

New Family Types and Changing Values: An Evaluation from an Ethical Perspective

Yeni Aile Türleri ve Değişen Değerler: Etik Açından Bir Değerlendirme

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Summary

This paper examines the ethical implications and challenges faced by polyamorous families within the broader context of evolving family structures. It highlights how polyamorous relationships, which involve multiple romantic and parental figures, challenge traditional nuclear family norms. Despite their growing numbers and the opportunities for fostering open-minded and communicative environment, significant barriers remain, particularly in legal and social contexts for polyamorous families. The paper explores various ethical concerns, including social stigma, legal recognition, access to healthcare, and the well-being of children and adults in polyamorous families. It is thought that these concerns are due to lack of recognition of polyamory in the society. This topic was chosen to prevent individuals from being discriminated against due to their sexual or romantic orientation and to raise awareness in an ethical context. The paper advocates for a bioethical approach that promotes justice, equality, and respect for diverse family forms, emphasizing the need for legal reforms, improved healthcare access, and efforts to reduce societal discrimination against polyamorous families.

Keywords: Bioethics; ethical non-monogamy; polyamorous families; social stigma; legal recognition.

Özet

Günümüzde geleneksel anlayışın dışında yer alan yeni aile türleri giderek yaygınlaşmakta; çokaşkl (poliamorik) aileler bu yeni türlerden birisi olarak kabul edilmektedir. Birden fazla romantik partner ve ebeveyn figürünü içeren poliamorik aileler, evli anne – baba ve biyolojik çocuklarından oluşan çekirdek aile normuna uymamakta ve bu nedenle çeşitli zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır. Bahsi geçen zorluklar, kimi etik sorunları beraberinde getirmektedir. Çokaşkl aileler sayılarının her geçen gün artmasına karşın toplum tarafından yeterince tanınmamaktadır. Bahsi geçen etik sorunların altında bu bilgi eksikliğinin yattığı düşünülmektedir. Bireylerin cinsel veya romantik yönelimleri sebebiyle ayrımcılığa uğramasını engellemek ve etik bağlamda bir farkındalık yaratmak amaçlarıyla bu konu seçilmiştir. Dolayısıyla poliamorik ailelere yönelik sosyal damgalanma, yasal hakların tanınması, sağlık hizmetlerine erişim ve çocuklar ile yetişkinlerin refahı gibi çeşitli etik kaygılar bu çalışmada ele alınmıştır. Poliamorik aileler açık fikirli ve iletişimci ortamlar oluşturma konusunda daha avantajlı olmalarına karşın, özellikle yasal ve sosyal bağlamlarda önemli engellerle karşılaşmaları söz konusudur. Bu çalışmada, poliamorik aileleri kapsayan yasal düzenlemeler yapılmasının, iyileştirilmiş sağlık hizmetlerine erişimin sağlanmasının ve toplumsal ayrımcılığın azaltılmasına yönelik çabaların önemi vurgulanarak adalet, eşitlik ve saygıyı teşvik eden bir biyoetik yaklaşımın benimsenmesi tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Biyoetik; rızaya dayalı tekeşli olmayan ilişkiler; poliamorik aileler; sosyal damgalama, yasal tanınma.

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INTRODUCTION

When thinking about different layers of a society, family comes across as a core one. Arguably, family can be seen as the prior and the most fundamental unit which a person is born into. As a result, the questions concerning what a family is, how are they perceived in social life and what are the rights and responsibilities that comes with being a family are all susceptible to ethical evaluation. Before delving into such evaluation, it is crucial to understand what the classic and new family types are. Starting with the classic and the most accepted way, nuclear families seem to be the norm with a set of parents – ideally a married monogamous heterosexual couple – and their genetic children (1). However, when we look at the formation of families in real life, it significantly deviates from the norm. While the described ideal of nuclear families are still quite common, there is a substantial increase in new formations of family; non-nuclear families now constitute a noteworthy portion of families (2,3). To be more precise, it is possible to observe deviation from each element mentioned above; non-monogamous, queer and / or child-free family units not only exist but they have also become increasingly visible across societies.

Different layers of social life, including individual, familial and societal ones, are often in constant interaction; hence, any of these deviations not only concern the individuals but also the families and societies. As the identifications and orientations of individuals change, they eventually lead to creation of new family structures. On the parental side, stepfamilies, queer families, single-parenting are few of the many new structures. As for the children side, adoption, artificial insemination through sperm or egg donation and being child-free can be given as examples. Out of all these new family types, the focus will be on polyamorous families for this paper. Examining how the legal systems, institutional branches and public spaces / opinions are formed in modern understanding; it is quite possible to argue that each of these elements had been shaped according to nuclear families. While there are three or more parental figures involved with a child in the cases of polyamorous families, regulations of law, government institutions like schools and hospitals and general public opinion tend to be shaped regarding the two-parent ideal. As a result of this duality, non-nuclear family members become more vulnerable to face legal constraints, lack of recognition, stigmatization and isolation (4) in comparison to nuclear family members. This rather discriminating attitude towards non-nuclear families raises various social concerns and this paper aims to evaluate them from an ethical perspective.

