

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF POLYAMOROUS PERSONS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of Educational Psychology

The University of Utah

May 2004

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ABSTRACT

There is currently a lack of research on “alternative lifestyles” involving multiple sexual partners; also, there is some academic bias towards monogamy and the nuclear family as the norm, as well as elevated risks of bias for mental-health practitioners serving clients with multiple sexual relationships. Therefore, mental-health practitioners would benefit from further research in this area. This qualitative study investigated “polyamory”—an emerging lifestyle typically involving multiple sexual partners—through the eyes of 10 participants in the area of Salt Lake City, Utah. Participants were recruited with a research announcement distributed directly to polyamorous persons at a local community center, posted on Internet discussion groups, and passed along from person to person. Individual interviews were followed by focus-group interviews involving all of the participants; then these interviews underwent phenomenological analysis: the essential meanings of the phenomenon were extracted and described through a process of transcription, horizontalization of meanings, clustering of meanings, textural description, structural description, essential description, and validation of the essential description.

The results provided seven main themes with first- and second-level subthemes. The main themes were *monogamist prejudice*, *mainstream culture*, *selective social circles*, *intimate relationships*, *core relationships*, *self-identity*, and *learning and growing*. The theme of *intimate relationships*—including *core relationships*—most

closely related to the practice of polyamory. The themes of *self-identity*, *mainstream culture*, and *monogamist prejudice* provided important contextual information. *Selective social circles* and *learning and growing* appeared adaptive given abundant stressors and the experiences or expectations of prejudice. The following conclusions were drawn for mental health practitioners: polyamorous clients are likely at risk for monogamist prejudice; practitioners may need to confront internalized prejudice; practitioners should educate themselves regarding polyamory (and other alternative lifestyles) and become aware of available resources; practitioners may wish to consider clients' levels of ego development and/or personal value stances with regard to relationship complexities and conflicts with mainstream values; polyamorous clients will likely benefit from exploring relationship issues; polyamorous clients likely experience many stressors associated with relationship issues and prejudice; and, therefore, these clients may present needs for acceptance and normalization from practitioners who are able to model unconditional positive regard.

Dedicated to

Carrie A. Beach,
for her love, support, understanding,
and gracious research assistance

and to the participants
who made this research possible
with their willingness to share themselves for others

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family for helping to bring me where I find myself; notably M. Brigid McGary, Audra Keener, Michael Keener, Eve Atchison and Ari McGary, who lovingly made a financial gift toward my education; and my mother and father, Dorothy and Allen Keener, who have always shown their love and support—as well as ongoing interest in my academic career and research—despite differences in perspectives. I am grateful for the valuable support and feedback from a committee of faculty who also happened to be friends: Dory Walker, Chuck Gregg, and especially Sue Morrow, the committee chair, who helped me a great deal throughout the entire process of developing, researching and writing this thesis. I am also grateful for the valuable support and feedback from friends and peer researchers: first and foremost, Denise Francis Montano and Sean Casey, who were there for me from the beginning to the end; also, Dinah J. P. Villanueva, Carrie Castañeda, and Yolanda Gamboa, who gave feedback on a regular basis during a significant portion of data collection and analysis; and finally, those who provided other forms of support and feedback: Tamara Abousleman, G. E. Kawika Allen, Laura Anderson, Kathy Barnett, Ines Campoverde, Candice Christiansen, Melissa Dixon, Burton Fullmer, Etirsa Gamez, Shari Gaudette, John Gawrys, Jr., Julie Goudie-Nice, Jodi Nan Hildebrandt, LeAnn Huff, Rick A. Johnson, Sean Kristjansson, Kevan LaFrance, Emily Mohr, Mary Moran, Emily Newcomer, Herlina Pranata, Brittany Price and Shobha Vaidyanathan, among others who will be remembered later.

I would like to acknowledge the supportive and informative feedback from those with some familiarity of polyamory: Deborah Anapol, Kathy Labriola, Ryam Nearing, Shawn Welling, Jennifer L. Wesp, and especially Geri Weitzman, for her repeated and ongoing support. In addition, a mental-health counseling internship was a powerful aspect of my education that happened to coincide with the thesis process, and surviving one allowed for surviving the other. The following skillful persons were especially supportive for me in my internships: R. J. Courtney, Claude Grant, Jr., and Pete Prazza (Alcohol and Drug Clinic, University of Utah Hospital); Lewis Galway, Deeny Otanez, and Fred Van Der Veur (ACES, Salt Lake City); and Christina Rodriguez, my internship coordinator, who helped me through the entire experience from start to finish.

Finally, I would like to thank the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Utah for granting me a master's degree, employment while pursuing it, as well as acceptance into their Learning, Cognition and Research Methods program so that I may now pursue a doctorate. I would like to thank Doug Hacker for providing some feedback during the data analysis phase in this study, as well as his willingness to mentor me in the PhD program. And, in addition to the department faculty as a whole, I wish to acknowledge the (other) administrative staff in the department: Glenda Pruemper, stretching the department money in her mysterious way so that I received a paycheck twice a month, and Sherrill Christensen, processing all of the academic forms with the proper signatures, so that I will eventually receive a diploma when this is all over.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the sexual revolution and experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s, persons living alternative lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners became a more significant minority. Mental-health professionals, like individuals in general, are influenced by negative stereotypes of nonmonogamous lifestyles; thus, they are at risk of providing biased services that may stigmatize clients (Hymer & Rubin, 1982; Knapp, 1975). In some cases, these biases may be especially pronounced. Knapp (1975) recruited participants from a random sample of clinical members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors and administered questionnaires regarding “non-monogamous marriage styles”; 7 out of 190 participants “made abusive statements about the research, the questionnaire, or both” (p. 511). These attitudes presented by a small minority presented a serious risk of professional bias against nonmonogamous clients.

Based on evidence of increasing rates of divorce, as well as premarital and extramarital sex, Peabody (1982) suggested, “The traditional monogamous marriage can no longer provide adequately for the intimacy needs of some individuals” (p. 430).

Based on her clinical experience as a psychologist, she stated:

The author would agree that some individuals are using alternative life styles because of neurotic or pathological needs, yet the contention is that there is another group of people who are in relatively stable primary relationships and who do not seem to be motivated by neurotic or pathological needs. They are attempting to resolve the inherent problems

with the relational structure of monogamous marriage. This group is attempting to cope with the multiple needs of individuation as well as commitment, intimacy, and sharing in a deep relationship which are not always compatible with one another.” (p. 430)

Peabody proposed that Loevinger’s (1976) Ego Development Framework may be appropriate to consider with clients insofar as a person’s level of ego development (conformist, conscientious, or autonomous) may relate to the highest level of complexity in intimate relationships with which the person may be adequately prepared to deal, referring to Ramey’s (1972) suggestion that different lifestyles may be arranged in order of complexity—from the traditional monogamous marriage, the simplest, through various alternative lifestyles with group marriage being the most complex. No empirical research has examined an ego development model for this purpose; however, Stayton (1985) proposed a similar approach with three types of value stances—A, B and C. Value stance A was a traditional stance in which values were externalized and act-oriented; C, on the other end of the continuum, had a progressive stance with values that were internalized and relationship-oriented (and B oscillated somewhere in the middle). For Stayton, based on his clinical experience, exploring a client’s value stance was appropriate in exploring potential repercussions of alternative lifestyle choices.

Overall, there is at present a lack of research on alternative lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners; in addition, there appears to be evidence for elevated risks of professional bias with nonmonogamous clients as well as some academic bias towards monogamy and nuclear family as ideals. The current research will explore a particular lifestyle involving multiple sexual partners known as “polyamory.”

A Lack of Research on Multiple Sexual Partners

Rubin (2001) explored the topic of alternative lifestyles which he defined thus:

The term *alternative lifestyles* included a variety of nontraditional family forms and personal living arrangements including singlehood, nonmarital heterosexual cohabitation, single-parent families, stepfamilies, dual career/work families, gay and lesbian relationships, open marriages and multiple relationships, and communes. (p. 711)

According to Rubin, lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners such as swinging, group marriages and communes have received little attention whereas other forms of alternative relationship have received increasing amounts of attention. This decrease in academic research on lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners stands in stark contrast with an insurgence of interest on the topic over 3 decades ago:

By the early 1970s, an increasing number of books on alternative lifestyles incorporating material on swinging, group marriages, and communes became available. Otto's (1970) edited book, *The Family in Search of a Future*, was partially based on a symposium held at the 1967 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. Prominent behavioral and social scientists contributed, including Albert Ellis (1970), who wrote about group marriage, claiming it has a long history in human experience. (Rubin, 2001, p. 718)

Nevertheless, following a promising beginning, there has been a lack of research on alternative lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners despite its evident existence. Rubin (2001) reviewed this literature and noted—within a discussion of swinging—that a new term demonstrated the presence of lifestyles involving “group sex” (p. 721): *polyamory*. According to Rubin, polyamory focuses more on emotional aspects of relationship and family as compared with the recreational sex characterized by swinging. Finally, he suggested that controversy may account for the lack of research in this area:

Swinging [and polyamory], group marriages, and communes may remain on the periphery of study and tolerance because they threaten the cultural image of what marriage is supposed to be. Other forms of alternative

lifestyles do not attribute the basis for their existence to the concept of multiple sexual partners. However, this avoidance may no longer be possible. The current debate on same-sex marriage has set the stage for the broader discussion over which relationships should be legally recognized. Some ask if legalized polygamy will be the next step after gay marriage. (p. 724)

In addition to a lack of research on lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners, there has been a bias towards monogamy and nuclear family in the academic literature.

