a new

system. The length of time needed for this depends on the individual's ability and effort in adapting to the concept of morphogenesis. Here are some descriptions highlighting this:

*One year, but it's a process. At the beginning, it's a long way. It's a long journey involving different processes. When we are close, the concept is different. So, for me, a polygamous marriage is filled with various processes (Husband)*

*Actually, for me, I already an intention for polygamy. However, there are still so many things in a polygamous relationship that require adaptation and normalization, especially for me to stay in this system. This took two or three years (First wife)*

*It didn't take so long, because one advantage for us is that we have been close friends since we were at university. So, it felt okay (Second wife).*

It took three years for me to adapt to my new family system (Child)

### **Openness**

All the family members partly acknowledged that openness is an important aspect which has enabled them to adapt to a polygamous system. A study by Bissuel (2002) found that polygamous life tends to change existing family situations in terms of shelter, environment, as well as relationships between family members and among surrounding communities, thus implying that a period of adjustment is required by family members to accept polygamy. This study found that the husband and both his wives are honest, speak frankly, and do not attempt to hide anything, thereby ensuring that they are able to adapt to any changes



that occur within the family. Here are some examples of this:

*I do not hide myself. I do not lie, and all decisions I discuss with my wives (Husband)*

*So, we need our children to understand what is right and what is wrong. If we are not honest with them, later on they may misinterpret us. Thus, I need to serve as a good example by displaying a good attitude in terms of my relationships with my husband and co-wife (First wife).*

*Erm...we are careful to say good things. For example, with our family we talk in a polite way and just speak about good things. I do not say bad things about my family to others (Second wife)*

#### **Objective five: Functioning of family members in the general context**

The functions of the family members were looked at in terms of their employment performance and educational achievement, as well as from their social relationships with friends, colleagues and neighbors. Also, their physical, mental and emotional well-being were explored. The study found that all the family members boast excellent job performance and are well-educated. They also enjoy a broad social networking base and maturity of mind.

#### **Excellent Employment Performance**

The implications of polygamy on family functioning have been previously discussed, particularly in terms of the academic performance of children and workplace performance of both husbands and wives. Previous studies such as Chaleby (1988); Hassounh (2001) and Slonim-Nevo, Al-Krenawi and Shani-Yuval (2008) revealed that polygamous

practices contribute to household problems and conflicts, increasing stress in daily life among family members. This practice, according to these studies, subsequently affects the job performance of the spouses and academic achievements of the children involved.

However, the findings of this study suggest otherwise, that polygamous life does not negatively affect either job performance or the learning process of children. Here are some examples from the respondents in this regard:

*I'm actually a brilliant worker. During my tenure, I have been twice rewarded with gems and APC, and I have been recently promoted from senior assistant (Husband)*

*Errmm.... when I got my SPM results, I got 10A 1B. As of now, my matriculation result for semester I was PNGK 3.70 (Child)*

*Thank God, my job performance has improved. My achievements have been pretty good. At school, my students' average exam grades have gone up in the subject I teach. My husband always supports, and my husband's first wife also gives me a lot of help (Second wife)*

*Alhamdulillah...thanks to God, since living in a polygamous marriage, my job performance has actually improved. My grade has got better because I have a broader network even though I live in a polygamous family (First wife).*

#### **Broader and Better Network**

Overall, the functionality of the family members has improved. After starting to live a polygamous life, all the family members felt their connections became

broader, especially among neighbors, workmates and the general public. In fact, the family began to get more attention from the people around them. Here are some examples from the respondents in this regard:

*My social relationships are getting better. In my view, the people around me respect me because they see I can lead and manage my family (Husband)*

*Alhamdulillah, my life in a polygamous marriage is better. It is stable and remains calm like before. My polygamous relationship feels normal, and in fact we all have more space. Before I moved to the new school, I lived far from my husband. The first wife of my husband has been so friendly, and she has a lot of friends to assist me since I moved to Klang. Also, my friends and her friends are both close to us because my husband's first wife has such a good attitude and is soft spoken (Second wife)*

*Alhamdulillah ... we are very close to our neighbors and always together. Sometimes when there is a new neighbor, they become friendly very quickly with us. Sometimes our house serves as a place for the neighborhood kids to learn Al-Quran and read yassin (Second wife)*

