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**Polygamy in Brunei:
Examining the Family Structure and
Experiences of Half-Siblings**

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Abstract

This paper explores the unique experiences of individuals within polygamous families, specifically from the lens of the offspring – a viewpoint not commonly considered before making decisions to enter this arrangement. Drawing on interviews with eight Malay Muslim Bruneians, this study provides insight into the significance of family cohesion on the lives of half-siblings. Relations between half-siblings are heavily influenced by other family members, namely the father's fairness and the mother's acceptance. Although there is a spectrum in the level of cohesion between half-siblings, there is no denying that polygamy brings with it significantly more negative effects than positive ones on the participants' lives regarding their social development, interpersonal relations, financial stability, and academic performance. This extends the current studies on such families in Brunei and documents how the offspring within polygamous families navigate their way through living in a non-conventional family structure.

Keywords: half-siblings; polygamy; family dynamics; Malay Muslim; Brunei

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Introduction

The topic of polygamy typically elicits strong responses. Whether it is by those personally affected or those from the outside looking in. As I started this research, many asked, “So, will you be writing *for* or *against* polygamy?” And while I understand the natural inclination is to choose a side to stand on, my interest is to present the facts as I have gathered them. I want to give a voice to those not usually given the opportunity to speak honestly on this subject, especially the offsprings of such marital practices. Hopefully, this paper will guide its readers towards having a more informed opinion about polygamy in Brunei.

Polygamy is the practice of having more than one spouse simultaneously, of which the most common form is polygyny – involving one man with several wives – as opposed to polyandry, which refers to marriage between one woman with several husbands (Al-Krenawi et al., 2011). Although my study focuses on the former, I will use the inclusive term polygamy instead as it instinctively refers to having more than one wife for Bruneians – it is not permissible the other way around. Though already been carried out for over a millennium, polygamy is not commonly practised in recent times. Whereas monogamy is simply between two people, polygamy involves more than two individuals, making the experiences of those involved more complex.

The members of polygamous families have experiences unique to them, for example, concerning the allocation of the husband’s time between the wives and their offspring, among other things, which would affect family functioning. In the context of Brunei, the existence and practice of polygamy have been longstanding, but its consequences on the family members and their relationships have yet to be examined.

Polygamy in Brunei

In Islam, polygamy is permitted only by following specific requirements from the Al-Qur'an:

“(1) A man may not have more than four wives at any given time; (2) he must have the appropriate economic resources to provide adequately for more than one woman; and (3) he should pay attention to and care for all women equally” (Rediy & Tefera, 2020)

These requirements are also recognised in Islamic Family Law in Brunei, which also stresses having adequate finances, justifiable reasons, and permission from the first wife (Saadiah Tamit, n.d.).

While studies on polygamy in the Middle East attributed one of the reasons for pursuing this type of marital structure to a desire to have sons (Al-Krenawi, 2014; Rediy & Tefera, 2020), this was not the case in Brunei. In the local context, the first wife's inability to bear any children is one of the reasons for polygamy, but this is not specific to either gender. Saadiah Tamit (n.d.) stated that other reasons were because the wife had a chronic illness, had become too old, or did not give her husband enough attention, among other things. Thus, the stigma that comes with being in a polygamous marriage is that when a man decides to take on a second wife, it is because his first wife has somehow “failed,” regardless of what the justification may be (Al-Krenawi, 2014; Razak et al., 2021b). The woman bears responsibility for the shortcomings of the marriage.

In Islamic societies, the decision to enter or leave these marital structures is decided by the husband (Al-Krenawi, 2014). However, Islam also establishes that men should give their wives the highest respect and equity; therefore, consent is required before this arrangement proceeds. According to Saadiah Tamit (n.d.), Islamic Family Law also states that all parties involved must be aware that they are entering a polygamous marriage. This means that permission should be granted from the first wife for the husband to practise polygamy and that the second wife is not misled into this arrangement. However, the permission of the first wife is not a condition for the validity of the marriage. Thus, the husband typically hides their second marriage from the first wife because of fear and of bringing shame to his family. The proper Islamic practice of polygamy is not always observed.

According to Ugal and Orim (2009), “the family is a microcosm of the larger society” as it mirrors the societal norms and expectations of the larger society (p. 1). These include gender roles, and Naldini (2017) suggests that the family was (and still is) widely assumed to be the “natural” sphere for women. As a result, Chin (2018) found that women within polygamous arrangements struggle emotionally with executing their role as “good” wives and mothers, which reflects the gender bias rooted in patriarchal societies. The patriarchal bias sometimes

adopted in the interpretation of the Al-Qur'an has been challenged by Islamic feminist discourse, which highlights that the unfair and damaging traditions practised are due to conservative views (Alhuzail & Lander, 2020). While some studies, particularly in the Middle East and Africa, point towards the economic and cultural benefits of being in polygamous families for everyone involved, Thobejane and Flora (2014) state that these may no longer exist in the modern era. Thus, there has been some criticism about the execution of polygamy in recent times, especially regarding equality and respect – the guiding principles of the practice of polygamy in Islam.

Research Questions and Significance

This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with eight Malay Muslim Bruneians, aged 22 to 43, who are the offspring of polygamous families. It explores the following research questions:

1. How does polygamy affect the relationship of half-siblings and family cohesion?
2. Is there a clear hierarchy among the offspring of senior wives versus subsequent wives, and to what extent do they accept their roles within this ranking?
3. What are the effects of being in a non-conventional structure for the offspring of these families?