Academic Bias Towards Monogamy and Nuclear Family

Related to the lack of research on alternative lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners, there also appears to be some academic bias in the literature towards monogamy and nuclear family as universal ideals. Regarding monogamy, Wiederman (2001) devoted a chapter to the topic of “Infidelity: What Proportion of People Have Had Extradyadic Sex?” in a textbook intended specifically to teach critical research skills. In doing so, the concept of extradyadic relationship was presented as being “infidelity” without acknowledging the possibility of faithful and extradyadic relationships. Also, Treas and Giesen (2000) reviewed the existing research on extramarital sex among couples in the United States (US), stating in their abstract, “Virtually all American couples, married or cohabitating, expect sexual exclusivity of one another” (p. 48). Evidence was cited to support the assertion that 90% of the general public in America considers extramarital sex to be wrong (Smith, 1994). Treas and Giesen also cited evidence that there are laws in the US opposed to extramarital sex; however, the possible connection between the US legal system and the views of the American public was not explored. In any case, assuming that 90% of the American public was opposed to extramarital sex, concluding that “virtually all” couples expect sexual exclusivity has completely marginalized a minority population—whatever the demographics may be.

Regarding nuclear family, the academic definition of family tends to be nuclear despite evidence of other family forms. In a textbook entitled, *Global Perspectives in Family Therapy*, Ng (2003) acknowledged, “Various types of family structures have long existed in different cultures and the reasons for their existence are innumerable” (p. 3).

He later added:

The basic family system across the globe has indeed gone through enormous changes after World War II . . . but in most cases the nuclear family structure remains intact, of course with exceptions. Family researchers have long debated whether the nuclear family is universal. (p. 4)

In a textbook entitled, *Families in Multicultural Perspective*, Ingoldsby (1995) discussed the statistics of Murdock’s (1967) authoritative *Ethnographic Atlas* in which strictly monogamous societies were the minority—keeping in mind that the *Atlas* did not include industrialized societies:

In the most extensive examination of the *Ethnographic Atlas*, Murdock (1967) analyzes marital structure in 1,157 societies. As with all studies in which societies rather than individual marriages are counted, polygyny emerges as the preferred marital structure in the world. Monogamy was the only permitted form of marriage in 14.5% of the cultures, polyandry was the norm in only seven cultures or 0.6%, . . . and polygyny is practiced in 84.8% of the world’s cultures. In 42% of the polygynous societies, it was practiced only occasionally, which means in fewer than 20% of all marriages. (p. 118)

Ingoldsby (1995) added, “Modern societies, heavily influenced by European colonialism, are overwhelmingly monogamous, but many citizens end up practicing ‘serial monogamy’” (p. 118) (i.e., a series of more or less temporary, sequential monogamous relationships). Unfortunately, it is unclear whether European colonialism within contemporary society may have also influenced the authors’ assertion that modern society is “overwhelmingly monogamous.” Furthermore, responding to a proposed

constitutional amendment limiting marriage to heterosexual couples in a manner relevant to this study as well, the American Anthropological Association recently stated:

The results of more than a century of anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through time, provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Rather, anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies. (American Anthropological Association, 2004)

A review of the literature on lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners did not produce statistics regarding their overall prevalence (although there were a few specific estimations regarding the numbers of Fundamentalist Mormon polygamists in particular communities). Nevertheless, the literature demonstrated that these lifestyles do exist and that persons living them—as well as the mental-health practitioners who might serve them—would benefit from further research in this area.

A Review of the Literature on Multiple Sexual Partners

Multiple sexual partnerships were expressed in a number of ways that included overlapping categories of lifestyles and polyamory appeared enmeshed within this network of intimate relationship styles. Therefore, this review covers the following categories: gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals; communes (and communities); extramarital sex, infidelity and open marriage; group marriage; polyandry; polygamy and polygyny; swinging; intimate friendship; and polyamory. Brief definitions of terms are included in Table 1 to guide the reader, followed by a review of the literature related to specific types of multiple relationships.

Table 1

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Commune	Communal living arrangements that may take many forms including different types of sexual restrictions and freedoms
Group Marriage	Marriage involving more than two persons and usually involving communal living arrangements
Intimate Friendship	Friendship in which sexual behavior may be appropriate
Monogamy	Single sexual mate or partner
Nonmonogamy	Not a single sexual mate or partner; typically, multiple sexual mates or partners
Pantagamy	All sexual mates; group marriage in which everyone was married to everyone as practiced by the Oneida community or the Kerista commune
Polyamory	Multiple loves; honest (or faithful) nonmonogamous lifestyle that generally appears to emphasize intimacy
Polyandry	Multiple sexual mates or partners who are men
Polyfidelity	Faithfulness to many; a term attributed to the Kerista commune practicing a form of (closed) group marriage; however, to some degree the term may be confused with polyamory
Polygamy	Multiple sexual mates or partners of either gender
Polygyny	Multiple sexual mates or partners who are women
Swinging	Married couples who exchange partners with other couples (and occasionally singles) for purposes of recreational sex

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Persons

Research with gay, lesbian and bisexual persons included the topics of open relationships, nonmonogamy and polyamory. These studies investigated communication difficulties and psychological adjustment in closed and open relationships among gay men; relationship issues in nonmonogamous or polyamorous relationships among lesbian and bisexual persons; and the relative prevalence of nonmonogamy and concerns with safe sex practices among gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons.

Burton (2001) conducted phenomenological research on long-term relationships among gay men and found that 11 of 19 couples who participated in the study maintained open sexual relationships. He suggested that long-term gay couples often establish their own rules for relationships because there are few cultural role models to follow and a sexually-open relationship may be appropriate. LaSala (2001) discussed communication difficulties in gay primary relationships—both open and closed—associated with extrarelational sex and concluded that different relationship styles may work for some persons better than others and relationships develop over time; therefore mutual agreements require occasional revisiting. Kurdeck and Schmitt (1986) employed a variety of assessments to compare gay men in closed versus open relationships on the following factors: time living together, psychological adjustment, and relationship quality. According to the research findings, the partners in open and closed relationships did not differ in psychological adjustment and were more alike than different in qualities such as relationship quality, a belief in partner changeability, and dyadic attachment. Kalichman et al. (1997) investigated life satisfaction among gay and bisexual males in closed and open relationships; according to the abstract, compared with men practicing

safe sex or men in exclusive relationships, “Men who engaged in unprotected anal intercourse outside of exclusive relationships reported a greater fatalistic outlook, were more dissatisfied with life, and perceived a shorter life for themselves.”

Kassof (1989) conducted phenomenological research (similar to the methodology of this study) in order to explore the experiences of nonmonogamy among lesbians. She described intimacy as an emphasis in the participants’ relationships and concluded, “Lesbian nonmonogamy is a diverse phenomenon which either develops as a conscious, planned alternative to monogamy, or as an unplanned, spontaneous solution to relational conflict and dissatisfaction” (p. 167); in addition, she discussed a variety of relational functions that nonmonogamy appeared to serve and categorized four styles in which it manifested: stable, transitional, self-oriented, and couple-oriented. In brief, lesbian nonmonogamy for Kassof’s participants emphasized intimacy (as polyamory does, see below) and served a variety of relational functions manifesting in stable, transitional, self-oriented, and couple-oriented styles. In *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader*, editors Munson and Stelboum (1999) compiled a series of academic articles related to the experiences and concerns associated with polyamory for lesbian authors, including the clinical perspectives of a counselor/nurse (Labriola, 1999) who discussed different “models of open relationships” (p. 217) that appeared to work better for different individuals. Polyamory (discussed in more detail below) has been defined in a general sense as the practice of honest nonmonogamy—in other words, the persons involved are mutually informed and consenting—and this often involves an emphasis on emotional intimacy rather than sexual relationship. Some basic issues expressed in the compilation, although focused on a lesbian population, appeared relevant to polyamory in general and will be

discussed further in that section. However, it will be noted here that Munson (1999) focused on the issue of safe sex and the potential transmission of HIV and other STDs in open lesbian relationships; according to the evidence, these risks may be significantly reduced in a lesbian population.

