

Family Environment During the Pandemic: A Comparative Study of Monogamous and Polygynous Family Structures of Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Family Environment is of prime importance for one's psychological wellbeing as it plays a protective role in dealing with challenges and crisis. This especially comes under focus in light of the recent COVID 19 pandemic wherein people were confined to their homes with their families. As such, family environment became a crucial determinant of one's mental health. The study aims to compare family environment amongst the different types of family structures i.e., monogamous and polygynous set ups in Arunachal Pradesh, during the COVID 19 pandemic. The sample consisted of 100 youth from Arunachal Pradesh- 50 from polygynous and 50 from monogamous families, within the age range of 20-30 years wherein the participants were administered the Family Environment Scale and the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale. Results showed that the participants from polygynous families had poorer acceptance, caring and cohesion within the family, as compared to their monogamous counterparts. Furthermore, in terms of social support, participants from monogamous families reported receiving the maximum support from friends and family while those from polygynous families reported to lean on significant other and friends for support. The implications of the study have also been discussed.

Keywords: *Family structure, Family environment, Mental health, Coping strategies, Monogamy, Polygyny*

With the novel Corona Virus 2019 (COVID 19) disease having been declared as a public health emergency, nations across the globe had faced large scale crisis in many sectors. The pandemic had created waves world over for its detrimental effect on health. However, what was primarily under focus was its biological and economic implications and not the social, mental health or the psychological ramifications which also pose a monumental threat to one's overall wellbeing. The infection had brought on an avalanche of mental health distress not only due to the fear of infection, sickness and death, but also due to its consequent repercussions like lockdown and quarantine. The need for freedom is a primary innate human need and due to the confinement and curfews that were exercised, the free and unobstructed commutation of the people has been derailed. People were compelled to follow SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) norms and limit social

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interaction which, given the social nature of human beings, was the prime factor behind the ongoing emotional and psychological distress. The tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh has an inherent collectivistic culture which functions on the ideals of oneness, unity and brotherhood, therefore, for a population never having had a true experience of a pandemic, the social distancing rules executed a major blow to the wellbeing and mental stability of the people of the state. This quite possibly could have been one of the major factors behind the peak in suicide rates amongst the youth in the area during the first wave of the pandemic (Parashar, 2020, April 5; Lepcha, 2020, June 29). These suicide rates have also been reported by the leading newspapers of the state (Arunachal24.in & The Arunachal Observer) to mostly been affecting the youth wherein a 25-year-old and individuals as young as 15-year-old had succumbed to suicide (“Arunachal 25-year-old”, 2020, June 12; “Minor Girl Commits Suicide”, 2020, July 6).

The nature of Family Environment especially came under focus in light of the said crisis wherein people were confined to their homes with their families as it plays a protective role in dealing with challenges and crisis. Family functions as the primary unit of socialization and therefore, is of crucial importance in the development of a child (Ozcinar, 2006). The interactive and behavioral patterns within the family highly influence the behavior and adjustment tendencies of an individual (O Leary, 1995). Several researchers have vouched for the notion that the atmosphere within the family significantly determines the mental health and wellbeing of its members - especially the children. A study by Herman et al. (2007) found that high family cohesion and support in a family are associated with increased psychological adjustment and low depression among adolescents. Moreover, conflict within a family has also been found to be associated with insecurity, aggression, conduct disorders and stress during adolescence and young adulthood (Wissink et al., 2006). As such, family environment becomes a crucial determinant of one's mental health in the scenario especially during the COVID 19 crisis (Mariani et al., 2020). However, with the rise in domestic violence and familial conflict during the pandemic (Zhang, 2020; Fraser, 2020), an analysis of the impact of family environment on one's mental wellbeing and resilience becomes a topic of great interest. More so for the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh having a high prevalence rate of polygyny (marriage of a man to more than one woman), the effect of having a familial set up consisting of more number of mothers and step siblings, on one's mental health status and the coping strategies used to deal with the pandemic related stress is truly worth exploring. A number of researches have reported the detrimental impact of a polygamous family on the psychosocial wellbeing of children (young, adolescent and young adults) and caused an acute sense of deprivation – social, emotional and financial (Pervez & Batool, 2016; Al-Sharfi et al., 2016; Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Elbedour et al. 2007; 2003; Al-Krenawi et al., 2002; Al-Krenawi & Lightman, 2000). Interestingly, Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo (2008) in their study highlighted that it the level of family functioning and economic status, not the structure of family that actually played an important role in the mental wellbeing of children. Minde (1975) and Swanson et al., (1972) have even gone forward to highlight a beneficial role of a polygynous families as their studies found that such a set up provided more number of role models, boosted the level of warmth and affection in the family and as such had a positive impact on the mental health of the children.