AN OVERVIEW OF POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILIES

Polyamory, which is one of the most prominent groups under the umbrella term of “Ethical Non-Monogamy”, involves the romantic, emotional and sexual union of more than two individuals at a given time. In a romantic context, polyamorous relationships exhibit a division in romance; an individual's romantic feelings are spread across multiple people (5). Individuals in polyamorous relationships are open to having multiple partners simultaneously; these partners may all be together, or each partner may have separate relationships (6). Due to these differences, polyamory can be subdivided, sometimes taking on a hierarchical structure. An example of such subdivisions is primary-secondary polyamorous relationships. In these relationships, two people are typically together for a longer period and share a household and financial responsibilities as the primary couple; third and subsequent partners interact with this couple as secondary partners (7). Another example is 'solo polyamory,' which does not include the primary-secondary distinction; a third example is 'polyfidelity,' a form of relationship involving three or more people who are committed to each other and closed off to others (8). Depending on the definition and conduct of the relationship, these examples can be expanded, but it is important to keep in mind that there may be unique forms of polyamorous relationships beyond these examples.

Considering how polyamorous relationships can be conducted in different ways, such distinction can also be made for polyamorous parenting. Schadler refer to these various family units as 'border families' (9).

She defines three types: poly-nuclear, hierarchical and egalitarian parenting. Poly-nuclear parenting implies two main, biological parents having relationships outside the family unit; this parenting method often passes as nuclear in the society. Hierarchical parenting consists of three or more main and co-parents where the division of labor and the role in children's life is not equal; in this case genetics do not tend to define which parent is main or not. Lastly, egalitarian parenting refers to three or more parents equally being involved in household and children's care. This parenting style deviates from the norm the most and goes through significant difficulties within the social structures.

Despite the different styles, one common point of polyamorous families is the negative attitudes towards them, namely marginalization, disapproval, stigmatization and prejudice. This situation becomes clearer in social and bureaucratic levels. Polyamorous families deprive legal, societal, economic and institutional rights; however, they are also afraid of being misunderstood, stigmatized and demonized which makes them reluctant for fighting for their rights in health care, education and legal protection. Due to the fear of not being accepted, polyamorous families often hide who they are and try to pass as traditional households (4,10,11). With the absence of clear definitions, one prominent feature of non-nuclear families becomes applicable: the role ambiguity. Non-nuclear families experience lack of boundaries and role clarity in their parenting and the absence of them comes from several bases (12). First, there are no well-established cultural scripts for non-biological parents in contrast to biological parents. Additionally the legal recognition is an issue which contributes to the ambiguity. Finally, social support system is often lacking in these family types since the norms tend to favor the nuclear structure. Given the situation, there are several legal shortcomings unique to polyamorous families. For instance, giving birth and primary care as well as parental leaves are centered on mononormative understanding. As non-biological partners are not recognized as parents, the polyamorous families have difficulties during these processes (13,14). On another example, the legal case from 1998 where a grandmother started a lawsuit for her grandkid due to her parents being in a polyamorous relationship brought fear for many families in similar living conditions (15). Further on, custody portrays even a bigger issue where the legal system prevents polyamorous families from reaching their full potential and forces them to live their lives in secret (11).

All things considered, there are different solutions or recommendations to ease the struggles of polyamorous families. One idea is to apply private contracts and business models to law systems to protect non-nuclear families' rights (15). Another idea is to unify various identity groups in fighting the inequities and the oppressive systems of relationship and families; this collective action would have the potential of overcoming social, political and legal struggles (16). Some others share the idea of improvements in the legal system by expanding the definitions of marriage and being a parent (17), while others question the entire existence of normative family understanding and makes a radical suggestion of abolishing the whole concept of marriage to minimize discrimination (18). All these different ideas are both supported and opposed in the literature. However, there is a consensus on one particular solution: enhancing the mental health-care through education and raising awareness for inclusivity (19). It is suggested for mental health-care workers to be more informed about polyamorous families and provide support in coming out process (20), about straining family and social ties (21) and about parenting issues (22). The last point can be tied to the children's well-being in polyamorous families. Most studies show that the children of polyamorous families tend to be more open-minded, transparent, communicative, honest and self-aware (11,22,23). However, these advantages does not guarantee the well-being of children. Lack of recognition on both social and legal levels appear to take its toll on polyamorous families; to overcome these issues access to adequate mental health-care services becomes essential.

AN EVALUATION FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Evaluating different family styles, such as nuclear families, single-parent families, stepfamilies, and polyamorous families, from a bioethical perspective involves examining how these structures impact the

well-being of individuals (especially children), societal norms, and the allocation of healthcare and social resources. Such evaluations are essential for ensuring that all families, regardless of their structure, have equitable access to healthcare, legal protections, and social support systems. By drawing on interdisciplinary insights from bioethics, we can better navigate the ethical complexities posed by the evolving landscape of family life in modern understanding. From an ethical perspective, polyamorous families and parenting can present both challenges and opportunities. While these polyamorous family structures are not inherently better or worse than any other family formation, certain ethical concerns may arise depending on societal, familial, and individual contexts. Some of them are briefly summarized below (24-29):

1. Social Stigma and Discrimination

Polyamorous families often face significant social stigma, which can lead to discrimination in healthcare, education, and other social services. This stigma can exacerbate stress and mental health issues for both parents and children in these families, hence combating discrimination is crucial. Bioethics would support initiatives aimed at reducing stigma through education, promoting social acceptance, and ensuring that the families receive equitable treatment in all areas of public life. This aligns with the principles of justice and respect for persons.