Rust (1996) explored the practices of monogamy and polyamory among a sample of 577 women and men; based on her sample, she found that “bisexuals were twice as likely (33.0%) as lesbians and gay men (16.0%) to say that they are dating or casually or seriously involved with one or more people and that they are also open to additional sexual encounters or relationships” (p. 135). She noted that these findings were consistent with Weinberg et al. (1994), who found that gay men or lesbian women were more likely to form monogamous relationships than bisexual persons. She also found that respondents within an international sample that included a variety of sexual orientations and practices were mostly White and highly educated persons (this becomes relevant in the discussion section). Relationship issues associated with polyamory for bisexual persons—including safe sex practices—appeared relevant to polyamory in general and will be discussed in the section on polyamory.

Lifestyles involving multiple sexual partners among gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons presented these conclusions: (a) Gay men in long-term relationships sometimes choose to have sexual partners in addition to their primary partner; (b) relationships among gay men may develop over time so that mutual agreements regarding sexual openness require occasional revisiting; (c) gay partners in closed relationships versus open relationships do not appear to differ in terms of psychological adjustment, and the two groups appeared to be more similar than different in terms of relationship quality, a

belief in partner changeability, and dyadic attachment; (d) experiences of lesbian nonmonogamy for one group of participants emphasized intimacy and served a variety of relational functions that manifested in stable, transitional, self-oriented, and couple-oriented styles; (e) bisexuals may be twice as likely to consider having multiple sexual partners as gay men or lesbians; and (f) safe sex practices were a significant concern of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons although evidence suggested that partners within a lesbian population only may be at significantly less risk. Another lifestyle situation that sometimes involved multiple sexual partners is communes (and communities).

Communes (and Communities)

Smith (1999) conducted an extensive examination of the history and research dealing with communes and communities—meaning essentially the same thing: some form of communal living arrangements. These included the religious communal utopias of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as the Shakers (practicing celibacy), the Oneida community (practicing pantagamy), and the early Mormons (practicing polygyny). Smith’s concept of communes/communities overlapped with polygamy and polygyny; furthermore, it is significant that a small number of Fundamentalist Mormon communities have remained and practice polygyny to the present day (discussed below in the section on polygamy and polygyny). In any case, these religious utopian communities declined as a general rule, and “communes” emerged as a significant social movement in the 1960s and 1970s. One significant commune that emerged during the 1970s was the Kerista commune, which practiced a form of group marriage in which all members were sexually faithful to the group as a closed relationship; consequently, they applied the term “polyfidelity” to describe this lifestyle, i.e., “fidelity with/to many”

(Furchgott, 1993; R. Nearing, personal communication, August 6, 2001).

Communes were diverse in their approaches and employed a variety of approaches to sexual freedom or restriction, including the expectation of monogamous marriages; therefore, these results will apply to a limited extent to lifestyles involving multiple sexual relationships. The main points of Smith's (1999) summary were: Communes vary a great deal; communal living was a temporary episode for many communalists during the 60s and 70s; some communes were more congruent with marriage and family life—secular communes were related to marital dissolution whereas religious communes appeared to strengthen marriages (referring to Zablocki, 1980); and there was a higher likelihood that parents with young children would stay in communes where family life was held as a central concern (referring to Ferrar, 1982). Communes most likely to survive included some of the following factors: religiosity; commitment mechanisms; controlled access and admission; and limited sexual freedom (referring to Kanter, 1972, and Zablocki, 1980), as well as financial abundance (referring to Mowery, 1978) and communal social structures involving “layered loyalties” (referring to Etzioni, 1996). Smith (1999) also concluded,

Intimate relationships are no longer only relegated to the nuclear family. By intimate, I do not mean solely sexual relationships, but intimate in a very broad sense. Obviously, sexual relationships outside of one's marriage are destructive. Zablocki's (1980) findings are very clear on that issue, but spouses are not the only people we can rely on to have close nonsexual relationships. (p. 129)

Smith's assertion that extramarital relationships are obviously destructive marginalized evidence that nonmonogamy had no direct effects—positive or negative—on the level of success of urban communes (Cornfield, 1983) in a study involving 32 households researched for a period of 7 years; therefore, this particular conclusion would

benefit from further questioning.

Communes (also known as communities) presented some conclusions relevant to multiple sexual partners: (a) Communes most likely to survive may include some of the following factors: religiosity, commitment mechanisms, controlled access and admission, *limited sexual freedom*, financial abundance, and “layered loyalties” within the commune’s social structure; and (b) the role of nonmonogamy in communal success presented ambiguous results and opinions and thus remains a topic of debate.

Extramarital Sex, Infidelity, and Open Marriage

There have been several studies regarding extramarital sex, and some were presented within a context of infidelity; however, as discussed earlier regarding an academic bias toward monogamy, some researchers have assumed that extramarital (or nonmonogamous) sexual relationships are essentially the same as infidelity. This assumption has repeatedly ignored potential for “open” marriage (or relationship).

Regarding the research on infidelity, the findings of Treas and Giesen (2000) were consistent with the existing literature insofar as personal values, sexual opportunities, and quality of the marital relationship appeared to be likely determinants of “infidelity.” In addition, according to their research, there appeared to be a higher likelihood of “infidelity” among those with stronger social interests, more permissive sexual values, lower subjective satisfaction with their union, weaker network ties to partner, and greater sexual opportunities. Because it was assumed that “virtually all” couples are monogamous, “infidelity” and “extramarital sex” were viewed as synonymous in their methodology: “Respondents marked whether they have ever had sex with someone other than their husband or wife while they were married” (p. 51).

Therefore, the findings of Treas and Giesen—including their affirmation of previous research conducted in a similar manner— would more accurately be applied to any persons with extramarital partners whether these partners were kept in secret or approved by both marital (and assumed heterosexual) partners in an open form of marriage.

Raines (2000) conducted a quantitative study to explore whether an avoidant attachment style is associated with nonmonogamous behavior. The topic of “infidelity” was not raised literally; however, the study measured the number of primary relationships in which the subject had secret sexual relationships with someone other than her or his primary partner within two consecutive primary relationships. There was a significant association between couple dissatisfaction in the second of two relationships and level of nonmonogamous behavior in both relationships. However, contrary to expectations, there was not a significant association between an avoidant attachment style and level of (secret) nonmonogamous behavior.

Immerman and Mackey (1999) conducted research presented within the broad context of STDs and multiple sexual partners; however, this, too, confounded infidelity with extramarital or multiple-partnered sex. Unfortunately, the context of multiple sexual partners in particular situations—perhaps involving infidelity and perhaps otherwise— was not explored. The researchers assumed for their study that

the most likely available mechanism for the acquisition of an STD by an individual is to be infected through a sexual relationship with a partner who, in turn, must have had sex with at least one other person who passed on the infection. That is, the existence of a sexually transmitted disease necessitates multiple partners on the part of someone. (p. 5)

The researchers analyzed various public records in the United States, and the results indicated that four negative social factors—less education, greater infant

morbidity, greater illegitimacy, and more violent crime—were associated with higher reported levels of STDs. For Immerman and Mackey (1999), in addition to these negative social factors, the implied “infidelity” associated with STDs presented a dilemma for the potential fathers, in particular with regard to genetic investment. Their sex-biased perspective was revealed in the following statement:

Although a man’s infidelity may be of stern concern to a wife, a woman’s infidelity is crucial to the husband. Said a little differently, the man’s physical act of infidelity, in and of itself, has a limited cost to the woman. But, on the flip side, the woman’s infidelity could result in her cuckolded husband nurturing and investing in another man’s child: another man’s genetic investment. (p. 11)

Immerman and Mackey (1999) proposed that multiple sexual partners within a community will result in negative consequences that include the loss of “fathers.” The argument proceeded as follows:

First, elevated levels of multiple sexual partners within a community signal an increase in sexually transmitted diseases within that community which increase the susceptibility of infants to a myriad of diseases that, in turn, lower their chances of longevity. Second, elevated levels of multiple sexual partners signal a lack of “husbands” and “fathers” within a community. And third, a lack of “husbands” and “fathers” will increase the proportion of illegitimacy and violence within the community, and will result in poorer school adjustment on the part of fatherless children. (p. 13)

Given the presumptuous structure of their argument, their assertions are open to question. In any case, the immediate results of their analysis indicated that four negative social factors—less education, greater infant morbidity, greater illegitimacy, and more violent crime—were associated with higher reported levels of STDs.