Even though the pandemic has ended, its long-term effects continue to echo throughout the various aspects of society in terms of significant social and psychological ramifications, such as increased stress, anxiety, and social isolation. Investigating the comprehensive

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reflection of such a prolonged high-distress phase, especially within the context of stressors, emerging in varying degrees due to different family structures can contribute to the understanding of the mental health scenarios of family members, unveil associated challenges and aid in the development of effective interventions. Therefore, against this backdrop, the interplay of family structures i.e. monogamous and polygynous, its level of functioning and perceived social support on the nature of stress and subsequent coping strategies is a vital area of research.

Aim

The present study aims to compare the family environment amongst the monogamous and polygynous family structures in Arunachal Pradesh, during the COVID 19 pandemic

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 100 youth from Arunachal Pradesh- 50 from polygamous and 50 from monogamous families, within the age range of 20-30 years. The study adopted a snowball sampling method.

Tools used:

Family Environment Scale –

The scale was developed by Bhatia and Chadha in 1993. It consists of 3 main dimensions: Relation Dimension – (Subdimensions: Cohesion, Expressiveness, Conflict, Acceptance & Caring)

Personal Growth Dimension – (Subdimensions: Independence, Active-Recreational Orientation)

System Maintenance Dimensions – (Subdimensions: Organization, Control)

The total of 69 items have been divided into ‘Positive’ and ‘Negative’ categories which are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has good reliability with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.95. It has also been used in a number of studies on Indian population (Ramaprabou, 2014; Madan, 2019)

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support –

The scale was developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley in the year 1988 and has a total of 12 items divided into 3 dimensions of Family, Friends and Significant Other. The test has good test-retest and internal reliability & moderate construct validity. MSPSS has been used in several research studies in India (Subramanian et al., 2020; Kavana et al., 2018).

Demographic Profile – Detailed demographic information along with informed consent was also taken.

Procedure

The above-mentioned tools were converted into Google Form formats and distributed amongst the sample group. The collected data was then analyzed using SPSS (version 20) and Microsoft Excel (version 2017) to evaluate Mean, S.D., frequencies/ percentages and T test.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Showing Demographics of all Participants

Type of Family	Gender	Marital Status	Living Situation	Age of Incidence	No. of Mothers	Ordinal Rank of Mothers
Polygamy	Male = 37% Female = 64%	Married = 0% Unmarried = 100%	With Father = 70% Without Father = 30%	Since Birth = 56.6% Age 1-5 = 10% Age 6-10 = 3.33% Age 10-20 = 26.6% Age 20+ = 3.33%	02 = 80% 03 = 16.6% More than 3 = 3.33%	1 st = 50% 2 nd = 43.3% 3 rd = 3.33% 5 th = 3.33%
Monogamy	Male = 43.3% Female = 56.5%	Unmarried = 93.3% Married = 6.66%	-	-	-	-

Table 2. Showing mean scores and SD for all study variables:

Family Structure	VARIABLE													
	Family Environment						Perceived Social Support							
	Cohesion		Acceptance & Caring		Conflict		Family		Friends		Significant Other		Total	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Polygamy	42.36	1.18	39.7	1.12	38.6	1.24	15.8	1.63	17.06	1.30	16.96	1.51	49.82	1.49
Monogamy	45.9	0.92	43.1	1.07	42.4	1.11	20.93	1.55	22.43	1.30	19.9	1.69	63.26	1.54

Table 3. Showing t and p values for the variables for all participants:

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT						PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT							
Cohesion		Acceptance & Caring		Conflict		Family		Friends		Significant other		Total	
t value	p value	t value	p value	t value	p value	t value	p value	t value	p value	t value	p value	t value	p value
-0.24	0.81	-0.45	0.65	-0.52	0.60	0.99	0.33	-1.30	0.20	0.43	0.67	-0.90	0.37

significant at 0.05 level

The study endeavored to compare the family environment amongst the different types of family structures i.e. monogamous and polygynous family set ups in Arunachal Pradesh, during the COVID 19 pandemic. The demographic profiles of the sample have been highlighted in Table 1. which clearly shows that sample consisted of 100 youth from

