

Press Release

University of Lethbridge

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Polygamy and the Same-sex Debate

by Reginald W. Bibby

During the last week or so, polygamy has been in the news. Journalist Norman Spector may have initiated the discussion with a provocative column in the *Globe and Mail* at the turn of the new year. Spector wrote facetiously that “now that the [gay] closet has emptied,” there is no rationale for discriminating against “Canadians who are not biologically hardwired for monogamy and would like to come out of the closet.” If Canada legalizes same-sex marriage, “said Spector, “I can’t think of a single additional reason to prohibit a woman from voluntarily choosing to become Paul Martin’s second wife, assuming Sheila Martin also agreed” (December 27, 2004).

This past Thursday, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper picked up on the theme, warning that if same-sex legislation is passed, other groups may step forward requesting other types of marriage such as polygamy. Harper has been widely assaulted by people including the Prime Minister for making such a suggestion. Justice Minister Irwin Cotler, for example, offered this well-circulated response: “We don’t see any connection, I repeat, any connection between the issue of polygamy and the issue of same-sex marriage. Andrew Coyne of the *National Post* informed us that the two issues are entirely separate – that, legally-speaking, one involves the question of whether or not monogamy is reserved for heterosexuals, the other whether or not monogamy itself is permissible (January 22, 2005).

However, what can be lost in the details of the debate is a fairly obvious fact: like it or not, the expansion of the concept of marriage to include gay couples opens up the possibility of the concept being expanded in any number of ways. One of those possibilities is polygamy. It is not merely a hypothetical example. Concern that polygamy is being practiced among a Mormon sect in Bountiful, B.C. has led to a federally funded examination of the situation. Canadian Islamic Congress president Mohamed Elmasry said last week that Muslims would not try “to push polygamy in the political arena” on the heels of the legalization of gay marriage. Nonetheless, he was quoted by journalists Chris Cobb and Bob Harvey as saying that polygamy as practiced in Muslim countries and by a few Canadian Muslims can be a positive family force – certainly preferable to people engaging in extramarital affairs (*National Post*, January 21, 2005).

A recent major study I carried out for the Vanier Institute of the Family on what Canadians want from family life anticipated such a possible expansion of the concept of marriage. Entitled *The Future Families Project*, the study examined a wide range of family issues, in the process exploring not only how Canadians view same-sex marriage but also how they feel about people having more than one marriage partner.

The study involved a comprehensive national survey of 2,093 Canadians that was completed in August of 2003. The survey’s size and highly representative sample permit accurate generalizations to the population (within about 3 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times in 20).

Attitudes Toward Polygamy

Respondents were asked, “What is your view of people being allowed to have more than one marital partner at a time?” **Some 20% of Canadians indicate that they are willing to accept polygamy.** However, only 4% say that, apart from tolerating such behaviour, they personally approve of individuals having multiple marital partners.

In fact, more people (31%) are willing to accept extramarital sex than polygamy. But such a finding needs to be kept in perspective: 7 in 10 Canadians do not accept extramarital sex and 8 in 10 do not accept polygamy. Here, as with polygamy, only 4% of people across the country say that they actually approve of individuals having sex with someone other than their marital partners.

By way of comparison, the study found that about 1 in 2 Canadians agree that “same sex couples should be allowed to marry” – a level that has remained fairly steady throughout the debate. Significantly, the figure is considerably lower than the 62% who indicate they are willing to accept gays having sexual relations, even though more than half of these same respondents do not personally approve of homosexuality.

	Approve & Accept	Disapprove But Accept	Disapprove & Do Not Accept	Totals
Polygamy	4%	16	80	100
Extramarital sex	4	27	69	100
Same-sex marriage*	→ 46*	←	54	100
Homosexuality	33	29	38	100
Premarital sex: heterosexual	65	25	10	100

**This item read, “Same sex couples should be allowed to marry,” with the four response options ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.*

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Future Families Project*, Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004.

In short, approximately 1 in 5 Canadians are willing to accept polygamous marriages, compared to about 1 in 2 who say that they would accept gay marriages. In both instances, more people accept individuals engaging in sexual behaviour than accept their proceeding to marry one another, seemingly preferring sex to marriage.

Such patterns, of course, stand in sharp contrast to many Canadians’ attitudes toward heterosexual behaviour – where 1 in 3 people prefer that individuals marry before indulging. For some people the message is “Have sex if you must, but don’t marry.” For others, it’s “wait until you marry.”