*My relationships with friends are good. Most of my friends are interested in how my family gets on and they ask me how I'm able to adapt to this kind of family. My friends don't keep away from me, but instead they are eager and interested in knowing about me (Child).*

The study conducted by Al-Krenawi and Graham (1997) on the Israeli Bedouin-Arab families found that the children from polygamous families experienced greater academic and behavioral problems than those from monogamous families. Similarly, the study by Elbedour et al., (2002) found that children from polygamous families were reported to have many problems in terms of academic achievement at school. This is because polygamous marriages often end in divorce and separation of family members. As a result, these children find themselves increasingly excluded from society. The findings of this study, however, differ from those of the abovementioned studies.

### **Maturity of Mind**

Meanwhile, in terms of mental, physical and emotional health, the family members gave good and positive responses. Although there are some persisting conflicts and problems, they all feel more mature and rational.

Al-Krenawi and Nevo (2008) found that polygamous marriages have an effect in the context of psycho-social and family functionality. This study found that children from polygamous families endure mental health problems, social difficulties, poor academic achievements and weak personal relationships. However, our study found the opposite, that is the child involved is emotionally and mentally sound, is rational, and is able to exert control over his emotions. The following is a description from the child:

*Erm...physically I'm not so strong as I'm a bit fat.... but, now I am trying to slim down. I'm not sick in any way, and my mental health is fine (Child).*

Previous researchers such as Ghubash, Hamdi, and Bebbington (1992); Al-Krenawi (2012) and Al-Krenawi (1999)

revealed that women in polygamous relationships have a high risk of experiencing mental health problems and low self-esteem. In contrast, this study, found that both the first and second wives displayed a good level of mental and emotional wellness despite some lingering problems. All the problems and issues in the household are assessed in a positive context and are solved by the family members themselves. Below are some descriptions from the husband, first and second wife in this regard:

*For me, we have actually improved since entering a polygamous arrangement. This is because we face many tests and challenges. Instead of getting weaker, we are actually getting stronger (Husband)*

*We need to understand what we want to do, because, in this way, we can learn and find knowledge, as well as know the real direction for ourselves. We focus on ourselves for all our problems and submit to Allah SWT. In this way, we will live a good life (First wife)*

*Alhamdulillah...so far, I have had no physical illnesses. I just had a broken leg from an accident a long time ago, so had to use a wheelchair. When I have been a bit sick, the senior wife has taken care of me along with the children. For now, my mental and physical condition is fine (Second wife).*

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, this paper sought to discuss the impact of polygamous marriages on the patterns of relationships, quality and satisfaction within the relationship, family adaptability and cohesion, and family

functioning. The study found that, as a whole, all the members of the family that took part in the research have enjoyed largely positive experiences and have successfully adapted to their new family system, thereby enabling them to sustain harmony within the family. While most previous research found that the practice of polygamy contributes to family problems and adversely affects the psychological functioning of family members, this study found that all the family members involved function well. Furthermore, they reported that their relationships are full of positive elements such as responsiveness and delicateness, sharing fun things, focusing on oneself, complementing each other, and understanding each other's roles. In other words, this study found that the prevalent themes associated with a polygamous family can be positive.

Nonetheless, these findings are not conclusive given that this is only a pilot study, and as such the saturation data is still inadequate. The data obtained was only to test the five objectives of the study. Thus, this pilot study has several limitations. For example, its investigations were small in scale, there were only a few participants, and the list of interview questions still needs to be upgraded to suit the respective respondents. This pilot study did however allow the researcher to practice interviewing techniques and make appropriate modifications based on the interviewing experience (Wijck & Harrison, 2013) It is suggested that future studies should have a greater scope and use an appropriate list of questions, specifically with more open questions aimed at eliciting as much information as possible from respondents. Furthermore, the duration of the interviews should be precise and concise (not more than one hour). The results of this study will assist the researcher in exploring and preparing for a major study on this topic.

### **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethic Committee, Universiti Sciences Malaysia (Ref USM/JEPem/18070324). Participants consented to anonymised quotes being used in dissemination.

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