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Arunachal Pradesh- 50 from polygamous and 50 from monogamous families, within the age range of 20-30 years. The participants were all were residents of the state, out of which 98 were married and 2 were unmarried. Most of the participants from a polygamous background (70%) were found to be living with their fathers, wherein the event of 'father remarriage' had occurred prior to their birth (56.6%). Most of the polygamous participants also reported to have maximum of 2 mothers (80%) and the ordinal rank of mothers was reported to be 1st (50%) and 2nd (43.3%).

The descriptive statistics (Mean and SD) have been shown in Table 2, which indicates that most of the participants from polygamous families reported to have low cohesion, acceptance and caring in their family environment whereas the participants from monogamous families reported to have average levels of the same constructs. The level of conflict within the family was found to be the same i.e. 'average' for all the participants. Additionally, the participants from polygamous families reported to have lower levels of perceived social support (49.82) as compared to the monogamous family backgrounds (63.26) wherein those from Monogamous Families reported receiving the maximum support from friends (and family while those from Polygamous Families reported to lean on significant other and friends for support. A comparative analysis revealed that the participants having more than one mothers, scored lower on all dimensions of Family environment and Perceived Social Support than those having only one mother. A similar finding was reported by a study (Rediy and Tefera, 2020) wherein participants from polygamous backgrounds were found to have poor cohesion and communication, high conflict and a sense of deprivation within their family environment.

However, a deeper analysis (Table 3) revealed, that the p values for the three dimensions of the Family Environment scale and Perceived Social Support were found not to be significant at 0.05 level of significance. The same observation was reported by a study by Hakami (2017) who found that the participants from a polygamous and monogamous backgrounds did not differ significantly on the variables of mental wellbeing and level of family functioning. This finding can probably be attributed to a number of reasons – Snowball sampling method for data collection, urban background settings, similar age group, educational qualification and relationship status of the participants. These factors might have led to the collection of a homogeneous sample resulting in no significant difference in the study variables among the two groups of the study.

For the participants from polygamous family members, the major sources of stress were reported as academics, family and work & finance. This finding can be interpreted according to the study by Farahmand & Rezvani (2018) which reported higher familial conflict and stress in a polygamous household. Mariani et al. (2020), reported a similar observation, wherein support from family had a strong role in alleviating depressive symptoms during the pandemic.

To acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the results, an awareness of the few limitations of the research study is mandatory. These can be enlisted as:

- Small size of the sample: The total number of participants can be increased to have a better representation of the population.
- Homogeneity of the sample: All the participants of the study shared similar location (Itanagar Capital complex), setting (urban), educational qualification (graduate), marital status and age group. Perhaps, an inclusion of participants who are married,

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have lower educational qualification, belong to rural backgrounds across different districts of the state and an increase in the age range would yield a more honest scenario of the phenomena.

- Online method of data collection: As mentioned, the data for the study was collected using Google forms. This might have caused the participants to not reveal their true responses which could have been manifested through a face-to-face interactive setting.

Thus, it can be seen that there are only slight differences in the study variables of Family Environment and Perceived Social Support, which might have resulted in mild stress amongst the participants during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The present study compared the family environment, stress and coping strategies amongst the different types of family backgrounds in Arunachal Pradesh, during the COVID 19 pandemic. The results of the research indicated that the participants from polygamous families scored lower on the study variables of Family Environment and Perceived Social Support than their monogamous counterparts. However, this difference was not found to be significant.

The study posits some important findings for further research and stands to be the first psychological investigation on a polygamous sample of Arunachal Pradesh. It highlights the crucial need for more supportive platforms to cater to the psychological needs of parents and children, especially from a polygamous background. This inadvertently, calls for more interventive measures from the Government and related stakeholders like the establishment of counselling facilities and mental health services to help alleviate those dealing with stress due to the combined effects of a negative family environment and the pandemic. This is one of the pioneering psychological studies to have been carried out in the state and thus, lays the foundation for further research in the area.

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Conflict of Interest

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