Research on polygamy is typically in the context of the Middle East or Africa, as these parts of the world are well-known for their practice of polygamy. It has not been explored in the Bruneian Malay context and culture; however, this is not a reflection of its relevance. Although only contributing to a small percentage of the Brunei population, research on this particular non-conventional family structure will expand the existing literature on families in Brunei. It will provide insights into the lived experiences of the offspring within polygamous families. This study will contribute to a more informed knowledge of the intricacies of polygamous family dynamics and the experiences of half-siblings.

Literature Review

Based on theoretical frameworks about the family, several factors are significant for a child's development: "cohesion, homogenous couple, strong bonding, and reasonable socioeconomic circumstances" (Rediy & Tefera, 2020, p. 4). However, polygamous family structures are frequently overlooked and are characterised by weak family cohesion, conflict, and unequal treatment. These result in offsprings experiencing conflict, mental health and behavioural issues, and unsatisfactory academic performances. In this section, I explore the literature on how the role of the parents – the father's fairness and the mother's acceptance – affect half-sibling cohesion and the latter's decision not to practise polygamy in the future.

Half-Sibling Cohesion

Disconnected relationships between family members attest to the absence of family cohesion in polygamous families. Al-Krenawi's (2014) study on the impact of polygamy in Middle Eastern societies established that polygamous families are more prone to conflicts between siblings and poor familial dynamics. For half-siblings in such families, words with negative connotations such as "hate," "jealousy," and "arrogant" were used to describe the relationship between them (Rediy & Tefera, 2020). Such families are often regarded as dysfunctional. However, within the Ethiopian context, Rediy and Tefera's (2020) study also indicated that some felt indifferent about their half-siblings, viewing them as acquaintances or people with no significance. This is supported by Pervez and Batool's (2016) study in Pakistan, which reported that most of the children in these families felt neutral towards their half-siblings. Others also described close and affectionate relations (Al-Krenawi, 2014). This demonstrates the spectrum in the ties between half-siblings whose level of cohesion depends on other factors, which will be explored later.

Family Dynamics

The findings revealed that family members were interconnected in their feelings and attitudes towards one another. The father's actions – whether equal or unequal – and the mother's reactions towards her predicament – acceptance or acrimony – affect their offspring and the relationship between half-siblings.

Role of Father

Studies in the Middle East and East Africa show that the presence of both parents is important in children's development and growth (Al-Krenawi, 2001; Elbedour et al., 2002; Rediy & Tefera, 2020). However, Rediy and Tefera (2020) found that 75 per cent of the participants in polygamous families reported unfair treatment from the father regarding availability, finance, support, and discipline. Better treatment was given to the second wife and her children than to the first wife and her children. As a result, this bias affected family relations as first wives and their offspring become neglected (Alhuzail & Lander, 2020; Razak et al., 2020). This also points toward the hierarchy within polygamous families where the second wife may hold more authority due to being favoured. Al-Krenawi (2014) did not note any specific hierarchy in who the husband “favours” among his wives, but inequality was present among low-functioning polygamous families.

Rediy and Tefera (2020) also pointed out that although some fathers may try to be equal in the division of their resources, this was only limited to material things – affection could not be divided equally. Thus, the main issue with the father’s role in polygamy is that it is difficult to maintain equal treatment.

Co-Wives’ Acceptance

Al-Krenawi (2014) found that the relations between half-siblings were typically vituperative and mirrored the tensions and abusive language exchanged between the co-wives. This is supported by Rediy and Tefera (2020), who reported that the mothers encouraged their children to compete with their half-siblings, promoting a toxic relationship. Rivalry between co-wives can be detrimental to the children themselves (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). However, this was only the case in low-functioning families. Al-Krenawi (2014) found that the wives in high-functioning families – while they also experienced pain – were more accepting of their predicament. As a result, the co-wives and children have better relations. They attributed this to the husband not practising favouritism between his wives and children, and to providing equal financial support. Hence the mother’s acceptance and the father’s fairness have positive influence on the relationship between half-siblings.

However, Al-Krenawi (2014) points out that second wives typically enter polygamous marriages unwillingly. They revealed they were deceived or succumbed to family pressure, which resulted in bitterness and unhappiness in their marriage. Similarly, unhealthy relations were inevitable when the first wives were unaware of their husband’s decision to marry a

second wife (Abdu-Salaam, 1997, as cited by Al-Shamsi & Fulcher, 2005). This demonstrates the significance of respect and consent in women's acceptance and general well-being in their marriages.

Effects of Polygamy

The negative experiences that characterise polygamy have led to a deterioration in the family unit. It has produced conflicting feelings by children towards their parents, in addition to developmental, academic, and financial issues, as observed in studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts such as the United Arab Emirates (Al-Shamsi & Fulcher, 2005), Pakistan (Pervez & Batool, 2016), and Ethiopia (Rediy & Tefera, 2020). Rediy and Tefera (2020) claimed that a recurring theme in how children expressed the effects of polygamy was to do with the loss of family satisfaction and harmony.

Rediy and Tefera (2020) also highlighted that the negative experience of polygamy made children feel protective, loving, empathetic and supportive of their birth mothers. This is supported by Al-Krenawi's (2014) study that found that the relations between mothers and children in polygamous families – specifically for the first wives – were more affectionate than their monogamous counterparts. Alhuzail and Lander's (2020) study conducted within the Bedouin-Arab community noted how the daughters tended to take on their mother's battles against their father, reflecting protectiveness over their mother, which affected paternal-child relations. However, this differed from Rediy and Tefera's (2020) study, where some children felt ambivalent towards their biological mother because of her involvement in a polygamous marriage.

