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## POLYGYNY AFTER 60

Victor Kassel

During the past fifteen years in the private practice of geriatrics, I have noticed a change in the attitude of many aged patients. Earlier in my career, these people felt a greater personal responsibility for working out the solutions to their own problems. Although they recognized the need for guidance to help effect a solution, they tended to assume a more active role in solving these problems. The aged have changed. Now, they have become passive, except to challenge everybody else to improve their lot. Their disabilities have become status symbols, a means whereby they can obtain attention and control their families. Years ago, these people considered old age a disadvantage and preferred that the nation ignore their chronological age. Now the aged are asking for special advantages because they are elderly. The emphasis has changed from what the aged can do to help themselves to what America can do to help the aged. Today, the needs of the aged are a major concern of our nation.

In considering these needs, it is best to categorize them into three main groups: medical-surgical, psychiatric-psychological, and social. The aged concentrate mostly on their medical-surgical and psychiatric-psychological needs. But in the private practice of geriatrics the greatest frustrations arise when trying to fill their social necessities. This would include needs caused by the death of a spouse, economic limitations due to inflation,

decline of prestige, loss of status, compulsory retirement from business, and, most of all, inability to find fully satisfying activities. Unlike the treatment directed against a medical illness, where the physician participates actively in helping the patient, the acceptance or modification of the social problems must be done by the patient. More and more the aged have become unwilling to try to change their lot. Rather, they look to society to modify itself to suit their needs. They seek to regain the way they lived in earlier adulthood. They would resurrect their dead spouses; they would undo the industrial advances of today. Many seem to say: "You've done this to me, now fix it!" I even have had patients blame me because they've lived so long; now they claim that it is my responsibility to make them happy.

What can be done about it? The aged are with us and, in increasing numbers, they shall continue to be with us. If the aged find it so difficult to change, perhaps society might change so that the aged may be reintegrated and live comfortably.

During the past two hundred years, we have seen a gradual change in political, economic, and social philosophy in this country. Of the unfilled social needs of the aged which the social scientists have identified, there is a set which a certain change in our present social philosophy or ethic might fill. Many might consider this change radical, but it is a return to a practice which at one time was considered proper in the Judeo-Christian ethic. I mean a change to polygyny—a limited polygyny—*polygyny after 60*.

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## ADVANTAGES OFFERED BY POLYGYNY AFTER 60

### Greater Ratio of Older Women to Older Men

With the American concept of equal rights and opportunities, not only all older men but also all older women should have the chance to marry or remarry following the death of a spouse. The average wife can expect to outlive her husband five to fifteen years so that, after the age of 60, the women outnumber the men. Thus, the need for polygyny is obvious: there just are not enough men. Therefore, any man over age 60 could marry 2, 3, 4, or 5 women over 60. Were the situation reversed and the men outnumbered the women, then polyandry would be the answer. Thus, there is a chance that polygyny would offer to the excess women the opportunity to obtain a husband. The inability of many older widows to remarry because of the limited number of available men represents an unfilled need which polygyny could help to alleviate.

### The Family Constellation

Besides the opportunity to remarry, polygyny offers to these women the opportunity to reestablish a meaningful family group. Sociologists have stressed the importance of the family in American life. Our urban living has limited the size of the modern family in contrast to the size of the rural family during the last century. And likewise, our homes are large enough only for the parents and children of the modern family. There just is not enough room in the average modern home for 3 generations. In addition, changing ideas about child raising often bring conflict between parents and grandparents. Consequently, except as baby-sitters, grandparents cannot play a meaningful role in the modern family circle. They are not intimates in the family constellation; they are outsiders. With polygyny, there would be a return to the married state for the many lonely widows as well as a chance to establish a genuine, intrarelated family group composed of these married women and their spouse.

### Diet

Studies have demonstrated that married couples subsist on a more adequate diet than do widows

and widowers. The lonely women, who were once excellent cooks, have no one for whom to prepare a complete meal. There is no incentive to cook. Many men never could cook well so they, too, exist on a limited, unbalanced diet. On the other hand, where there is a group of people living together as a family, eating in the company of one another, the story is different. Mealtime regains its social atmosphere: appetites return. Each wife can take her turn at cooking so that the task does not become too great, and menu planning becomes a source of pride. This can lead only to better and more adequate meals.

### Living Conditions

Another cause for the inadequate diet of aged men and women, besides the loneliness described above, is their limited income. And limited income contributes to the inadequate living conditions found among many aged. The polygynous marriage offers the opportunity to pool funds so that there is enough money for all. The family can live more graciously.

### Illness

Added to the opportunities to maintain good health, another advantage of polygyny relates to illness. Many aged persons would not need nursing home care if responsible people at home were available to nurse the infirm person. In addition, many aged are hospitalized because they live alone and are unable to obtain adequate home nursing care. Polygyny solves this difficulty, for the husband and wives would take turns nursing the sick. Also, the care does not become too great a burden for one person as so often happens in monogamous marriages; the responsibility is shared. Added to these advantages is the fact that the ill person remains within the familiar surroundings of his or her own home.

### Housework

Many aged find it impossible to keep their homes in order because of the fatigue produced by the physical labor of housework. Two or more women in a polygynous marriage, working together to keep the house in order, lighten the burden for one an-



other. They also have an opportunity to display their abilities as fine homemakers without overworking themselves. In addition, when one of the wives finds her physical infirmity activated, she need not strain herself. She can rest, knowing full well that the other wives will continue the homemaking until she is capable again.