Variations. The inclination to accept polygamy is somewhat higher among *younger adults* and *men* than others, as well as among people living in *Quebec* and *British Columbia* versus their counterparts in the rest of the country. Approximately 1 in 4 individuals in each of these particular age, gender, and regional categories are willing to accept multiple marital partners. Far fewer, however, express personal approval.

As would be expected religion is a fairly strong predictor of attitudes toward polygamy. But some differences between groups are readily apparent.

More than 1 in 3 Canadians who report that they have *no religion* say they would be able to accept polygamy, as would about 1 in 4 *Quebec Catholics* and 1 in 4 people who identify with *world faiths* other than Christianity.

Those figures for acceptance of polygamy drop to slightly above 1 in among those people who identify with *Mainline Protestants* and *Catholics, outside Quebec*, and to fewer than 1 in 10 for *evangelical Protestants*.

Some 25% of Canadians who *attend religious* services less than once a month indicate that they would accept people having more than one marital partner, compared to only about 10% of those who attend services at least once a month.

Table 2.
ATTITUDES TOWARD POLYGAMY BY AGE, GENDER, AND REGION
“What is your view of people being allowed to have more than one marital partner at a time?”

	Approve & Accept	Disapprove But Accept	Disapprove & Not Accept	Totals
Nationally	4%	16	80	100
18-34	4	23	73	100
35-54	6	15	79	100
55+	2	8	90	100
Men	6	18	76	100
Women	3	12	85	100
Quebec	6	23	71	100
British Columbia	7	14	79	100
Prairies	4	12	84	100
Ontario	3	13	84	100
Atlantic	3	11	86	100

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Future Families Project*, Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004.

Table 3.
ATTITUDES TOWARD POLYGAMY BY RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION
“What is your view of people being allowed to have more than one marital partner at a time?”

	Approve & Accept	Disapprove But Accept	Disapprove & Not Accept	Totals
Nationally	4%	16	80	100
None	7	30	63	100
RCs: Quebec	4	24	72	100
Other Faiths	7	18	75	100
Mainline Protestants	3	10	87	100
RCs: Outside Quebec	3	9	88	100
Conservative Protestants	1	6	93	100
Attend <Monthly	6	20	74	100
Attend Monthly-Plus	1	8	91	100

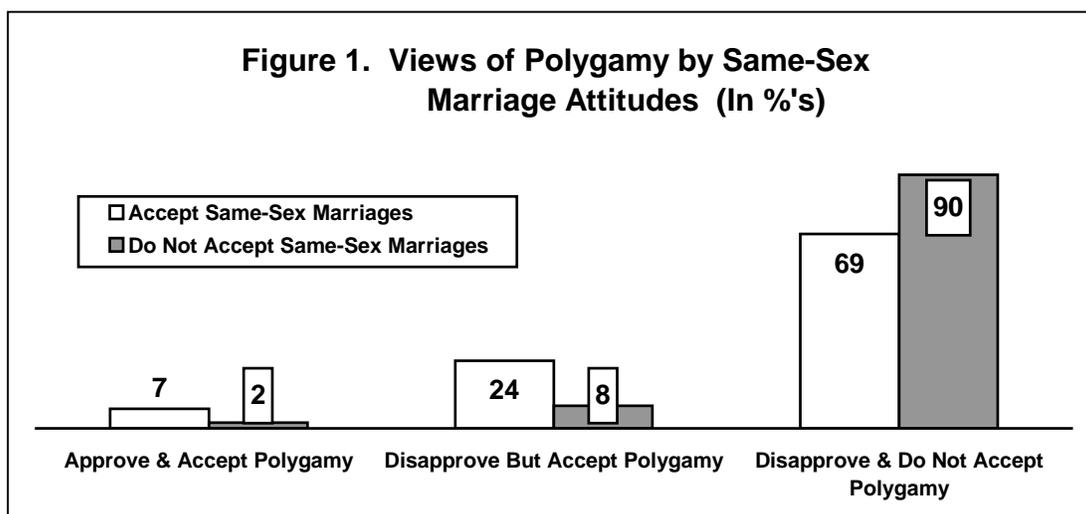
Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Future Families Project*, Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004.

Same-Sex Approval and Polygamy Attitudes

Some observers seem to think that if Canadians approve of gay marriages, they also will be inclined to approve of polygamy. The survey finds only limited support for such an assertion.

Just 7% of those who agree that “same sex couples should be allowed to marry” say that they approve and would be accepting of polygamy – only slightly higher than the 2% figure for people who are opposed to gay marriage. The difference between those endorsing same-sex marriage and others lies in the formers’ greater inclination to be willing to *accept* multiple partner marriages, even if they do not personally *approve* of them. Here about 25% of those who give their consent to gay marriage say they would approve of polygamy, compared to less than 10% who reject such unions.