Poor relations between parents and children may lead to mental health and behavioural issues for the children within these family structures (Rediy & Tefera, 2020). Children of polygamous families – specifically from the first wives – endured substantially more psychological distress than their monogamous counterparts (Al-Krenawi, 2014). The bond between parents and their children may affect other aspects of the children's lives and their development (Al-Sharfi, 2017; Elbedour et al., 2002; Razak et al., 2021a).

Studies also mention that the academic achievements of children were affected by weak family cohesion. In Al-Krenawi's (2014) study, participants from polygamous families consistently scored lower in grades, high school graduation and higher education participation than those in monogamous families.

While all members of the family could feel the effects of polygamy, Rediy and Tefera (2020) claimed that the most significant impact of polygamy is that it strips women and children of their rights as they were either not made aware of these arrangements before the decision, or the conditions to partake in it were not fully met. This suggests that wives and children typically held secondary roles in the decision to enter this family arrangement and were primarily the ones to bear its consequences. This is evident in various studies conducted in Borneo, including Indonesia (Chin, 2018), Malaysia (Razak et al., 2020), and Brunei (Saadiah Tamit, n.d.), alongside studies from the Middle East (Al-Krenawi, 2014).

Offspring's Future Aspirations on Marital Structure

Tellingly, studies in the Middle Eastern context found that none of the children who experienced and witnessed the effects of polygamy wished to pursue it in the future (Al-Krenawi, 2014; Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006). They expressed that it was unrealistic, unsustainable, and painful. Al-Krenawi (2014) also noted that, except in a few cases, the fathers would not recommend or wish their children to practice polygamy. They recognised the impracticability of supporting more than one wife and many children, which puts a financial and emotional strain on everyone involved. Thus, the low desirability of practising polygamy can attest to the disadvantages over benefits for all members of the family. However, Zeitoun (2001, as cited in Al-Shamsi & Fatcher, 2005) noted that the husbands do not usually consider these long-term adverse effects before deciding to practise polygamy.

Concluding Remarks

Rediy and Tefera's (2020) study only included insights into the children of the first wives within polygamous families. At the same time, Alhuzail and Lander's (2020) study focused only on the daughters of this group. My work examines the children's experiences from the first, second, and third wives, both sons and daughters.

Additionally, most of the studies were from the Middle East and focused primarily on Arabic culture and context. This was compared to the lived experiences of Bruneian families explored by Saadiah Tamit (n.d.) in her case studies of polygamous marital partners in the country and to the Malays in Razak et al.'s (2020, 2021a, 2021b) work in Malaysia. My criticism of Razak et al.'s (2020) study is that they only included one family's experiences. My research adds to these existing studies on polygamy in the Malay cultural context, based on the experiences of participants from eight polygamous families.

These studies concluded that a high-functioning polygamous family depended on an equal division in the resources the husband provides to each of his wives and children, acceptance of polygamy by the wives, and cohesion among the half-siblings. These factors were interdependent on one another. However, polygamy had far-reaching consequences for everyone involved.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used, where I arranged and presided over semi-structured interviews with eight participants aged 22 to 43. These provided extensive data on the experiences and opinions of each participant, which I analysed using a thematic approach. The research ethics were also considered as I prioritised their comfort and confidentiality while tackling such a delicate topic.

Sampling

As the topic is sensitive and somewhat taboo in Brunei society, it was challenging to obtain participants. They were recruited through personal contacts and word-of-mouth using a snowball sampling method. However, as this technique proved difficult, the circulation of a poster through social media (Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp) was used to gather more participants. It outlined the requirements needed for the participants to partake in the study, which were that they had to be (1) aged 18 or above, (2) Malay, Muslim Bruneian, (3) offspring of a polygamous family, and had (4) any half-siblings. The definition of polygamy was also provided to avoid attracting the wrong demographic, namely the offspring of a divorced or widowed parent who chose to remarry. The use of social media was effective as it garnered much attention and reached the desired individuals who met the criteria. However, I only managed to attract a specific demographic – young adults in their 20s.

Table 1*Research Participants' Demographic*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Mother (wife number)
Rafiqah	Female	22	1 st out of two
Nur	Female	23	1 st out of two
Ibrahim	Male	43	1 st out of three
Hasan	Male	23	2 nd out of two
Hana	Female	23	2 nd out of three
Wajdi	Male	25	2 nd out of three
Habib	Male	24	3 rd out of three
Fatimah	Female	23	3 rd out of four

Table 1 shows the demographic of the participants. The scope of the study included eight Malay Muslim Bruneians with an equal number of males and females, and the age range was concentrated mainly in the early to mid-20s, with one 43-year-old. The table shows the participant's placement within their family structure – whether from the first, second, or third wife. Three participants were offspring of the first wife, another three from the second wife, and two from the third. The number of wives within each family ranged from two to four. Those from the first wife – Rafiqah, Nur, and Ibrahim – transitioned from being in a monogamous to a polygamous family when they were approximately 14, 5, and 8 years old, respectively. Those from the second and third wives were born into polygamous families.

It should also be noted that during the research, Hana's biological mother was divorced from her father. However, she fulfilled the requirements to partake in the study as her father was married to her mother and his other wives simultaneously before the divorce. Meanwhile, Fatimah's father passed away when she was 12, so her interview draws upon her earlier experiences with her father and her current relationship with her half-siblings.

Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, which explored three issues: (1) the participants' level of cohesion with their half-siblings, (2) their family dynamics and (3) their general experience with polygamy. The topics incorporated into the interview questions were the cohesiveness and progression of the interpersonal relations between half-siblings and the family dynamics between the offspring, the father, and the co-wives. Their general attitude

towards polygamy and its effects were also explored. Open-ended questions were used to elicit the participants' experiences and opinions of polygamy.

The interviews began by gaining the participants' verbal consent to participate in the study and to be audio recorded. It was also made clear that they would be given a pseudonym to guarantee their confidentiality, and they were reminded of their right to withdraw. The sessions were primarily conducted through Zoom, where the researcher and participants had cameras on, making it easy to observe their facial expressions. However, one participant chose to disable his camera, but this decision proved beneficial as the anonymity made the participant more comfortable sharing his personal experiences, resulting in a lengthier interview. Moreover, gauging his emotions based on his voice alone was relatively easy.

Listening to the participant's emotional voice without seeing their face is not usually adopted during fieldwork, but this did not prove to be a limitation. Other interviews were conducted in real life, with one participant opting for an interview through text messaging (WhatsApp). This decision was made because he felt that his experience with polygamy might bring him to tears, and he was uncomfortable expressing that. Thus, being divided by a screen and ensuring a certain degree of separation seemed to help the participants to open up about their experiences.

The face-to-face interview sessions ranged from 26 minutes to 1 hour and 14 minutes which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, while the text messaging interview took 2 hours and 30 minutes. Some participants would code switch between Malay and English or speak entirely in Malay; these were translated to English before analysis.

The interviews were emotional. While the participants expressed their opinions and experiences in a nonchalant manner, during specific questions, several participants would start sniffing or crying, or attempt to mask it and fail, evidenced by the wavering of their voices. These instances show the significance of the effects of polygamy on their lives as the emotional reactions seeped through the cracks of their armour.

Thematic Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the transcriptions from each interview brought up interesting recurring patterns. As qualitative data is known to be rich in detail, these were narrowed down and grouped into themes and concepts following the research questions. A benefit of this approach is that it organised large chunks of information allowing for a concise and coherent analysis of the data while not sacrificing its richness. The sub-themes present in

the study were cohesion, family functioning, “one big family,” boundary, consent, pain, support systems, and unequal division of resources. These sub-themes were under the overarching themes of half-sibling cohesion, family dynamics, hierarchy, effects of polygamy, and future marital aspirations.

Findings

The interviews provided comprehensive data on relations between and the cohesion of half-siblings. The findings demonstrated that the participants’ attitudes toward being in a polygamous family were heavily influenced by how their parents managed relations in such a family. They also revealed that access to resources was typically unequal, many of the participants’ fathers spent more time with their third wives and offspring. However, this preference was not reflected in the allocation of finances and affection, which varied between participants. No specific hierarchy with regard to the status of the participants was identified.

Half-Sibling Cohesion

According to my analysis, there was a spectrum in the cohesion levels between the participants and their half-siblings. These may be categorised as close, civil, strained, and strangers. A close relationship would entail fondness, affection, and consistent communication between half-siblings. A civil relationship involves a good perception of the half-sibling, though they would only communicate sporadically or when necessary. A strained relationship conveys acrimony between half-siblings and avoidance of communication, Strangers refer to half-siblings with no relations – generally dismissed and not part of their lives. We can consider close and civil relations to have high cohesion and strained and strangers to have low cohesion.

Table 2*The Consistency of the Relations between Half-Siblings across Time and Step-Families*

Participant	Half-sibling from:	Relation-ship before	Relation-ship now	Consistency across time	Consistency across step-families
Rafiqah	2 nd wife	Strangers	Strangers	Yes	N/A
Nur	2 nd wife	Civil	Civil	Yes	N/A
Ibrahim	2 nd wife	Strangers	Strangers	Yes	No
	3 rd wife	Strained	Strained	Yes	
Hasan	1 st wife	Civil	Civil	Yes	N/A
Hana	1 st wife	Strangers	Strained	No	No
	3 rd wife	Strangers	Close	No	
Wajdi	1 st wife	Close	Strained	No	No
	3 rd wife	Strangers	Strangers	Yes	
Habib	1 st wife	Close	Close	Yes	Yes
	2 nd wife	Close	Close	Yes	
Fatimah	1 st wife	Civil	Close	No	No
	2 nd wife	Close	Strained	No	
	3 rd wife	Strangers	Strangers	Yes	

The participants' relationships with their half-siblings were not permanent. Some started as close and eventually deteriorated; others began as strangers and developed into meaningful bonds. In the case of the former, three out of eight participants experienced an adverse turn in their relationship. In contrast, two out of eight shared a positive turn in their familial bond. The rest were consistent in their feelings and attitudes towards their half-siblings – positive or negative, as shown in Table 2.

Additionally, for the participants with more than one stepmother, their relationship with their half-siblings was not always consistent across the different step-families. For example, they might be close to the offspring from the first wife but have a strained relationship with the ones from the second. As presented in Table 2, this occurrence (or a similar kind) was the case for four out of the five participants with more than one stepmother.

The findings showed that only one participant, Habib, had a continuously close relationship with his half-siblings. This was also the case across his step-families – the offspring of the first and second wives. Habib represents an anomaly as other participants' experiences differ significantly from his.

