



PERCEIVED IMPACT OF POLYGAMOUS FAMILY BACKGROUND ON UNDERGRADUATES' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of polygamy on the academic performance of University of Ilorin's undergraduates, Nigeria. A sample of 490 respondents were selected randomly using descriptive survey design. The chi-square analysis further validated the relationship between the research variable stated in the hypotheses. The result of this study showed that 490 respondents participated in the study and 61.3% of the respondents agreed that students from polygamous family were more likely to perform low in academic work than students from monogamous family and 38.7% disagreed. This means that 61.3% of the respondents believed that polygamous family hinder the academic performance of the University students. The study also revealed that infertility is the leading perceived factor among others as a cause of polygamy. Thus, this study concludes that polygamy has enormous impact on undergraduates' academic performance as perceived by the University of Ilorin's undergraduates. Hence, recommendations are made that parents should re-examine their financial support to students. Added is that school social workers should be employed in all institutions of learning and adequate supervision be put in place to ensure provision of necessary guidance service to the students.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Family, Polygamy, Socio-Economic Status, Undergraduate

Introduction

Polygamy which is broadly defined as the practice of having multiple spouses simultaneously, is a long-standing social institution rooted in ancestry and tradition. Its manifestation varies globally depending on cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts. While it is widely practiced in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, many Western societies such as the United States and most of Europe have outlawed it, often framing it as incompatible with modern human rights and family laws (Arthi & Fenske, 2016). Nevertheless, the practice continues to attract scholarly debate among sociologists, feminists, and policymakers because of its implications for gender equality, child welfare, and education (Hobejane & Flora, 2014). Historically, polygamy was perceived as a marker of affluence and social prestige, particularly during the precolonial and early independence periods in Africa. Arthi and Fenske (2016) observed that men acquired multiple wives to expand household labor, increase fertility, and strengthen social alliances. In many traditional societies, women were viewed as economic assets that were key contributors to agricultural labor and family continuity. During the colonial era, however, missionary and Western influences challenged these norms. Christianity's introduction, alongside formal education and economic modernization, reduced the prevalence of polygamy by promoting monogamy as the ideal marital form (Falen, 2008; Fenske, 2015). Yet, as Falen (2008) and Dolapo



(2020) noted that the cultural and economic roots of polygamy in Africa are deeply entrenched and resistant to complete eradication.

The legal and religious dimensions of polygamy vary significantly across regions. While civil laws in many countries prohibit polygamy, customary and religious laws often permit it. Dolapo (2020) highlighted that several West African nations, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire, regulate polygamous unions under customary or Islamic law, though enforcement is limited due to cultural and religious tolerance. Wagner and Rieger (2014) reported that about 56% of women in polygamous marriages in Africa are Muslims, compared to 34% Christians which is indicating that religion continues to shape marital patterns. In Nigeria, the coexistence of civil, customary, and Sharia legal systems allows for multiple interpretations of marriage. In the Northern region, where Sharia law operates alongside state law, polygamy is widely accepted, while in the South, it is less prevalent but still practiced under customary traditions (Abdul-Fatah, 2020).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, polygamy remains a prominent social feature, particularly in rural and low-income areas. The 2017 Demographic and Health Survey revealed that between 44% and 47% of women and 20% to 25% of men aged 15–49 are in polygynous unions (National Population Commission (NPC) & ICF., 2019). This gender disparity reflects cultural expectations and economic inequalities, where men's wealth often determines their marital capacity (Faridah, 2019). Lyimo (2011) noted that many communities perceive polygamy as a source of economic security, family prestige, and a solution for infertility. However, Sanusi (2020) established a strong correlation between polygamy and poverty in Nigeria, regions with higher poverty levels also record higher rates of polygamy. When family resources are divided among multiple wives and children, educational and welfare outcomes are often compromised, particularly for children from less favored wives.

In the Nigerian context, especially in states like Kwara, polygamy has both cultural and socio-economic implications. Polygamous families may struggle to provide adequate financial and emotional support for all members, potentially affecting children's educational motivation and achievement. Girls from such families may face early marriage pressures, while boys may experience economic hardship or limited parental supervision (AbuRabiat, 2011). These dynamics suggest that the structure of polygamous families could influence the academic performance and social adjustment of young people. Given this background, this study examined the perceived impact of polygamous family background on the academic performance of undergraduates at the University of Ilorin. Understanding how students from polygamous households perceive their academic experiences is crucial for educational policy and interventions. By situating the discussion within the socio-cultural realities of Kwara State, this research contributes to the broader discourse on how family structure affects undergraduates' academic.