2. Parental Rights and Legal Recognition

One of the primary bioethical concerns for polyamorous families is the lack of legal recognition for multiple parents. Current legal frameworks typically recognize only two parents, which can create significant challenges in areas such as medical decision-making, custody, and inheritance. From a bioethical standpoint, this raises questions about justice and equality. The lack of recognition can lead to discrimination, where non-recognized parents may be excluded from critical decisions about a child's healthcare or well-being. Bioethics would advocate for reforms that recognize the rights of all involved parents to ensure equitable treatment.

3. Access to Healthcare and Social Services

Due to legal and social biases, polyamorous families may encounter barriers in accessing healthcare and social services. For example, healthcare providers may not recognize multiple parents in medical decisions or fail to understand the dynamics of polyamorous relationships, leading to suboptimal care. Here, the need for healthcare systems to adapt to diverse family structures can be highlighted. This includes training for healthcare providers on the specific needs and dynamics of polyamorous families, ensuring that all members can participate in healthcare decisions, and advocating for policies that protect the rights of non-nuclear families.

4. Child Welfare and Emotional Well-being

The complexity of relationships within polyamorous families can potentially impact the emotional and psychological well-being of children. Children in these families might face confusion about parental roles, experience loyalty conflicts, or be exposed to societal stigma. The welfare of the child would be a primary concern from an ethical perspective. This includes ensuring that the child's environment is stable, nurturing, and free from harm. It is important to address how polyamorous families can provide supportive environments and resolve any gaps in resources or support systems that may affect the child's well-being.

5. Psychological Impacts on Adults

Polyamorous relationships may place unique psychological demands on adults, including managing multiple intimate relationships, coping with jealousy, and navigating complex emotional landscapes. These factors can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. The importance of mental health support for adults in polyamorous relationships can be reiterated here. This could involve advocating for greater access to counseling and therapy tailored to the needs of individuals and couples, ensuring that they have the resources to manage their relationships in healthy and sustainable ways. Ethical considerations would also include the importance of self-care and mutual support within these relationships.

6. Autonomy and Informed Consent

The principle of autonomy is central to bioethics, which includes respecting individuals' rights to make informed decisions about their lives and relationships. In polyamorous families, ensuring that all partners have equal say and that decisions about family structure and child-rearing are made consensually is critical. Clear communication, mutual respect, and informed consent within polyamorous relationships are all susceptible to evaluation in this perspective. It can also be explored how external pressures, such as societal stigma, might impact the autonomy of individuals in polyamorous families.

7. Privacy and Confidentiality

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality can be challenging in polyamorous families, especially in medical contexts. Multiple partners might need access to medical information, which can complicate the standard protocols of patient confidentiality. Bioethical considerations for this concern would include developing guidelines for how to manage confidentiality in situations where multiple partners may have legitimate interests in a family member's medical care. This might involve creating consent frameworks that clearly outline who has access to what information, ensuring that patient autonomy and privacy are respected while also considering the practicalities of polyamorous relationships.

8. Genetic and Reproductive Ethics

Polyamorous families may face complex decisions around genetics and reproduction, particularly when multiple partners are involved in childbearing decisions. Questions about parentage, genetic responsibilities, and the ethics of selective reproduction could arise. The implications of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) within polyamorous families, including sperm/egg donation, surrogacy, and genetic screening is quite open to bioethical evaluation. This would include ensuring that all parties involved have a clear understanding and agreement on genetic parentage and the responsibilities that come with it. The field would also consider the child's right to know their genetic origins and how these complex family structures may impact their sense of identity.

CONCLUSION

Polyamorous families, as part of the broader spectrum of ethical non-monogamy, comes with its own opportunities and concerns when evaluated from a bioethical perspective. While their number is increasing each day, these families still challenge the normative understanding, raising significant questions related to social stigma, legal recognition, and the well-being of children and adults within these families. The paper highlights the systemic barriers polyamorous families face, such as legal constraints, lack of recognition, and discrimination in healthcare and social services. These challenges often intensify the stress and mental health issues experienced by both parents and children. However, the potential for creating inclusive and supportive environments within polyamorous families, which foster open-mindedness, communication, and self-awareness, is also recognized. Bioethics, as an interdisciplinary field, offers valuable insights and recommendations for addressing these concerns, advocating for greater legal recognition, access to healthcare, and the reduction of societal stigma. Ultimately, ensuring the well-being of all family members, regardless of family structure, requires a commitment to justice, equality, and respect for diversity in family life.

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