Factors Affecting Half-Sibling Cohesion

Several factors influenced the cohesion between half-siblings. These were the father’s fairness – distinguished by how he allocated his living arrangements, finances and affection between the different family branches – and the relationship with his co-wives. These findings demonstrate the interconnectedness between family members’ sentiments and attitudes towards one another, directly shaping half-sibling cohesion.

Table 3

The Father’s Living Arrangements and Division of Financial Support and Affection between Half-Siblings

Participant	Living arrangements	Financial support	Affection	Equality
Rafiqah	Not fixed	Favours 2 nd wife	Favours 2 nd wife	Unequal
Nur	Equal	Equal	Equal	Equal
Ibrahim	Favours 3 rd wife	Favours 3 rd wife	Favours 3 rd wife	Unequal
Hasan	Favours 1 st wife	Favours 1 st wife	Equal	Unequal
Hana	Favours 3 rd wife	Favours her & 3 rd wife	Favours her & 3 rd wife	Unequal
Wajdi	Favours 3 rd wife	Favours 1 st & 3 rd wife	Favours 1 st & 3 rd wife	Unequal
Habib	Favours 3 rd wife	Equal	Favours 3 rd wife	Unequal
Fatimah	Favoured 2 nd then 4 th	Favoured 2 nd & 4 th wife	Favoured 2 nd & 4 th wife	Unequal

Note. The wives also imply their respective children.

Father’s Fairness

The living arrangements varied between the participants – some resided with their half-siblings, while others lived separately. As shown in Table 3, the time the father spent between the wives and their respective children differed, but the findings showed that they were unequivocally disproportionate. Half of the participants’ fathers also spent more time at their third wives' houses, and consequently with the offspring of the wife concerned. This is the case for all participants except Hana, who resided with her father’s third wife after her parent’s divorce. The only anomaly in this finding is Nur, who shared the same living space as her half-sibling, meaning her father did not have to move between houses.

Table 3 demonstrates that six out of the eight participants revealed that their father unequally divided his financial responsibility toward the families. This could be seen in the delegation of household expenses, company shares, and the types of academic institutions the participants went to – whether public or private, domestic or abroad. However, the findings suggested no correlation between the participant’s placement within the family and their level of financial support.

While finance and time could easily be measured, affection was more complex. The participants interpreted this question differently; some talked about the time spent bonding or the amount of money invested into their “dreams.” Others through “memories,” how they are spoken to, and what kinds of conversations they had. Nonetheless, as seen in Table 3, six out of eight participants claimed that their fathers did not care for the different family branches equally. Similar to the allocation of financial support, there was no correlation between the participant’s placement within the family and the level of affection they received from their father.

Co-Wives’ Relations

Relations between the co-wives and between the half-siblings were mixed, mainly strained or civil. There was consistency in more than half the cases between the two sets of relationships.

Table 4

The Correlation between Co-Wife and Half-Sibling Relations

Participant	Mother’s relation with stepmother	Relationship with half-siblings	Consistency across
Rafiqah	2 nd wife: strained	2 nd wife: strangers	No
Nur	2 nd wife: civil	2 nd wife: civil	Yes
Ibrahim	3 rd wife: strained	3 rd wife: strained	Yes
Hasan	1 st wife: civil	1 st wife: civil	Yes
Hana	1 st wife: strangers	1 st wife: strained	No
	3 rd wife: strangers	3 rd wife: close	No
Wajdi	1 st wife: strained	1 st wife: strained	Yes
	3 rd wife: strained	4 th wife: strangers	No
Habib	1 st wife: civil	1 st wife: close	No
	2 nd wife: civil	2 nd wife: close	No
Fatimah	1 st wife: close	1 st wife: close	Yes
	2 nd wife: strained	2 nd wife: strained	Yes

Table 4 indicates that only one participant, Hana, had a drastic difference between her mother's relationship with the third wife – that of strangers – and her relationship with her half-siblings, with whom she has close relations. However, before her parents' divorce, Hana's mother's relationship with the other wives was strained, and Hana's relationship with her half-siblings was initially that of strangers. This suggests that Hana's relationship with her half-siblings was previously influenced by the dynamics between her mother and her father's other wives.

Discussion

In the rest of the paper, I will examine the level of cohesion between half-siblings, paying attention to the factors contributing to this. The relations amongst members of polygamous families are interconnected and are profoundly affected by how fair the father treats his wives and how well the co-wives accept the polygamous practice. In particular, these have consequences for the children and half-siblings. Unpleasant treatment by the father and resentment from the mother affect the social development, mental health, financial stability, interpersonal relationships, and academic achievements of my informants.

Half-Sibling Cohesion

The differing levels of cohesion demonstrated by the eight participants – close, civil, strained, and strangers – show the spectrum in the relations between half-siblings. This is reflected in the findings from different studies, suggesting no universal experience regarding the interpersonal relationship between half-siblings. However, all studies have in common that, no matter the level of cohesion the family has, the experience of polygamy is usually described as “painful”.

Half-Siblings with High Levels of Cohesion

Those with close and civil relations with their half-siblings illustrated their positive feelings towards their half-siblings by describing their family as “one big family.” The participants with excellent interpersonal relationships with their half-siblings generally view them as part of their immediate family, making no distinction between their full siblings and half-siblings. They expressed adoration, pride, respect, contentment, and protectiveness when talking about their half-siblings. However, while Hana also described having close bonds with her half-siblings, she revealed that she felt a “boundary” between them. This supports the theory of inclusive fitness whereby individuals in polygamous families distinguish between their full and half-

siblings (Gyuris et al., 2020). She attributed this “boundary” to how her full brother had been a part of her life from the beginning, whereas she only started developing bonds with her half-siblings when she was 11.