Statement of Problem

The connection between polygamy and undergraduates' academic performance remains a relatively underexplored area in social and educational research. Most studies on polygamy in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African contexts have concentrated on its socio-economic, cultural, and gender dimensions (Arthi and Fenske, 2016; Sanusi, 2020), while limited attention has been paid to how the family dynamics of polygamous households shape students' academic outcomes at the tertiary level. This research gap may be partly due to the assumption that university students are adults that are capable of emotional independence. However, evidence shows that the psychosocial experiences and emotional patterns developed in childhood particularly in complex family structures continue to affect learning and academic motivation during young adulthood (Alean, 2014; Adeshinwa, 2013; Elbedour, Bart, & Hektner, 2012).

In many polygamous families, parental neglect, rivalry among wives, and unequal distribution of resources often create emotionally unstable environments that affect children's sense of belonging and academic drive. Empirical studies indicate that students from polygamous homes may experience lower self-esteem, divided parental attention, financial constraints, and psychological distress, which directly translate into poor academic concentration, absenteeism, and underachievement (Elbedour et al., 2012;



Faridah, 2019; Oni & Junaid, 2023). The indirect effects such as inter-parental conflict, limited emotional support, and economic hardship can also weaken students' coping mechanisms and therefore leading to decreased motivation and academic persistence (Lyimo, 2011; Sachiti, 2011; Akomolafe et al., 2011).

Gender inequality is another concern. Studies have shown that girls in polygamous households are often disadvantaged in education, as they may be withdrawn from school for early marriage or domestic responsibilities, while boys may face pressure to contribute economically to family upkeep (Muhammad Al-Sharfi, Pfeffer, & Miller, 2015). Such disparities perpetuate cycles of poor academic outcomes and limited social mobility. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) recognizes polygamy as a violation of women's equality rights, emphasizing its harmful psychological and financial implications. Nonetheless, despite growing global advocacy and legal reforms, the practice persists in many African societies due to deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions (Gaffney-Rhys, 2012; Mwambene, 2017). In Kwara State, particularly among students of the University of Ilorin, the effects of polygamous family backgrounds on academic performance have not been systematically investigated. Given the emotional, financial, and social challenges associated with polygamous households, it becomes essential to examine how these family structures influence the educational experiences and achievements of undergraduates. Addressing this gap contributed to a deeper understanding of how socio-cultural family patterns affect higher education outcomes in Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the perception of University of Ilorin undergraduates towards the impact of polygamy on academic performance of university students and then specifically address the following objectives;

1. To ascertain Unilorin undergraduates' perception on the causes of polygamy.
2. To examine Unilorin undergraduates' perception on the effects of polygamy on Undergraduates' performance.
3. To examine Unilorin undergraduates' perception on how socioeconomic status of polygamous family influences undergraduates' academic performance.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 significant level:

1. Students from polygamous family are more likely to perform low in academic than students from monogamous family.
2. Students from polygamous family are more likely to experience low socioeconomic status than their student's counterparts.

Review of Related Literature

Baloyi (2010) found that 94% of respondents in Kenya agreed that the socio-economic background of the family significantly influences students' academic performance, either positively or negatively. This finding highlights the strong link between family income and educational outcomes. Similarly, Carlisle and Murray (2015) affirmed that children from high socio-economic status (SES) families often have access to quality education, healthcare, and adequate basic needs, while those from low SES backgrounds struggle with financial constraints that hinder academic success. Supporting this view, David and Mhari (2018) observed in Ghana that rivalry and instability in polygynous marriages often lead to stress and poor health among women and children which indirectly affects children's academic performance due to emotional distress and limited parental support.



Elbedour et al. (2002 & 2012) revealed that polygamy negatively impacts children's well-being, as those from polygamous families are more likely than their counterparts from monogamous homes to experience marital conflict, high levels of violence, and family disturbances. These challenges often disrupt the children's mental and emotional stability, which in turn affects their academic performance. The studies further emphasize that behavioral and developmental problems are more prevalent among children raised in polygamous households, and such psychological disturbances can lead to poor concentration, low motivation, and diminished academic achievement.