Overall, 90% of Canadians who are opposed to gay marriage would also reject the idea of people having more than one marital partner. This compares a rejection figure of 69% among those who feel that same sex couples should be allowed to marry.



A Possible Key to Same-Sex and Polygamy Attitudes: The “Family Tolerance” Factor

Perhaps it is extremely noteworthy that *The Future Families Project* found that, **personally, the vast majority of Canadians aspire or aspired to know fairly traditional kinds of family life.** Most wanted to marry, have children, and stay with the same partner for life. **However, when pressed as to whether or not they thought that any one family arrangement is ideal, 41% reflected the pervasive Canadian commitment to diversity and its correlate of tolerance in saying, “No.”** Most of the 59% who said that they believe one family arrangement is ideal posited the traditional family. Significantly, that is also the same kind of family situation that most of the dissenting 41%, on a personal level, also aspire to experience.

The inclination to accept family arrangements that are different in the face of what one personally wants – what we might call “**family tolerance**” – may be one important key to understanding who supports same-sex marriage and who does not.

The survey analyses reveal that no less than 75% of those who refrain from seeing one family arrangement as ideal accept gay marriage, compared to only 28% of those people who believe one form is preferable to others.

But the survey findings also show that, contrary to what many observers think, **because such a family tolerance outlook is not specific to same-sex marriage, it also is associated with a higher level of acceptance of other marriage possibilities – in the current instance, people having more than one marital partner.** Some 32% of Canadians who do not subscribe to the idea of one ideal family form say they are open to people having multiple marriage partners, compared to just 12% of those who believe that one family arrangement is ideal.

Table 4.
BELIEF ONE FAMILY ARRANGEMENT IS IDEAL AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SAME-SEX MARRIAGE & POLYGAMY

% Accepting

Believe one family form is ideal	Same-Sex Marriage	Polygamy
No	75%	32
Yes	28	12

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Future Families Project*, Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004.

Such “family tolerance” tends to be more common among *younger* than older adults, and among *women* than men. *Regionally*, it characterizes about 5 in 10 people in B.C., 4 in 10 in Quebec and Ontario, and slightly fewer numbers in the Atlantic and Prairies regions.

Canadians who do not feel one family arrangement is ideal are also less likely than others to be actively involved in *religious groups* – hardly surprising given that most of the country’s groups espouse the traditional family as ideal.

Again, perspective is needed: Canadians who exhibit “family form tolerance” constitute a minority both nationally and within most social categories. But to the extent they exist, they are far more likely than others to be open to diverse family arrangements generally and to new marriage arrangements specifically.

Table 5.
“FAMILY TOLERANCE” BY SELECT VARIABLES

% Maintaining That No One Family Arrangement is Ideal

Nationally	41%
18-34	52
35-54	43
55+	25
Women	46
Men	36
British Columbia	53
Quebec	42
Ontario	40
Atlantic	37
Prairies	33
<Monthly	50
Monthly-plus	27

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Future Families Project*, Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004.

Concluding Note

To return to where I began, the debate about gay marriage has brought into question more than what is legal as defined by Canada's constitution. The same-sex marriage debate has also raised the question of how inclusive Canadians want the concept of marriage to be. The gay marriage issue, as many observers have pointed out, may not be a slippery slope that automatically leads to any number of marriage possibilities. Our analysis makes it clear that people who endorse same-sex marriage hardly give a similar green light to polygamy. But, without question, such a broadening of what is considered to be marriage opens the door for other arrangements at least to be considered – including the possibility of people having more than one marriage partner.

Our *Future Family* findings show that, currently at least, support for same-sex marriage readily exceeds that of support for polygamy. However, the findings also show that a noteworthy number of Canadians – particularly younger people – are fairly receptive to expanding the concept of marriage to include people who want to have multiple marriage partners. Significantly, most of these family tolerance-minded people are individuals who, personally, have not abandoned the traditional marriage ideal. Rather, they don't feel any need to impose their family dreams on others who do not have either the same family aspirations or family outcomes.

For at least five decades now, Canada has trumpeted diversity in virtually every realm of life. The theme has taken. Tolerance and acceptance are in. And so they should be. In such a Canada, there is every reason to believe that we will not lack for people who, from time to time, will call for the expansion of the boundaries of marriage.

As with the advocates of gay marriage, they can be expected to be met with a paradoxical mixture of resistance and receptivity.

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