Habib’s preference for his half-siblings over his full siblings is an anomaly in this study, as most participants revealed they were closer to their full siblings. He reasoned that his more affectionate relationship with his half-siblings was due to the smaller age gap. This is supported by Furman and Burhmester (1985, cited in Jankowiak & Diderich, 2000), who found that likeness in age and gender encourages relations that mirror friendships, creating close bonds.

Half-Siblings with Low Levels of Cohesion

Consistent with the findings from Rediy and Tefera’s (2020) study, Ibrahim used vituperative words like “arrogant,” “drama seekers,” and “provokers” to describe his half-siblings. He also openly claimed to “hate” them and bad-mouth them “almost daily”. This tense and competitive relationship between him and his half-siblings weakened family cohesion and contributed to a dysfunctional family. On the other hand, Fatimah and Wajdi initially had close relations with their half-siblings due to sharing the same living space, but this did not persist after they started living separately.

Half-Siblings with Ambivalent Relations

Participants also expressed ambivalence in their relationship with their half-siblings. In Rafiqah’s case, she claims that she “feel[s] nothing” for her half-sister. But the distance and lack of emotion were offset by how she still regarded her as her sister. Thus, it is evident that although their relationship is in a grey area, she does feel a sense of care and obligation towards her half-sister because of their blood relation.

Factors Affecting Half-Sibling Cohesion

The relations between half-siblings in polygamous families mirror the father’s treatment of his wives and offspring and the relations between co-wives. Thus, family dynamics were a critical determinant of the cohesion between half-siblings.

Father’s Fairness

In line with Rediy and Tefera’s (2020) study, my findings reveal that fathers do not equally distribute their time, finances, and affection between their children. The data suggests that most

of the participants' fathers preferred spending more time with their third wives and their respective offspring. There was no specific preference for the allocation of finance or affection. This contrasts with Rediy and Tefera's (2020) study, which showed that husbands prefer their second wives and their children. However, inequality is still evident in these situations and points toward hierarchies within polygamous families. As there is an unequal divide in resources, it is not surprising that half-siblings became competitive and developed rivalry between them. As a result, family cohesion deteriorated as their relations become tense (Alhuzail & Lander, 2020). My participants also described having to rely on their biological mother for support, creating dependency on their mother to provide what was lacking in their expectations from their father.

Nur's situation best describes the interconnectedness in the distribution of resources between half-siblings. She is the only participant whose father does not have to move between houses, as she shares the same living space as her half-brother. As a result, the division of time, affection and financial support are given equally between the half-siblings. Thus, living arrangements positively correlate with the availability of resources and contribute to the good interpersonal relationship between half-siblings. However, as her half-brother lived with her family, he was separated from his biological mother. Nur expressed that due to this, he can never truly feel complete. Despite being treated well, the absence of the biological mother had a negative impact on Nur's half-brother.

Co-Wives' Acceptance

The words frequently used to describe the mother's feelings toward polygamy were generally negative. These were "painful," "lonely," "heartbreaking," "upsetting," and "disheartening". Some also tearfully revealed that their biological mother "wanted to die" or "almost killed herself". The findings show that these feelings and situations were influenced by whether the husbands treated their co-wives fairly, which is never the case.

Another factor that influenced their feelings toward being in a polygamous family was whether or not consent was obtained. Seven out of eight of the participant's fathers did not gain permission from their wives – irrespective of their placement in the family – before entering this arrangement. To elaborate, the first wives were usually kept hidden from the knowledge, and subsequent wives were deceived of their husband's motives – whether by the promise of divorce to earlier wives or by neglecting to tell them that they were already married. Al-

Krenawi (2014) states that these inevitably led to resentment and acrimony, which transferred to the relations between half-siblings and resulted in weak bonds between them. However, most participants mentioned that their mothers eventually learnt to accept their predicament after some time, though the bitterness never entirely disappeared.

Hasan was the only participant whose mother and stepmother consented to enter a polygamous marriage. However, he speculated that his mother's parents could have pressured her to get married, which could have influenced her decision. Al-Krenawi's (2014) study also found that extended family sometimes influenced second wives of polygamous families to enter into a polygamous marital union. However, Hasan revealed that his mother has always accepted her role as a co-wife and does not resent it. Hasan's civil relationship with his half-siblings attests to how acceptance of the mother's place within polygamous families, has a positive influence on relations between co-wives and between half-siblings.

Effects of Polygamy

In my study, the consequences of polygamy for the participants were overwhelmingly negative. Only one benefit was pointed out: having a sizable family. Meanwhile, there were several negative repercussions as the participants revealed that polygamy affected their social development, support systems, interpersonal relationships, finances, and academic achievement.

Sizable Family

Habib is the only one that expressed a positive effect of polygamy on his life, which was having a sizable family. Hasan conveyed the same view and recalled gaining help from his stepmother at the hospital after an accident. A polygamous family provided support, especially during times of distress. This reflects the idea of Brunei as a collectivist nation whereby family values are engraved in the paradigm of *Melayu jati* (Malay identity) (Ho, 2019). Dhindsa and Fraser (2011) also note that collaboration is preferred over competition in the Bruneian context, mirroring the norm of solid family unity and filial piety. However, as we have seen from the rivalry between half-siblings from earlier accounts, this is only achieved when the family members fulfil their roles. In Brunei, the father's traditional role is to provide for his family. However, the unequal division of resources that characterises polygamous families goes against the idea of *Malay jati*, which incorporates a pro-family belief.