Extramarital relationships qualify as infidelity within the context of monogamous marriage vows; however, some qualify as “open marriage.” O’Neill and O’Neill (1972) critiqued the institution of traditional marriage and went further to describe, with personal

case examples, an emerging relationship form known as “open marriage,” and suggested that rigid roles and scripts focused on gender were destructive to the health and growth of a marital relationship. According to the O’Neills,

Open marriage is looking at your life together as a cooperative venture, in which the needs of each can be fulfilled without an over-riding dependency that cripples the other’s self-expression. Love can then be understood as a sharing of one another’s independent growth rather than as a possessive curtailment of growth. (p. 52)

Others have discussed open marriage (e.g., Duberman, 1974; Mazur, 1973; Smith & Smith, 1974) in order to challenge mainstream assumptions regarding monogamy and marriage. Unfortunately, there was no academic research in the literature relating specifically to open marriage, although there has been research involving extramarital sex. Furthermore, some research mentioned open marriage within the larger context of “alternative lifestyles” (as discussed in the section on mental-health practice with multiple sexual partners in general).

Exploring extramarital sex, infidelity, and open marriage presented the following conclusions: (a) Extramarital sex (or nonmonogamy in general) has been assumed by some researchers to be the same as infidelity; (b) personal values, sexual opportunities and the marital relationship may be likely determinants of extramarital sex; (c) there may be a higher likelihood of extramarital sex among those with stronger social interests, more permissive sexual values, lower subjective satisfaction with their union, weaker network ties to partner, and greater sexual opportunities; (d) there may be a significant association between couple dissatisfaction in the second of two relationships and level of secret nonmonogamous behavior in both relationships; (e) evidence does not suggest a significant association between an avoidant attachment style and level of secret nonmonogamous behavior; (f) four negative social factors—less education, more infant

morbidity, more illegitimacy, and more violent crime—appear associated with higher reported levels of STDs; and (g) the assertion that rigid gender roles are destructive to relationship growth may benefit from research.

Group Marriage

In a literal sense, the term “group marriage” may include “polygamy,” “polyandry,” and “polygyny” (and other constructs, such as “polyfidelity”); nevertheless, they appear in the literature as different branches of a larger tree and the topics are discussed in different sections. “Group marriage” essentially means a marriage involving more than two persons that usually includes “economic, emotional, housing, and child care relationships” (Rubin, 2001, p. 717). The topic of group marriage overlaps to some degree with communes of a specific nature; e.g., “The Oneida Community found monogamy restricting and practiced pantagamy . . . where every woman is considered the wife of every man and every man is considered the husband of every woman” (Smith, 1999, p. 58). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of group marriage being discussed here gained academic exposure in the late 1960s and 1970s and has often been associated with the larger topic of “alternative relationships.”

Some researchers have approached the topic of group marriage specifically. Ramey (1972) conducted research to measure levels of success in group marriages and found that people over the age of 30 were more often involved in successful groups; therefore, he suggested that older individuals may be more mature in general and better at dealing with the complex issues that arise with multiple intimate relationships. He also suggested that alternative lifestyles may be arranged in order of complexity (with group marriage being the most complex as mentioned previously). Salsberg (1973) proposed

that problems associated with group marriage may be too difficult for most people to reconcile. Constantine et al. (1973) proposed that group marriage may be fulfilling for some and inappropriate for others, and counselors serving persons who live within a group marriage may be helpful in facilitating communication among the group members and encouraging a productive group process with the skills for decision making.

The following conclusions were presented in this research: (a) Evidence suggested that a group marriage presents complex issues for its members that may be too difficult for most people to deal with; (b) older individuals who are presumably more mature may be more successful in a group marriage; and (c) counselors serving persons within a group marriage may be helpful in facilitating communication and encouraging productive group process and decision making.

Polyandry

Polyandry appeared rarely as a recorded form of relationship among human societies (0.6% of nonindustrialized societies according to Murdock, 1967), and the nature of polyandry has been a topic of theoretical debate and research with mixed results. The discussion has usually focused on the practice of polyandry in Tibetan society and/or has referred to inclusive fitness theory (applied within the field of evolutionary biology); and potential conclusions are scarce and questionable although there is some evidence that polyandrous tendencies may be more prevalent in human society than existing ethnographies have recorded (Hrdy, 2003). Trevithick (1997) provided a convincing assessment of the current discussion on polyandry, stating:

It is neither androcentric nor ethnocentric to point out that polyandry is a remarkably rare phenomenon, and that monandrous situations appear to be preferred. Levine writes that “these cases of polyandry should make clear how narrowly we have framed questions about male concerns in sexuality

and parenthood.” (Levine, 1987:284) I would rather say that the discussion thus far illustrates how narrowly we have framed questions bearing on general human tendencies. If, as Cassidy and Lee would have it—and I concur—polyandrous societies should be regarded as “examples of human flexibility,” (1989:8) they should also be set along side the great mass of human animals for whom polyandry is not an option, and examined for evidence of what appears thus far to be an overwhelming preference for monandry. (pp. 174-175)

The primary conclusion from the research on polyandry was that the topic of polyandry and its rare manifestations in human societies would benefit from further research.

Polygamy and Polygyny

In a strict sense, the research referring to polygamy involved the more specific category of polygyny; in other words, multiple women (or wives). As described in the glossary of terms (see Table 1), polygamy (multiple mates or marital partners) includes polyandry and polygyny (multiple men and women, respectively); however, it appeared that the concept of polygamy has been assumed to be polygyny at least in part due to the rarity of (human) polyandry. For this reason, the following discussion will move back and forth between the terms polygamy and polygyny—usually referring to polygamy—with the understanding that the more specific term would be polygyny.

There was a significant body of international research on the topics of polygamy and polygyny; however, because this is a culture-specific study, this review was limited to research that appeared the most relevant to culture in the United States. The following categories are discussed below: polygamy in Fundamentalist Mormon communities; wife abuse and polygamy among Muslim women in America; “informal polygamy” in which a man becomes partnered with two or more women who bear him children; and the effects of polygamy on children.

Altman and Ginat (1996) conducted an extensive review of the history and

literature on polygamy (specified in this form as polygyny) as practiced within Fundamentalist Mormon communities. They conducted research involving 26 polygynous families over a 5-year period. From a transactional perspective, the researchers examined the experiences of the participants, including the early stages of relationships, home environments of plural families, managing everyday life, and different types of relationships. A significant result of this examination was an abundance of stressors in polygynous marriage:

Conflict, adjustment, compromise, negotiation, competition, and jealousy are frequent in wives' relationships with one another and with their husband. Stresses and strains arise with respect to children, budgets and finances, home furnishings and living arrangements, celebrations, the management of homes, jealousies about one another's relationship with their common husband, and so on. (p. 436)

In addition to stressors arising closer to home, there were stressors that related to dealing with mainstream culture and society as well as the Mormon (or LDS) Church which abolished polygamy in 1890. As a result of these stressors, "Many participants described life in a plural marriage as an unending struggle; every day is a challenge, and one never completely resolves the conflicts, jealousies, and stresses that inevitably arise" (Altman & Ginat, 1996, p. 437). They concluded that some initial preconceptions were unfounded and that, regardless of its stressors, Fundamentalist Mormon polygyny presented a lifestyle that needed research and open-mindedness:

In spite of the problems they face, some of these new forms of close relationships—including plural families among contemporary Mormon fundamentalists—are here to stay in American and Western society. They are not likely to "go away"; they are not fads or fancies; they are not aberrations. They will be part of the family life scene well into the future.

We must therefore learn about them, learn from them, and even help people live the lifestyle of their choice. Doing so increases the probability that participants in emerging forms of close relationships will contribute to the well-being and quality of life in American society at large. (p. 444)

The literature did not present studies dealing with the general topic of polygamy among Muslims in America; however, Hassouneh-Phillips (2001) conducted qualitative research dealing with wife abuse and polygamy among Muslim women in America (noting that Muslims refer to their form of polygamy as “polygyny”). In doing so, she found that abuse permeated the complexity of their relationships:

Experiences of polygamy in this sample of American Muslim women were intertwined with abuse. All women reported feeling that they were treated unfairly in comparison with other wives, and all women perceived this as emotional abuse and religious failure on the part of the husbands. Also significant was the presence of the cowives, who sometimes were witnesses to abuse by husbands and sometimes acted as perpetrators themselves. (p. 746)

In addition, Hassouneh-Phillips (2001) stated that these particular experiences involved a form of polygamy being practiced unfairly and in a manner outside of proper Muslim conduct; nevertheless, in the experience of some women, “polygamy may be perceived by wives as abusive in and of itself” (p. 746). She suggested further research would be helpful to assess potential risk factors for wife abuse associated with polygamous versus monogamous marriages.