Adenike (2013) postulates that a child's emotional and psychological well-being is largely influenced by the home environment, and negative conditions such as violence, rudeness, and absenteeism can significantly affect academic performance. In support of this view, Asia (2019) asserts that emotional stability is crucial for students' academic success, as psychological distress often leads to learning difficulties. Since the family serves as the primary agent of socialization, parents are expected to equip their children with basic life skills before formal education begins. However, in polygamous households where competition and conflict among parents are common, it becomes difficult to instill harmony and cooperation. Consequently, children raised in such unstable environments may struggle emotionally and academically. Conversely, research shows that students who receive kind, nurturing, and supportive parenting from their mothers tend to perform better academically in higher institutions (Bongiwe, 2015).

Methods

A descriptive survey design was used for this study. The undergraduate's population of the study which is the University of Ilorin is estimated to be over 48,000. The population comprises 15 faculties. The sample size of the study is 490 respondents in the selected faculties and across all academic levels. The selected faculties were; Social Sciences, Management Science, Education, Art, Life Sciences, Physical Science and Engineering. Random sampling technique was used to draw the sample size from the population of the study. A total of four hundred and ninety (490) respondents were randomly selected. Questionnaires were distributed by visiting the lecture theatres of the selected faculties, where seventy (70) copies were randomly administered to students and retrieved. The components of the sample size consist of both male and female undergraduates from 100 to 500 levels in the selected faculties. The research instrument for the study was structured questionnaire which was designed to collect data and responses from the respondents. A total of 490 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and retrieved from the respondents. Frequencies count, mean and chi-square were used to analyze the data in tables.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis on Responses from Respondents on the Factors that Determine Polygamy

S/N	Determinant of Polygamy	N	Cluster Mean	Remark
1	Socioeconomic	490	2.90	Agree
2	Infertility	490	3.14	Agree
3	Infidelity Prevention	490	3.04	Agree

Fieldwork

The table above presents respondents' perception on the determinants of polygamy. A decision criterion of 2.5 was adopted, where mean scores equal to or greater than 2.5 indicate agreement, while scores below 2.5 denote disagreement. This statistical benchmark implies that a variable is considered significant if its mean response meets or exceeds 2.5. All three determinants recorded mean scores above the benchmark which is indicating general agreement among respondents that socioeconomic factors, infertility, and infidelity prevention are major drivers of polygamous unions. Notably, infertility had the highest mean (3.14) which revealed that reproductive challenges are perceived as the strongest motivator for entering polygamous relationships among undergraduates of the University of Ilorin.

Hypothesis One: Students from polygamous family are more likely to perform low in academic than students from monogamous family.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Percentage on Polygamy and Undergraduates' Academics Performance

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	353	72.0%
No	137	28.0%
Total	490	100%

Fieldwork

The table shows that 490 respondents participated in the study. 72.0% agreed that students from polygamous families are more likely to perform poorly in academic work than students from monogamous families. Conversely, 28.0% disagreed. This distribution reflects a stronger agreement on the family types and undergraduates' academic achievement.

Table 3 Chi-Square Analysis of Relationship between family type and Academic Performance

Family type	Family type affects academic performance of students		Total
	Yes	No	
Polygamous	218	27	245
Monogamous	135	110	245
Total	353	137	490

Fieldwork

X² calculated =5.320 X² tabulated = 3.841 N = 490 DF = 1 Sig. =0.05

The Chi-Square analysis shows that the X² calculated= 5.320 value is significantly higher than the X² tabulated= 3.841 value at the 0.05 significance level. Hence, we accept the hypothesis that students from polygamous families are more likely to perform poorly in academic work than students from monogamous families.

Hypothesis Two: Students from polygamous family are more likely to experience low socioeconomic status than their student's counterparts.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Percentage on Students from Polygamous Family and their Experiences of Low Socioeconomic Status

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	392	80.0%
No	98	20.0%
Total	490	100%

Fieldwork

The table shows that 490 respondents participated in the study. 80.0% agreed that students from polygamous families are more likely to experience low socioeconomic status than their counterparts from monogamous families. Conversely, 20.0% disagreed.