The Transition from Monogamy to Polygamy

For first wives and their offspring, transitioning from a monogamous family to a polygamous one is described as “traumatic” (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). Nur depicted her life as having a “before,” which she attributed to a generally positive childhood, and an “after,” which she attributed to financial burdens and emotional turbulence, recognising that polygamy was the direct cause of this change. Her account clearly shows that this transition was unexpected and unwanted. Thobejane and Flora (2014) claim that this may affect their self-esteem, trust, and safety, which supports Al-Krenawi’s (2014) view that children, especially from the first wives, had to bear more significant psychological distress than those from conventional families. Alhuzail and Lander (2020) also suggest that daughters of first wives typically resist the transformation of a monogamous family into a polygamous one and resent those they believe were the cause of this transformation – the father and second wife.

The offspring of first wives did not have any support system – within or outside the family – at the start of this transition, arguably the most critical stage for the development of the reconstituted family. The participants revealed that they mainly coped with this transition alone – a phase characterised by “confusion” and loneliness, followed closely by anger and resentment that never fully subsided. Allen and Kelly (2015) state that any negative occurrences during these early years can have significant and lasting impact on the trajectory of the children’s lives. In comparison, most of the participants from subsequent wives described the ease of accepting their polygamous identity, which did not come easy for those from the first wife, especially in the initial stages. Thus, the offspring of subsequent wives felt that they had more support from the extended family.

Relationship with Parents

Many participants cried while talking about their mother’s painful experience of being in a polygamous marriage. This may lead to a strong sense of protectiveness over their mother, as found in Alhuzail and Lander’s (2020) study and affected their bond with their father. Participants in the study also conveyed protectiveness and a high level of empathy for their mothers.

Rediy and Tefera (2020) also state that the mother’s openness in sharing her feelings creates a stronger bond with the participants. This was the case for Hana, who described the exchange as reciprocal as they could express their feelings freely. In contrast, others led to a deteriorating relationship. Rafiqah and Wajdi both mentioned that their mothers dealt with it

in an “unhealthy” way. Rafiqah revealed that her mother would use her as a “therapist” when she was younger, and Wajdi talked about how she would “push [them] away whenever [they] offer help” and also “projects her anger and [...] frustrations” onto them. There were some participants whose mothers would avoid the topic altogether. Nur mentioned the “tension that went on [...] that never went addressed, until now.” Thus, the relationship between the participants and their mothers and the stability of the family unit is influenced by whether or not these interactions are healthy.

The father’s (lack of) openness about his decisions also affected the paternal-children bond. Six participants expressed that their father’s motivations in pursuing polygamy had been kept secret. There were no discussions or consultations about it between the father and the participants. The participants did not show much interest in the reasons. This may reflect the father’s role as the patriarch that holds absolute control, resulting in others not being allowed to question his decisions. This supports Chin’s (2018) study that points out the conservative roles and gender biases rooted in the ideology of the family in patriarchal societies. As a result of this unspoken rule, Nur expressed that “there are a lot of unanswered questions in [her] head,” suggesting that being in a polygamous family – at least for her – is like being thrown into rough seas and forced to learn how to swim. Meanwhile, Hana and Habib revealed that while there were no explanations for their fathers’ reasonings, their fathers still “made sure [they] understood the whole dynamic.” As a result, this open communication and understanding may have contributed to the good relations between them and their half-siblings. As with the mothers, the participants held their father in high esteem because of his openness.

Romantic Relationships

Some participants revealed how their father’s pursuit of polygamy influenced their views about romantic relationships and marriage. Rafiqah mentioned how the standard of her relationships was “moulded” by her father, which led to consistently negative experiences in her romantic pursuits. Similarly, Fatimah indicated how her experience with polygamy influenced how she “perceived [and] defined romantic relationships.” She said she tended to be with men with similar characteristics to her father, including unfaithfulness because she thought it was “normal”. This can be explained through the social learning theory, which supports the idea that children often mirror their parents’ social attitudes by observing their interactions and behaviours (Rhoades et al., 2012).

Financial Burdens

Nur emphasised the financial difficulties she faced after her father decided to remarry, pointing out that “having an extra mouth to feed isn’t an easy thing to do”. This sentiment is shared by Hasan, who used the Malay metaphor, “*ikat perut*” [having to tie your stomach], to describe the primary effect of polygamy on his life and explained that he was constantly “living on the line” and “eating on a budget” because of the financial burden of having a sizable family.

Academic Achievements

The effect of this non-conventional family structure on the participants’ education was more complex. Some participants mentioned that their performance in school started “plummeting” due to the experiences surrounding polygamy. This is in line with several studies (Al-Krenawi, 2014; Al-Shamsi & Fulcher, 2005). However, some began to improve significantly. Rafiqah said that she worked hard in the classroom so that she would be able to “escape” from the polygamous experience and study abroad. And Fatimah used the unfair treatment from her father and step-family to “motivate” her to excel to prove herself to them. Although these appear to be positive, it is easy to overlook the mental and emotional toll.

Aspirations on Marriage and Family Marital Structure

When asked whether they would want to pursue a polygamous marriage in the future, all eight participants immediately and firmly said “no”. This was generally told laughably as if conveying that the idea itself is incredulous. A similar reaction was given in Al-Krenawi’s (2014) study, where the children were opposed to revisiting the experience of polygamy in their future marriages. Although the immediate response was light-hearted, the mood would turn sombre when asked to explain their answer.