Rivett and Street (1993) coined the term “informal polygamy” and stated, “We use this term to describe the one man-two women scenario where the man has regular emotional, and often practical and economic, commitment to two families which include his children by two different women” (p. 71). Based on their clinical experience that involved assumptions and mistakes made serving clients within an informal polygamous relationship, they stated:

These cases have made us more sensitive to the multiplicity of family structures that exist within Western societies. We have also become more aware that when helping such families, family therapists need to be wary of stereotypes and popular assumptions, and to be critical of their own hypotheses about such structures and their implications. (p. 78)

Other research appeared to be relevant to the concept of informal polygamy, although the researchers did not apply this term. Scott (1976, 1986) conducted research on an emerging polygamous family form among Black Americans; he described this as the latter case below:

Polygamous families may be formed in a number of ways: One style of polygamous family is a female-headed family combined with a second female-headed family, with the two families sharing the never-married father of their children between them. Another style is for a legally married man and an unmarried female to begin an extramarital courtship which eventually grows into a full-fledged familial relationship with children and subsequent regular visitation and financial support patterns. In this latter type of polygamous family formation, the consensual “wife” is often a never-married mother living independently who began as a teenage parent and for various social, sexual and economic reasons became sexually involved with a married man and came to the point of sharing him with his legal wife on a regular and continuing basis. (Scott, 1986, p. 174)

According to Semaj (1982), a declining sex ratio within the Black population was a crisis for the practice of monogamy, i.e., “It has become necessary to evaluate various family lifestyles since it is impossible for every Black woman to enter into a ‘monogamous’ relationship [with a Black man]” (p. 29); and, based on a relationship survey administered to Black men and women, she concluded that overt sharing relationships may be an emerging secondary option for Black families. On the other hand, for the participants in Scott’s (1986) research, “*drifting into polygamy* has been for these women . . . a forced choice” (p. 177). The research on Black polygamous family formation was relatively specific in its culture and context; nevertheless, it emphasized questions about alternative family forms as well as polygyny and its potential relationship with the oppression of women.

Elbedour et al. (2002) conducted an extensive review of the literature—including international research—regarding the effects of polygamy on children. (Although this

overlapped significantly with international cultures, the findings appeared relevant here.) Some evidence suggested stressors associated with polygamy are detrimental to a child's development; other evidence suggested more role models have a positive effect on their development. Elbedour concluded, "The divide between advocates and opponents of polygamy has been exacerbated by the fact that findings from the few empirical investigations on the effect of polygamy on children have been mixed" (p. 264). In addition, researchers need to be culturally sensitive to specific forms of polygamy: "Although the practice of polygamy itself tends to be similar across cultures, it appears that the function it serves, the attitudes toward it, and the value that society attaches to it will determine its impact on children" (p. 267).

The following conclusions were presented in the research on polygamy and polygyny: (a) polygamy has sometimes been confused with polygyny; (b) polygyny among Mormon fundamentalists appeared to be associated with an abundance of stressors involving relationships and mainstream culture and society; (c) abuse appeared to permeate the polygynous relationships of Muslim women who were being abused by their husbands; (d) further research would be helpful to assess potential risk factors for wife abuse or other oppression of women associated with polygynous versus monogamous marriages; (e) evidence suggested that functions, attitudes, and values associated with polygyny within a given society will influence its effect on children; and (f) researchers have expressed the need for cultural sensitivity with polygynous or polygamous family forms as well as alternative lifestyles in general.

Swinging

“Swinging” is an alternative lifestyle generally involving couples that became increasingly visible in the United States following the progressive decade of the 1960s (Mazur, 1973). Jenks (1998) reviewed the literature on swinging and defined the lifestyle as “married couples exchanging partners solely for sexual purposes” (p. 507); although this definition simplifies a complex culture, it will be sufficient for these purposes. Swinging was associated with polyamory by different authors, although the nature of this association has been a matter of disagreement (this will be discussed in the section on polyamory). The majority of swingers appeared to be White, middle- or upper-class, and above average in education and income. “Swingers were raised in religious homes but, somewhere along the path to adulthood, a majority gave up their religion” (p. 509). Difficulties associated with swinging included fears of STDs, issues in finding people, jealousy, anxiety, fear about public exposure, and time factors. Motivations for swinging included a variety of sexual experiences, pleasure or excitement, and the ability to meet others. According to some research, swingers rated their marriages to be happier and more fulfilling than those of couples in monogamous marriages (Gilmartin, 1975). Duckworth and Levitt (1985) conducted research with a localized group of swingers that suggested a pronounced degree of serious interpersonal difficulties; however, Murstein et al. (1985) conducted research with ex-swingers and found no evidence of particular distress. The evidence was scarce, and further research is needed. Jenks (1998) concluded, “Although many people in our society disapprove of this behavior and believe that swingers are very unhappy and have unsatisfactory marriages there is no evidence for such a claim” (p. 519); furthermore, he agreed with the conclusion of Thio (1988)

made a decade earlier:

We may conclude that swinging is like a two-edged sword—it may swing in the direction of positive consequences or in the opposite direction of negative consequences. The nature of the consequences depends more on the individual who uses the sword than on the sword itself. (p. 270)

The following conclusions were presented on swinging: (a) difficulties associated with swinging may include fear of STDs, finding people, jealousy, anxiety, fear about public exposure, and time factors; (b) motivations for swinging may include a variety of sexual experiences, pleasure or excitement, and the ability to meet others; (c) swingers may rate their marriages as happier and more fulfilling than couples in monogamous marriages; and (d) swinging may be like a two-edged sword that brings positive or negative consequences based on the particular circumstances.

Intimate Friendship

The concept of Intimate Friendship appeared especially significant to the topic of polyamory (the following section). Ramey (1975) applied the term “intimate friendship” and administered questionnaires to 380 participants. The questionnaire gathered a variety including demographics, information related to family, relationships, and the role of intimate friendships in their lives. Participants were mostly White and middle- or upper-class, and 69% of the men and 43% of the women had completed 4 or more years of college. According to Ramey (1975):

Intimate Friendship (IF): otherwise traditional friendship in which sexual intimacy is considered appropriate behavior; IF appears to be an outgrowth of practicing sexually open marriage over an extended period of time. Such behavior appears to combine the positive aspects of friendship with sexual activity that would otherwise be covert non-consensual adultery. Participants believe IF to be more rewarding, more honest, and a distinct improvement over their previous lifestyles. Positive and negative aspects of this practice are examined, as well as the ways in which it differs from swinging. (p. 515)

There was one essential conclusion resulting from this research: A new lifestyle appeared to emerge in American society in the 1970s involving multiple sexual relationships that emphasized friendship and intimacy and appeared to differ from swinging in significant respects. In addition, intimate friendship bears striking similarity to a lifestyle—at that time yet to emerge or be labeled—known as polyamory.

Polyamory

Polyamory was the focus of this study; therefore, the following discussion explores its origin and development before returning to the literature.

Background

The term “polyamory,” loosely translated as “many loves” (with a mixture of Greek and Latin roots) has an uncertain beginning based solely on anecdotal evidence. Anapol (1997) attributed the term to Morning Glory Zell who used the phrase “polyamorous lifestyle” in an article discussing “Open Relationships as a Conscious and Loving Lifestyle” published in 1990 in *Green Egg Magazine*. According to an online encyclopedia, “[Polyamory] has been independently coined by several people; one instance was Jennifer Wesp, who created the Usenet newsgroup alt.polyamory in 1992. However, the term has been reported in occasional use in the 1960s” (Wikipedia.org, 2004). Although the development of polyamory as a social movement remains unclear, it appeared that its roots may lie in the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s—perhaps being labeled intimate friendships in the 1970s and then responsible nonmonogamy in the 1980s—and that the term polyamory emerged into popular view in the early 1990s.

Polyamory has often been described as a lifestyle of multiple sexual relationships maintained in an honest and responsible manner and emphasizing intimacy—however,

the term was also applied in different ways by a variety of popular authors. The Internet has been a popular source for material on polyamory, and a popular online “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) document provided an inclusive definition of polyamory that rejects restrictive definitions and accepts the apparent social truth:

Polyamory means “loving more than one.” This love may be sexual, emotional, spiritual, or any combination thereof, according to the desires and agreements of the individuals involved, but you needn't wear yourself out trying to figure out ways to fit fondness for apple pie, or filial piety, or a passion for the Saint Paul Saints baseball club into it. “Polyamorous” is also used as a descriptive term by people who are open to more than one relationship even if they are not currently involved in more than one. (Heck, some are involved in less than one.) Some people think the definition is a bit loose, but it's got to be fairly roomy to fit the wide range of poly arrangements out there. (alt.polyamory, 1997, Section 2: What's polyamory, then?)

