

*This brief article takes a critical look at Joseph W. Scott's article "Black Polygamous Family Formation." While Scott's research is seen as helpful, several problems in his treatment of plural mating and marriage arrangements among Black Americans are discussed. Major conceptual problems are created by Scott's use (or misuse) of the concept "polygyny." Significant methodological problems are also posed by his sampling approach, operationalization of concepts, and analytic strategies. Studies such as Scott's are of optimal value when their exploratory nature, and consequent limitation, are clearly acknowledged.*

## **A COMMENT ON SCOTT'S "BLACK POLYGAMOUS FAMILY FORMATION"**

WALTER R. ALLEN  
BAMIDELE ADE AGBAŞEGBE  
*University of Michigan*

Joseph Scott investigates the phenomenon of "man-sharing" in contemporary Black American communities. Scott chooses to characterize the sample of such relationships examined as polygamous family arrangements. According to his analysis, the 11 consensual and 11 legal wives studied found themselves in man-sharing arrangements that over time, evolved into polygamous family relationships. As one reads Scott's article several issues are raised. Certainly, few among us are unaware of the interest and debate surrounding the forms of man-sharing relationships common in contemporary Black communities. Scott's examina-

---

**Authors' Note:** *Please address inquiries or requests for reprints to: Walter R. Allen, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109*

tion of these phenomena is helpful to the extent that it acknowledges the reality of plural mating and marriage arrangements in Black communities, emphasizes the need for increased scholarly research into these, and summarizes results from a systematic study of such phenomena. But several problems arise from Scott's treatment of polygamous family arrangements. In addressing these problematic features, we seek to contribute increased understanding of plural mating and marital patterns among Black Americans. For clarity's sake, our comments on Scott's article are organized in conceptual and methodological issues.

### CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS

Scott justifies terming the concurrent conjugal-like involvement of a man with more than one woman as polygamous on the basis of Hoebel's anthropological textbook definition of polygynous marriages (1980: 42). But, the peoples about whom Hoebel and other anthropologists often write are those characterized as "traditional" societies. Insofar as conjugal unions are concerned, a number of so-called traditional societies, particularly African provides for the cultural endorsement of polygyny. Thus in traditional African societies where polygyny is a cultural ideal, such marriages have jural status. A potential wife enters the relationship well aware of her husband's wife or wives senior to her. Her marriage is an *opted* not a *forced* choice. This certainly contrasts with the situation Scott examines for Blacks in North America: Polygyny is not a cultural ideal nor is it given legal recognition in the United States. Moreover, according to Scott, women continued their relationships with men who had plural domestic group affiliations only as a matter of "pragmatic acquiescence" (1980: 59). Equally to the point is Scott's observation that "the tendency was for the women to stay in these relationships indefinitely—hoping to make them exclusive" (1980: 54).

After carefully perusing the literature on polygyny in traditional African societies, we are led to concur with the succinct observations of anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa (1975: 236): "Before the advent of Europeans in Africa, and in most places even today, a man and his several wives are considered to be a *single family*, and all the women and children therein are united by ties of

affection to one another as well as to the husband-father." A polygynous family normally resides in one compound, i.e., a set of physically contiguous rooms or household units, such that the husband-father and each wife with her young children occupy their respective units. Mutual respect is one of the significant norms underlying the interpersonal relations between members of a polygynous family.

What must be understood is that living in a polygynous family creates more roles and relationships than would be the case in a monogamous family. The roles and the rights and obligations entailed in the relationships of husband/wife, parent/offspring, and sibling/sibling are found in both monogamous and polygynous domestic settings. In the polygynous setting, however, one immediately sees another role, that of cowife (including senior wife and junior wife), and the relationship between cowives. And just as there is a relationship between the cowives, so too is there a relationship between cowife-mother and the offspring of her husband's wives. Finally, the sibling role embraces not only the offspring of one's mother but all offspring of one's father's wives. The notion of "half-sibling" is usually absent in the day-to-day interaction of a polygynist's children, socialized to perceive themselves as "children of one father." "In fact," notes Sudarkasa (1975: 236) "traditionally it was only for specified occasions, such as those involving the division of certain types of property, that there was a division made between the children of different wives." The point to be underscored here is that a polygynous family is one, unified family; it is not several nuclear families (Sudarkasa, 1980).

In contrast to the brief overview of polygamous family life in traditional Africa, what Scott depicts as polygamous Black American family life is indeed very different. Scott's data reveal that a man may have more than one family of procreation; but this man, his mates, and his children by each mate do not perceive themselves as belonging to one family in which they each have rights, obligations, and ties of affection to each other.

This contrasting note on polygyny as practiced in "traditional" societies and plural mating as described by Scott, albeit brief, should raise a number of questions. Among them would be: what is the difference between what Scott calls polygamous family relations and what Smith and Smith (1974: 87) describe as a

tolerated form of "consensual adultery"? Is Scott's usage of the concept "polygamy" as a generic contrast to monogamy a euphemism for extramarital relations?

Suffice it to say, Scott's use (or misuse) of the concept, polygyny is indeed problematic. Moreover, his use would blur our understanding of the ethnographic data for those Black populations in the Western Hemisphere whose mating and marital behavior demonstrates some claim to being called polygynous-like unions. Cases in point would include data from sociologist Charles King's (1947) note on a polygynous family-farm system in Bullock County, Alabama and Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain's (1958) and Michel Laguerre's (1978) anthropological comments on *polygynous plasaj* in rural Haiti.

### METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Given the reality that one's conceptual framework often dictates and directs one's methodological approach, it is not at all surprising to note several methodological problems in Scott's paper. To a large extent, these problems in methodology have their origins in some of the conceptual difficulties delineated above. For example, the conceptual fuzziness revealed in Scott's attempts to define the concept of polygamy among Black Americans carries over into his attempts to empirically measure this same concept. Ultimately, Scott's distinction between consensual and legal wives leaves much to be desired, particularly if one seeks clear cut specifications of differences in the empirical dimensions of their relationships with the male (beyond whether or not they are legally married to him). Most notably, it would be interesting to know something of the shared male's relative financial contributions to his consensual vs. jural wife/family—the expectation here being one of finding a correlation between relative financial contributions and importance assigned (or obligation felt towards) the respective wives/families.

Other methodological difficulties arise with Scott's sampling approach. One wonders whether in the presence of an explicitly defined conceptual framework he would have opted for the same type and size sample. Moreover, women in, yet dissatisfied with or disapproving of, man-sharing arrangements would likely be

missed in a "snowball" sample comprised largely of women who had come to accept such relationships.

Scott is also guilty to some extent of inappropriate use of statistics from external sources to support his arguments. For instance, how does he justify reliance on group marriage statistics to bolster his points about these unions, given his earlier assertions that they fall outside the current use of the term "group marriage"? (e.g., he cites Salsberg's research on group marriages to support his conclusion that single females commonly enter "polygamous" relationships with married men) [Scott, 1980: 49]. In a similar vein, Scott makes inappropriate use of aggregate statistical patterns to draw inferences about individual-level behaviors. Such an "ecological fallacy" fails to consider the reality of different Black male-Black female sexual ratios across regions, age groups, and class levels. And the variety of options available to Black females under differing conditions of sexual imbalance are not fully considered (e.g., fraternization with whites or foreign blacks, social isolation, sporadic rather than long term man-sharing, and so on).

Scott's approach seems, overall, to be poorly suited to the kinds of questions he seems interested in posing and the data at his disposal. Scott applies analytic strategies better suited for survey data to the analysis of his more qualitative data—with predictably frustrating results. His sample is not of sufficient size to permit inferences about other populations. Nor are his variables clearly enough defined to permit fine delineations between statuses. Finally, his prior knowledge of the phenomenon was insufficient to permit formulation of testable hypotheses

## SUMMARY

We submit that the value of Scott's research vis-à-vis our understanding of man-sharing relationships among Black American women would have been greatly enhanced had he more readily accepted the exploratory nature of his research and acknowledged the innate limitations of what he had done. Moving from this point, we would like to have seen less attention devoted to superfluous discussions of aggregate teenage pregnancy rates, sexual ratio imbalances, and other more general demographic

developments in Black communities. Instead, the stress could have been better on using the experiences of this small sample of women in such arrangements to organize our thinking about patterns of man-sharing in Black communities—or model specification if you will. What were some of the significant factors, features, and dimensions to emerge as these women described their experiences? One suspects that he has extremely rich data that he fails to bring to bear on his examination of these relationships. We certainly see glimpses of rich content in the women's descriptions of their motivations for becoming involved in such relationships. What studies such as Scott's need to accomplish successfully is the delineation of important elements in the processes underlying entry into, and functioning in, man-sharing arrangements; then large-scale studies can be used to test the generalizability of findings. Along the same lines, far too little space was devoted to discussing social definitions/evaluations, spouse rights/responsibilities, and so on in these relationships. Finally, additional insights into such unions are to be gained from interviewing the affected males, and, in several cases, interviewing three-party plural mating units (husband, plus his jural and consensual wives).

## REFERENCES

- COMHAIRE-SYLVAIN, S. (1958) "Courtship, marriage, and plasaj at Kenscoff, Haiti." *Social and Economic Studies* 7: 210-233.
- KING, C. E. (1974) "A Polygynous family-farm system in Bullock County, Alabama." *Rural Sociology* 12: 174-176.
- LAGUERRE, M. (1978) "Ticouloute and his kinfolk: the study of a Haitian extended family," pp. 407-445 in D. Shimkin, E. M. Shimkin, and D. A. Frate (eds.) *The Extended Family in Black Societies*. The Hague: Mouton.
- SCOTT, J. (1980) "Black polygamous family formation: case studies of legal wives and consensual 'wives.'" *Alternative Lifestyles* 3: 41-64.
- SMITH, L. G. and J. R. SMITH (1974) "Co-marital sex: the incorporation of extra-marital sex into the marriage relationship," pp. 84-102 in J. R. Smith and L. G. Smith (eds.) *Beyond Monogamy: Recent Studies of Sexual Alternatives in Marriage*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.
- SUDARKASA, N. (1980) "Towards a clarification of indigenous African family structure and its relationship to Afro-american family structure." Unpublished manuscript.

—(1975) "An exposition on the value premises underlying Black family studies." J. of National Medical Assoc. 67: 235-239.

*Walter R. Allen is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Center of Afroamerican-African Studies, University of Michigan. His Research interests are socialization and personality, population studies, social epidemiology, and family research and theory. His published articles have appeared in the Journal of Marriage and the Family, Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Signs: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society, and the Sociological Quarterly. Please address inquiries or requests for reprints to: Walter Allen, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 48109.*

*Bamidele Ade Agbasegbe, Research Assistant in the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at The University of Michigan, has undertaken undergraduate and graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Michigan. His field research in the South Carolina Sea Islands is the basis of a monograph on rural black family life. His works have appeared in anthologies such as New Research on Women and Sex Roles (University of Michigan, 1976) and journals such as The Michigan Discussions in Anthropology and The Black Scholar.*