Many participants – usually tearfully – brought up the effects it has had on everyone involved, *especially* their biological mother, who would have to “share a husband”. Several also mentioned that it is a “painful” experience they would not want to go through. Hana expressed that “marriage should only be between two people”, and Nur firmly interjected that “polygamy is essentially cheating.” Depending on the culture and perspective, there are many different expectations about marriage. But the traditional – or ideal – view of matrimony is that it only involves two people. A deviation from the norm is disapproved of.

Other participants talked about how polygamy was only applicable “during wars”, like during Prophet Muhammad’s time, so it is not justifiable today and in the Bruneian context. Hasan elaborated further by saying that nowadays, people want to practice polygamy “for ugly reasons” and that “it has become twisted”. Saadiah Tamit (n.d.) points out the stark difference in how Prophet Muhammad practised polygamy, which was for noble reasons, compared to the men that claim to follow in his footsteps. She states that Prophet Muhammad’s wives were widows of old age due to the war, except for Siti Aisyah. Meanwhile, the husbands in Saadiah Tamit’s (n.d.) study expressly point out that “the wife has become old” as one of the reasons for polygamy, reflecting the “twisted” reasons that Hasan expressed.

Although the participants talked about the effects of polygamy on their individual lives, their responses reflected much empathy and sympathy toward other family members. They were sensitive to the detrimental impact of polygamy on the wives and other offspring that had to bear witness to it.

Conclusion

This study addressed half-sibling cohesion, hierarchy within polygamous families, and the effects of belonging to a non-conventional family structure. It demonstrated a spectrum in the relations between half-siblings and the family members’ roles – the father’s fairness and the mother’s acceptance in particular – in influencing these dynamics. Although the participants’ fathers tended to spend more time with their third wives and their respective offspring, this was not consistent when considering whom they favoured regarding financial support and affection. Adversities overwhelmingly outweighed benefits of being in a polygamous family.

The study highlights inequality in the practice of polygamy. The fathers are typically unable to meet the complete requirements of polygamy, especially regarding affection which is impossible to replicate between wives and children. Other resources, finances and living arrangements, were quantifiable and could be duplicated across the different branches of the family. Polygamy in Brunei in this study is centred around men at the expense of other family members.

Nonetheless, these experiences are culturally bound; some may overlap between societies, but they cannot be a complete mirror of one another. However, polygamy seems to have a common characteristic across many cultures and communities: it is painful even under the most favourable circumstances, especially for women and the offspring of these families.

A limitation of my study is that I did not consider the participants' income levels, so I cannot conclude whether financial background can produce different impacts on those in polygamous families. Thus, future studies should take note of the family's economic circumstances. Additionally, my study focused primarily on the insight given by those in their 20s (with only one in their 40s). Future studies in Brunei should look into a more diverse age range. Other family members should also be considered, such as the fathers and the mothers within these structures, to have a more inclusive understanding of polygamy in the Bruneian Malay context.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How many wives does your dad have? Is your mum the first wife or second or third?
2. How old were you when your dad married his second wife, and how old are you now?
3. How many half-siblings do you have?
4. Do you live with your half-sibling?/ Growing up, did you live with your half-sibling?
 - How does your dad divide his time between you and your step-family?
5. What's your relationship like with your half-sibling? Do you spend time/ talk together often? Are you supportive of each other, or is there some kind of rivalry?
6. Has your relationship with your half-sibling always been that way? Or did it change with time?
7. Are you as close to your half-sibling as you are with your actual siblings?
8. Do you think your dad divides his time, affection and money equally between you and your half-siblings?
9. How did you find out about your dad remarrying? Did he communicate with you and explain what was going on – did he tell you how he was going to get a second wife and why he chose to do it?
10. Has your mum talked to you about how she feels about being in a polygamous marriage? Do you know if your dad asked for her consent before getting a second wife?
 - How does she feel about your dad's other wives?
 - How does she feel about your half-siblings?
11. What's your relationship like with your stepmother? Is she a stranger to you, or are you close?
12. How do you feel about eventually dividing your inheritance with your half-sibling?
13. Do you tell people about how you're in a polygamous family? Is it something you're comfortable with other people knowing?
14. How do you cope with being in a family structure that not a lot of people can relate to? Do you have friends or family members you can talk to when you want to vent about, for example, if conflict happens between you and your half-siblings or between the wives?
15. Have you ever witnessed how other people have reacted to your dad being in a polygamous relationship? Do they tend to be supportive, or do they not support his choice to be in a polygamous marriage?
 - And is this the same as how people have reacted to your mum being in a polygamous marriage?
16. How would you say that the experience of being in a polygamous family has affected you?
 - For example, some people have said that as kids, it affected them academically or even in romantic relationships and everything that comes with it. Can you relate to that?
17. And my final question for you is – in the future, do you think you would want to be in a polygamous marriage?

NEED PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH PAPER

Hi guys! I'm doing my final year paper on the **familial dynamics between half-siblings in polygamous family structures** and need help with getting people I can interview who meet **all** the following requirements:

- Aged 18 and above
- Malay, Muslim Bruneians
- Children of polygamous families (father has had more than one wife at the same time, at some point)
- Has half-siblings (same father, different mothers)

I completely understand how personal and delicate the topic is and would like to stress that your confidentiality and comfort are of utmost importance.

If you have any questions at all, please feel free to contact me here or on:

Whatsapp: [REDACTED]

Email: amirahjapar06@gmail.com

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