Because of the variety of ways in which people have applied the term polyamory, there appeared to be disagreement about its relationship with swinging.

Do You Swing?

Some have drawn a distinction between polyamory and swinging because polyamory emphasizes intimacy whereas swinging emphasizes sex (e.g., Anapol, 1997); however, “swinging vs. polyamory” paints too simple a picture. Anapol (1997) discussed the differences between them while acknowledging, “There is some overlap” (p. 10). Munson and Stelboun (1999) never mentioned swinging, but they did include “casual sexual involvement” (p. 2) in their definition of polyamory. Furthermore, Rust (1996) categorized swinging as a rare “polyamorous relational form” (p. 139). Despite some implied difference between swinging and polyamory, the precise nature of the relationship between them remains ambiguous. Another unclear relationship appeared between polyamory and polyfidelity.

Polyfidelity

The term “polyfidelity” has been attributed to the Kerista commune in San Francisco during the 1970s. The term has become increasingly popular since the publication of *The New Faithful: A Polyfidelity Primer* by Ryam Nearing (1989). Nearing also intended the term to signify a group marriage where the partners agree to have sexual relationships only within the marriage. For some, its meaning has expanded to mean polyamory. According to Anapol (1997):

Polyfidelity 1) [original usage] a lovestyle in which three or more partners who are all primary with each other agree to be sexual only within their group . . . 2) [common usage] Polyamory, Responsible nonmonogamy. (p. 179)

Perhaps the abbreviated term “poly” has something to do with the confused overlap in meaning as both polyamory and polyfidelity may both be shortened to poly. Time will demonstrate the development of these terms and their applied meanings.

The Internet and the Emergence of Polyamory

Anapol (1997) has been an advocate of “responsible nonmonogamy” since the early 1980s, before the term “polyamory” had emerged; according to her, the growth of the Internet has been a significant factor in the growth of the underlying movement behind the contemporary lifestyle known as polyamory:

The advent of accessible desktop publishing in the early ‘80’s led to the publication of Love Without Limits [Anapol (1992)] . . . PEP [Poly-fidelitous Educational Productions, founded by Nearing (1992)] had made similar strides during this time, and the growth of these two organizations along with the expansion of the Internet gave rise to the re-emergence of today’s Polyamory Movement. (p. 98)

Another example suggests the Internet’s influence for those living a polyamorous lifestyle: *Loving More Magazine* has been a popular periodical of the polyamorous

community in the United States (and to a lesser extent internationally) that maintains a personal ads section as well as a website to display them. As a limited example, 56 ads were placed in the personals section of issue #23 (Fall 2000), and 37 ads (66%) included an email address—a significant percentage of polyamorous persons placing ads. According to Cloud (1999), author of an article of *Time Magazine*, as many as 250 polyamory support groups may exist—available mainly through the Internet.

Regarding the emergence of polyamory as a significant social phenomenon, “Polyamory is under consideration for the next edition of the Oxford English Dictionary” according to an anonymous source at OEDonline (personal email communication, March 18, 2003). Furthermore, the academic journal *Sexualities* recently advertised for contributors for a special issue on polyamory (Erel et al., 2003).

The Literature on Polyamory

There are different approaches to the concept of polyamory in the literature. Although some authors have rejected casual sex as a form of polyamory, Munson and Stelboum (1999) stated that “the term ‘polyamory’ includes many different relationship styles, such as polyfidelity or group marriage; primary relationships open to secondary affairs; and casual sexual involvement with two or more people” (p. 2). Rust (1996) critically interpreted the phenomenon behind the term:

Once we have rejected the cultural idealization of monogamy in favor of an approach that values a variety of relational forms, the term nonmonogamy no longer seems appropriate because of the negative connotations implicit in defining something in terms of what it is not rather than what it is. In recent years, the term polyamory has begun to replace nonmonogamy among individuals who wish to linguistically symbolize their rejection of monogamy as the only ideal form of relating. (p. 132)

Rothblum (1999) applied further critical examination and questioned whether

lesbian polyamorous relationships ought to be defined in sexual terms, because sexuality and sexual relationship styles have historically been gender-biased concepts:

Sexual relationships are so influenced by patriarchal definitions that we cannot truly conceive of women relating in ways that feel authentic to us. This is an area of tremendous power, and one in which we do not even know what our questions are, let alone our solutions. (p. 82)

Given diverse perspectives, the literature on polyamory presented many definitions as well as the potential for many more in the future. It must be noted here that Anapol's (1997) work was not published in the academic literature. However, she was involved in the discussion of polyamory since its early beginnings and received a PhD in clinical psychology; therefore, her views have been included here. Anapol (2001) reflected with apparent frustration:

There is no such thing as polyamory. No such thing as monogamy either. No such thing as marriage. These are all concepts, ideas, fictions created by the mind.

A polyamorous person is really nothing more than a person who labels him or herself polyamorous. It may not even have anything to do with their behavior or their relationships. (p. 8)

There has been limited research in the area of polyamory. The variety of articles compiled by Munson and Stelboum (1999) presented valuable dialogue and exploration of the concepts and experiences of polyamory among lesbians; common perspectives emphasized intimacy, honesty, communication, self-exploration and the questioning of social norms. Rust (1996) discussed results from an ongoing, international research project that included the topic of polyamory and potential relationship issues for bisexuals. She described relationship issues that appeared relevant to polyamory in general, namely, different forms of polyamory, the importance of honest communication and establishing ground rules or agreements, and issues relating to safe sex, social disclosure, and biases in mainstream culture toward monogamy. Rust (1996) concluded:

Whatever relational forms bisexuals choose, they often need special support from mental health professionals because of the lack of support they receive elsewhere. . . .

It is, therefore, vital that mental health professionals examine their own stereotypes about bisexuality, question cultural beliefs about relational maturity and morality, and familiarize themselves with the issues that arise in polyamorous relationships so that they can provide bisexuals with the kinds of support and guidance that they are unlikely to find elsewhere. (p. 145)

Although Rust's statement involved polyamory among bisexual persons, the conclusions apply as strongly to polyamorous persons in general. Mental-health professionals—and the polyamorous clients who might be served by them—would benefit from a familiarity with polyamory and its issues. Furthermore, this point was made in recent years at professional conferences (Davidson, 2002; Weitzman, 1999).

A Phenomenology of Polyamorous Persons

Given a lack of research on polyamory and the need for multicultural awareness, this topic presented a good area for study; however, given diverse perspectives on the subject, questions remained regarding an applied definition of polyamory. Weitzman (1999) suggested that further research in this area “might be facilitated by a qualitative study in which polyamorous individuals are interviewed in-depth, so that they may convey to therapists in their own words what their lifestyles and needs are today” (Future research and conclusions, para. 1). Accordingly, this study explored polyamory from a phenomenological paradigm in order that mental-health professionals may become better acquainted with polyamory through the eyes of persons who identified as polyamorous.

The question guiding this exploration was: “What are the experiences and meanings of polyamory for polyamorous persons?” By employing a broad research question, I intended to approach the essential experiences and meanings associated with

polyamory for the participants as directly as possible. On the other hand, the broad question was applied in a localized geographic region—the Salt Lake City metropolitan area—and so the actual question was, more specifically, “What are the experiences and meanings of polyamory for polyamorous persons who live in the Salt Lake City metropolitan area?” The purpose of the research was to help inform the mental-health profession about this cultural minority, thereby improving multicultural awareness and the quality of mental-health services provided to polyamorous clients.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods were the most appropriate for exploring personal experiences and meanings associated with living a polyamorous lifestyle because “qualitative research aims to understand and explain participant meaning” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200). Qualitative methods provide rich and emergent results that typically involve a relatively small sample of participants; the results are not intended to be generalizable to other populations (Morrow & Smith, 2000; Patton, 1990). Qualitative researchers may proceed from many different paradigms depending on the nature of their studies. For this study, *phenomenology* was chosen as an appropriate research paradigm.