### Sex

Now we come to the most delicate and the most controversial aspect. Studies at various geriatric centers have disproved the misconception that older people are not interested in sexual activity. Marriage sanctions sexual activity, and the polygynous marriage enables the unmarried older woman to find a partner. Most widows refrain from sex because they lack this partner; society has taught women to remain chaste when not married.

To many people it is abhorrent to visualize grandparents or even parents past the childbearing stage enjoying the pleasures of sexual intercourse. Older women, recognizing this attitude, repress their sexual desires and develop psychological conflicts and consequent guilt. Studies have demonstrated, however, that most women have an increase in libido after the menopause simply because they lose the fear of pregnancy. A polygynous marriage enables them to express this desire, instead of remaining repressed through a continent widowhood.

As for the men, sexologists claim that the male is polygynous by nature. The development of impotency and decreased libido in older men need not represent a senile change. The existence of a climacteric in the male has never been positively established. It seems that most impotency in the aged male represents boredom and many times an unattractive, uninterested partner. With variety, greater interest is sparked and many men can come back to life sexually. Also, the problem of the frigid wife is eliminated; other partners are available. Polygynous marriage offers a solution to a number of sexual problems of the aged.

### Grooming

Where you have many women competing for the attention of the lone male, both the women and the man would show an increased interest in better

grooming. Many aged persons are uninterested in their appearance, change their undergarments infrequently, bathe inadequately, and seldom cleanse their external excretory organs. Polygyny offers to the woman someone for whom to compete. The man, on the other hand, is interested in being courted. Each person will do his or her best to upgrade appearances, each will be alert to the advantages gained by the competitor, and each will learn the tricks of becoming more attractive. The end result must be finer-appearing older citizens.

It can be argued that the jealousy aroused as the result of the competition would be carried to an extreme by the women and would disrupt the quiet, peaceful home. This may occur. But when there is a choice between uninterested, dowdy, foul-smelling hags and alert, interested, smartly dressed ladies, the selection is obvious. Troubles might arise, but what marriage—monogamous or polygynous—is without troubles? The strained competition between the women does represent an obvious disadvantage of this married state, but the advantages compensate for this one difficulty.

### Depression and Loneliness

In the practice of geriatrics, one of the major psychiatric problems encountered is depression. As mentioned above, the aged no longer find themselves members of a family. The result is loneliness and a feeling of uselessness on the part of the aged parent. Depression results from this loneliness and uselessness. These people always ask, "What is the point of my existence?" There is no answer that seems to satisfy them: they find no reason to continue living. In our youth-centered, family-oriented society, the aged find their own youth gone and their family grown. Depression results. Their children may try to make work for them in order to reestablish the parents' importance and feeling of being needed, but the contrivance is obvious. The sham only produces a deeper depression.

Although the polygynous family group is not the same as the youthful, monogamous family, at least it is the closest thing to it. In contrast to the monogamous marriage, polygyny frees a larger percentage of older women from the loneliness and depression of widowhood.



Since this is polygyny after the age of 60, the married partners will be close in age, with a greater likelihood of similar interests. This would spur a more intimate socialization between members of the family so that they could attend community activities and programs together. When living alone, the aged are reluctant to participate in activities outside their home. When living with others, however, interests are more likely to become contagious. The married partners can engage in activities as a family. It is knowing that one is a member of a distinct group that produces a feeling of belonging, with a consequent reason to live.

In addition, polygyny enables a number of people to live together intimately. Each one has lived his unique life, and each one enters the marriage with a different set of experiences. There is then the chance for each member of the marriage to grow further by his close contact with the other members of the family. Each can learn from the experiences of the others, and in that way deepen his insight into life. Living alone seldom offers this opportunity.

Thus, a polygynous marriage in old age is capable of dispelling depression and loneliness, as well as enabling the participant to grow in depth.

### Health Insurance

The final advantage of a polygynous marriage in the later years has to do with health insurance. Recent years have seen the growth of group health insurance. Membership in it offers advantages over individual policies. For example, Utah Blue Cross and Blue Shield is less expensive and more inclusive when the insuree is part of a group plan. Older

persons who, upon retirement, elect to continue their health insurance find their premiums more expensive, and they are excluded from psychiatric benefits. There is no reason why group insurance should not consider the polygynous family within its coverage and charge less expensive premiums.

### SUMMARY

Polygyny after 60 is offered for consideration as a solution to a number of the social problems of the aged. This modification of marriage is not unique in the history of our culture. At one time, it was a socially acceptable way of life. Today, too many aged persons find it impossible to adjust to the social changes that occur in their senescence. Less and less are they able to establish a meaningful role for themselves in American society, and much unhappiness has been the result. They have become less aggressive and more passive while waiting for solutions to be effected for them, and they seem contented in allowing the nation to grant them special privileges merely because they are elderly. Therefore, it would seem that society should attempt to find solutions to these problems. Polygyny after 60 could insure the elimination of a certain set of the aged's social problems, even though it meant a total change in certain aspects of the structure of marriage. The writer fully recognizes that the introduction of polygyny after 60 entails many complications, but he feels certain that the advantages gained for the aged would more than compensate for the trouble necessary to work through these difficulties. Thus, if the aged refuse to solve these problems for themselves, then, rather than allow the aged to continue in their miserable, unhappy state, society must change.