Table 5: Chi-Square Analysis of Relationship between Family Type and Students' Experiencing of Low Socioeconomic Status

Family Type	Family type affects students' socioeconomic status		Total
	Yes	No	
Polygamous	224	21	245
Monogamous	168	77	245
Total	392	98	490

X² calculated= 8.140; X² tabulated= 3.841; N= 490; DF= 1; Sig. = 0.05



Table above showed the Chi-Square analysis of family type and socioeconomic status of the students. The Chi-Square analysis revealed that the calculated value of 8.140 is significantly higher than the tabulated value of 3.841 at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, we accept the hypothesis that students from polygamous families are more likely to experience low socioeconomic status than students from monogamous families.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that infertility, socioeconomic factors, and infidelity prevention are major determinants of polygamy among undergraduates of the University of Ilorin. The use of the 2.5 mean criterion shows that all three factors are perceived as important. This aligns with previous research by Baloyi (2010), who argued that infertility remains a primary justification for polygamous unions in many African societies, as the ability to bear children is culturally tied to marital success and family continuity. Also, the findings of this study also align with Omorogiuwa and Odore (2025) who observed that cultural beliefs and economic hardship significantly shape individual and family decisions in health-related contexts. Similarly, within polygamous households, such socioeconomic and belief-driven dynamics may influence how resources are distributed and how members prioritize education and wellbeing.

Secondly, the study therefore discovered that students from polygamous family were more likely to perform low in academic than students from monogamous family. This means that family types have major impact on the academic performance/achievement of the students. This finding is consistent with Alean (2014) and Micah et al. (2017), who reported that children from polygamous households often face limited emotional support, economic strain, and psychological challenges, all of which hinder learning and academic performance. The findings further support Adenika (2013), who emphasized the role of a stable home environment in fostering students' emotional well-being and academic achievement. This finding implies that the complex family dynamics in polygamous households such as competition for attention, limited resources, and emotional instability may negatively influence students' focus and motivation. While previous studies focused on general family stability, this study uniquely contextualizes the problem within undergraduate education by highlighting how the pressures of polygamous family life continue to affect young adults' academic trajectories.

Lastly, this study further discovered that students from polygamous family were more likely to experience low socio-economic than their student counterparts because of the un-circulatory needs of the students. In the polygamous family the socio-economic status is usually low. This agrees with Baloyi (2012) and Reardon (2011), who found that socioeconomic background strongly influences educational outcomes. In polygamous families, resources such as time, attention, and finances are often stretched across multiple households, leading to deprivation and reduced academic motivation among children. Carlisle and Murray (2015) also observed that children from high socioeconomic backgrounds have greater access to quality education and learning resources, while those from low-income families often experience learning barriers. This finding emphasized that family economic background strongly predicts educational opportunity. In polygamous settings, financial and emotional resources are distributed among multiple households which is often resulting in deprivation and limited access to educational materials. The present study extends these insights by showing how such disparities persist even at the tertiary education level reflecting broader socioeconomic inequalities in Nigerian households.

Conclusion

This study examined the determinants and effects of polygamy on undergraduates' academic performance and socioeconomic well-being in the University of Ilorin. The findings revealed that infertility, infidelity prevention, and socioeconomic pressures are the leading factors driving polygamous practices. This study further established that students from polygamous families are more likely to perform poorly academically and experience lower socioeconomic status than those from monogamous families. In the African context particularly in Nigeria, marriage is deeply associated with procreation, and childlessness is often stigmatized which is leading some individuals to justify



polygamous unions. However, the findings of this study indicated that the emotional, psychological, and economic consequences of polygamy can have long-term adverse effects on children's educational progress.

Recommendations

Polygamy cannot be eradicated but only mitigated. Therefore, these are recommended;

1. The parent should re-examine their financial support to student since this support is viewed as the main contributor towards the students' academic performance and men who are willing in having polygamous home should examine their socio-economic status so that their children would not lack basic need and have access to adequate resources to excel in their academic.
2. Empowering Women in Polygamy is a necessity as this will enhance financial stability of the wives. If the wives are able to provide for themselves without economically depending on their husband will reduce the rate of jealousy among the wives.
3. There is a need for pre-marital and marital counseling with the focus on enlightening the intending couples or parent regarding the effect of the home structure. This will enhance the parents to understand the implication and consequences of such family structure and thus, mobilize all resources to curtail the problem arising from the situation.
4. There is need for government to effective implementation of marriage act, reform or enact new policy on guarding the marriage in Nigeria. Therefore, for any man that is willing to engage in polygamy must go through some stages and these stages will examine whether the man is capable or not. These will also strengthen the religion and law on the issue of polygamy.
5. School social workers should be employed in all institutions of learning with adequate resources be put in place to ensure provision of necessary guidance service to the students to overcome academic challenges.

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