Research Paradigm: Phenomenology

Phenomenology has its more recent roots with the philosophy of Husserl in the early 20th century; however, the term “phenomenology” had been used earlier by Hegel and Kant, and a string of related ideas traces back through the philosophical dialogue as far as Descartes: “What was said to possess objective reality existed only through representation in the mind; thus Descartes . . . reasoned that objective reality is in truth subjective reality” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 44). The philosophy of Descartes influenced Husserl, who proposed that subjective experience presented the grounding of everything we claim to know. For Husserl, “Phenomena [of experience] are the building blocks of

human science and the basis for all knowledge. Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for an investigation” (Moustakas, p. 26). Husserl’s ideas were developed at length by other philosophers, notably Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Kvale, 1996; Spiegelberg, 1982). As defined succinctly by Marshall and Rossman (1999), “Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview” (p. 112).

Phenomenology is concerned with subjective experiences and meanings; therefore, it is an appropriate paradigm for an exploration of the lived experiences and meanings of polyamory as considered from the perspectives of polyamorous persons. Phenomenology is also appropriate for this study because it is compatible with the diversity of subjectivities involved in multiculturalism. A growing awareness of the importance of multicultural factors has led some mental-health practitioners to “a postmodern conceptualization of psychological experience and functioning that recognizes the existence of multiple belief systems and perspectives and attends to the role of cultural factors in shaping phenomenology” (Fuentes et al., 2001, p. 3).

In using a phenomenological paradigm, a researcher inspects her or his personal perspectives to aid in the suspension of judgment (also known as “epoché”) and reflects on personal bias throughout the research. Then the researcher explores and describes the essential phenomenon as experienced by the participants through a process of analyzing meaningful participant statements. Phenomenology also assumes the “intentionality of consciousness,” wherein the reality of any perceived experience always relates to one’s consciousness of it; therefore, even common experiences present diverse meanings.

Research Design

A phenomenological perspective can mean *either* or *both* (1) a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which case one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself) or (2) a methodological mandate to actually experience the phenomenon being investigated (in which case participant observation would be necessary). (Patton, 1990, p. 70)

Patton's (1990) second approach involving more direct experience of the phenomenon was impractical here given the intimate nature of the study; therefore, the primary focus of the research was on how research participants experienced and interpreted the experience of polyamory. The research design was developed to some degree during the research process, using an emergent design:

A qualitative design needs to remain sufficiently open and flexible to permit exploration of whatever the phenomenon under study offers for inquiry. Qualitative designs continue to be *emergent* even after data collection begins. The degree of flexibility and openness is, however, also a matter of great variation among designs. (Patton, 1990, p. 196)

Following an emergent design involved being sensitive to potential opportunities during the research to gain valuable knowledge through enhancements to the proposed approach, such as conducting additional interviews as necessary.

Researcher as Instrument

Given the subjective nature of phenomenological research (and qualitative research in general), as the researcher, I played a major role in the process and the form of its results. With this in mind, my background and biases become an important consideration. I had received a bachelor's degree in philosophy and developed a penchant for phenomenology. I was deeply impacted by the "radical empiricism" of William James (1842-1910) wherein "the ultimate stuff of reality (or at least all knowable

reality) is pure experience” (Sprigge, 1995, p. 425), a philosophical doctrine associated with the later development of phenomenology. I agree with James’ position that “concepts can only provide a static picture of a world that is essentially dynamic” (Sprigge, 1995, p. 425). Speaking as a postmodern radical empiricist, I believe that differences in perspective are associated with differences in reality. I also believe that different phenomenological realities possess validity, although they may conflict or appear mutually exclusive; following from this perspective, multiculturalism and diversity are important issues for me.

As the researcher, I made three major methodological assumptions. First, a phenomenological paradigm required “the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience*” (Patton, 1990, p. 70); in other words, I assumed there would be one or more essential meanings associated with polyamory that would be shared among the participants’ experiences, to some degree. Second, I assumed that the participants presented their actual experiences and meanings rather than fabrications. Third, I assumed that the phenomenon is dynamic; therefore, I expected that the results of this brief period of research would provide snapshot descriptions of polyamory within the changing lives of the participants (and this brought an expectation that follow-up interviews would be valuable). In addition to methodological assumptions, I possessed personal biases that are discussed below in the “*epoche*” sections.

Self-reflexivity is a primary concern in doing qualitative research because the researcher is so closely involved in the research process and outcome. Subjectivity is unavoidable; indeed, subjectivity makes qualitative research possible and may be employed in particular ways to further enhance it (e.g., heuristic inquiry; Patton, 1990).

Nevertheless, appropriate awareness and management of one's subjectivity is important. I employed three strategies to manage my subjectivity: (a) I maintained a self-reflective/analytic journal during the research process that was verified by the chair of my thesis committee. This journal tracked my subjective experience of the research process and helped to keep me mindful of it. (b) Five peer researchers—in this case, other graduate students performing research in my department at the university—provided me with feedback on regular occasions for at least a few months during the research process; two of them were available throughout the entire research process. In doing so, the material I shared included only information that did not threaten the confidentiality of research participants. (c) Before beginning the research, I carefully considered my own perspective on polyamory as a reflective essay. This introspection follows as it was written in August of 2001. It is followed by a brief reflection written in December of 2003 as the research process ended and the writing of the thesis approached its closing. The practice of epoche was applied throughout the analysis and was not limited to these essays; however, these essays provide significant brackets of perspective in the process.

Epoche: August 2001

Epoche. "Withholding" of assent and dissent, i.e. suspension of judgment. Ancient skepticism combined a thesis, "There is no knowledge," with a prescription, "Practice epoche." The one leads to the other via a view shared by some non-skeptics that it is stupid to assent to what you do not know. (Kirwan, 1995, p. 248)

In conducting phenomenological research, inspecting the researcher's own experiences and perspectives facilitates the suspension or "withholding" of judgment. Although I have never maintained a polyamorous lifestyle, I still possess my own perspectives regarding polyamory. I expect that polyamorous relational forms are

generally more egalitarian, more diverse, and more difficult than monogamous ones.

Also, I am inclined to believe that human culture has developed restrictive and patriarchal mechanisms for regulating sexual behavior associated with the biological and cultural evolution of our uniquely adaptive form of intelligence and our pronounced tendencies for violence (similar, for example, to the views of Wrangham and Peterson, 1996).

I feel that monogamy is appropriate for some, if not many—including myself—and I support it as a choice; however, I also affirm diversity and oppose any oppressive enforcement of monogamy. While reading West (1996), I found myself identifying with the strong words of one polyfidelitous lesbian, “Seneca,” whose perspective applies to polyamory as much as polyfidelity (whatever the difference here may be):

For me, the great value of polyfidelity is that polyfidelity shouts out for civil liberties, for basic human rights . . . I support no system of organized violence, of which enforced monogamy is one. Monogamy often sets the stage for murderous criminal jealousies against lovers. The monogamous mentality has led to ongoing domestic violence toward wives and daughters even suspected of off-site sex. Meanwhile, “crimes against monogamy” are punished by statute and via monogamous judges and juries. (West, 1996, p. 39)

On some level, I resonate with polyamory as a diverse-oriented and expansive approach to relationships and sexuality. However, in my practical ignorance, a naïve potential for idealizing polyamory exists, and this will be proactively avoided in the research process through regular consideration of alternative explanations and feedback from my thesis committee and peer researchers.

Epoche: January 2004

My perspective on polyamory has not changed since August 2001 with one significant exception—I no longer feel that monogamy is the only appropriate choice for me. The future may bring many things and exploring the lives of polyamorous persons

has caused me to question the nature of my own “monogamous” self-identity.

Participants

Sampling and Recruitment

Participant recruitment was conducted from June through August of 2002. For purposes of this study, polyamorous persons were defined as persons who self-identified as polyamorous. This approach was consistent with a phenomenological paradigm. In addition, this study applied four criteria. (a) To better ensure that the participants were relatively familiar with polyamory, participants needed to self-identify as being polyamorous for at least 1 year prior to research participation. (b) Participants needed to be 25 or more years of age. Adolescence commonly involves a fluidity in identity development and a conservative age estimate marking a period after adolescence (mid-20s) was chosen in order to avoid the participant sample being in an active process of identity development. As an additional consequence, all participants were legal adults. (c) Participants were chosen from the Salt Lake City metropolitan area. Choosing participants from a single region provided a common cultural frame for participant experiences, thereby making the process of finding common themes easier and more practical. (As mentioned previously, qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable to other populations). Localizing the sample also made the process of organizing a focus group for all of the participants easier and more practical. (d) Participants were chosen with the intention of representing the greatest amount of diversity that presented itself for cultural factors such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious or spiritual orientation, age, and the years of personal experience with polyamory. In actuality, the first 10 volunteers were chosen because it was decided by

the researcher and thesis chair that they represented an acceptable range of diversity for the project. Furthermore, conducting all individual interviews within a limited period of time allowed for the participation of all participants in the entire focus group process.

Participants were recruited using a written announcement (see Appendix A). The announcement was written poorly insofar as the reference to “living in the Salt Lake City area” should have appeared in the bulleted list at the top; therefore, I was contacted by several persons living outside of Utah. The announcement was circulated in three ways: (a) The announcement was given directly to polyamorous persons who lived in the Salt Lake City metropolitan area. (b) The announcement was posted on Internet discussion groups related to polyamory. (c) The announcement encouraged its recipients to pass it along to anyone who may be interested. First, the announcement was circulated directly with members of a group that meets regularly at a community center in the Salt Lake City area to discuss issues related with polyamory. I first attended a group meeting in December 2000 and attended a meeting every 2 or 3 months until the announcement was circulated in June 2002 (and for a period of time thereafter) in order to establish some level of acquaintance and rapport with group members (as well as for personal interest and enjoyment). In addition, social interaction related with group meetings and activities provided me some level of familiarity with local polyamorous culture. Second, the announcement was posted on Internet discussion groups that served members with interests in polyamory. These discussion groups were local (salt_city-_poly@egroups.com; biformutandpolyforumut@yahogroups.com), national (poly@polyamory.org), and the latter was international to some degree. The announcement was also posted on an Internet discussion group designed specifically for

the discussion of psychological issues and polyamory (psych-polyamory@yahoo.com). The third form of sampling relied on recipients of the announcement to pass it along to others. This is known as “snowball or chain sampling” and this sampling strategy “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know people who know what cases are information-rich, that is, good examples for study” (Patton, 1990, p. 182).

Participant Demographics

There were 10 participants in this study: 7 women and 3 men. Some of the participants were in relationship with one another, so there was a limited amount of familiarity among the sample (see Table 2). The participants reported having been polyamorous for a range of years between 2 to 30 (average = 12.4), and having had a number of “polyamorous relationships involving significant time and commitment” falling within a range of 1 to 7 (average = 3.5), although these relationships did not necessarily take place at the same time.

Table 2

Percentages of Participant’s Relationships with Other Participants

	October 2002	January 2003	October 2003
Intimate (Sexual)	15.6 (13.3)	11.1 (0.9)	13.3 (11.1)
Close Friends	2.2	13.3	16.7
Friends	15.5	41.1	43.3
Acquaintances	6.7	34.5	26.7
Never met	60.0	0.0	0.0

The participants were between about 25 to 50 years of age (average = 34.4). The only significant pattern regarding their birth order was that none of the participants was an only child (oldest child = 2; middle child = 4; youngest child = 4). A majority of the participants were raised in Utah ($n = 7$), and the others were raised somewhere on the Western Coast of the US ($n = 2$) or in Europe ($n = 1$). Almost all of the participants were raised in Christian families, either LDS ($n = 7$) or nondenominational ($n = 2$), and one participant was not raised within any religious or spiritual perspective. A majority of the participants identified their present religious or spiritual orientation as being Pagan in some sense ($n = 7$), usually involving a relatively complex and personalized spirituality, whereas the others identified as nondenominational Christian ($n = 2$) or as having none ($n = 1$). A majority of the participants were White ($n = 7$); for the others, ethnicities included Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander (this description is intended to be vague for purposes of confidentiality). Half (5) of the participants identified as bisexual (although one of them preferred typically to identify as queer), and the others identified as heterosexual ($n = 1$), mostly heterosexual ($n = 2$), or oriented sexually along a dominant/submissive axis ($n = 2$). Overall, the participants had a relatively high level of education: high school graduates = 2; some college = 5; college graduates = 2; and some postgraduate education = 1. For current socioeconomic status (SES), except for 1 participant giving no response, the participants provided a range of descriptions that included two responses of “poor,” and individual responses of “working class,” “lower middle class,” “somewhere between working class and middle class,” “between pretty damn good and oh shit,” “much less than a thousand dollars a week,” “upper middle class,” and “comfortable.” The SES of the participants had remained about the same over

their lifespan except for two cases in which it had dropped significantly to poor, and two cases where it had been raised significantly from poor. A brief description of each individual participant has been provided below.

Participant Descriptions

Each of the descriptions was developed initially from the data and then refined through feedback from the participant being described. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and some identifying information was changed or deleted for purposes of confidentiality. Also, with one exception noted in the descriptions, only the participants (but not their partners) were given names.

Britannia

Britannia is a White, bisexual woman in her mid-20s. She was raised in the LDS Church and described her present spiritual or religious orientation as “pantheistic.” Britannia estimated that she has been polyamorous since adolescence. At the time of the first interview, she had been in a secondary relationship for about a year with Little Joe, who is married to Samantha. About 5 months later, Britannia had moved in with Samantha, Little Joe, and their son and reported that “things are going very well.” About 13 months after the initial interview, she reported, “things are sill going well. We have all moved into a new house together. We have our communication problems and moments of drama, but we seem to weather it all.”

Gimel

Gimel is a White woman in her mid-40s who described her sexual orientation as being “somewhere mostly on the submissive end of the d/s [or dominant/submissive]

axis.” She was raised in the LDS Church and described herself presently as a “mystic-shaman” who follows “the path of making it up as you go.” Gimel estimated that she has been polyamorous for at least 17 years. At the time of the first interview, she had been in a primary relationship with Seven Snake for about 18 years, and both of them had been in intimate relationship with Pantagruel for about 6 years. About 5 months later, she reported that she, Seven Snake, and Pantagruel were “rearranging” their configuration. About 13 months after the initial interview, she and Seven Snake were “happily intensifying their relationship with one another, while enjoying a renewal of their close friendship with Pantagruel. We are open to the ‘occasional third’ concept, but currently have no one filling that role in our lives.”

Kierstyn

Kierstyn is a White woman in her mid-20s who identified as “queer” and has since become more accepting of being labeled bisexual although her primary attraction is toward women. She was raised in the LDS Church and described her present religious or spiritual orientation as “descriptively pagan.” Kierstyn estimated that she has been polyamorous for about 3 to 5 years. At the time of the first interview, she had been married to Zach for about 2 years, and neither of them had other ongoing intimate relationships (although there had been previous relationships in which both were involved). About 5 months later, she reported that “a lot of stuff that came out in group really helped Zach and me communicate,” and “we have a new member of our family”—an intimate relationship had developed between both of them and another female (who did not participate in the research but chose the pseudonym “Autumn”), and Autumn had moved in with them. About 13 months after the initial interview, Kierstyn reports that

she “would answer some of the questions very differently now, given the year’s lessons.” Kierstyn, Zach, and Autumn were a “triad” for 9 months, at which point “Autumn and I broke up, Zach and Autumn are still together, and the three of us still live together.” Sleeping arrangements were one of the major adjustments. She stated that “what I have learned . . . has drastically changed some of my attitudes . . . to a state refined by what I think of as more ‘real’ polyamory situations.” She added that “I have been aware of trying to use the word ‘partner’ rather than ‘husband’ . . . [but] still constantly find myself pulling the privilege card of marriage, even within the transcripts of interviews for this study.”

Little Joe

Little Joe is a man in his early 30s of mixed ethnic descent who identified as “a 2 on the Kinsey scale,” being “mostly heterosexual” and “intellectually bisexual.” He was raised in a nondenominational Christian church and described himself presently as Wiccan or Pagan. Little Joe estimated that he has been polyamorous since adolescence. At the time of the first interview, he had been married to Samantha for about 10 years, they had a young son, and he had been in a secondary relationship with Britannia for about a year. About 5 months later, Britannia had moved in with him, Samantha, and their son, and “there’s been a lot of processing . . . and I think this is one of the weirdest stages I’ve ever been in because I have a desire for testosterone in my environment, whereas I’ve never really wanted that.” About 13 months after the initial interview, “we have all moved into a house together, everyone has a space they can call their own. Our communication has quite often deteriorated due to moving and general chaos—but we catch ourselves. Communication always needs improvement. Our families have all

come together at the same place and time, and their perspectives have become more accepting and understanding.”

Mabel

Mabel is a White, bisexual woman around 50 years of age. She was raised and identified as being presently Christian. Mabel estimated that she has been polyamorous since her early 20s. At the time of the first interview, she had been married to one man for about 15 years, both of them had been in intimate relationship with another woman for 8 years, and Mabel had been in intimate relationship with another man for about 11 years. About 5 months later, she reported no major changes. About 13 months after the initial interview, she reported that her extramarital relationship with the man had changed and was not sexual because “[he] has fallen in love with a woman who chooses not to participate in polyamory.” In addition, the woman had ended the intimate level of relationship with Mabel while remaining in intimate relationship with the husband, Mabel’s husband had “chosen to live alone and follow his heart in choice of women to be with,” and there is no communication between his lovers and Mabel. “There is no longer any family dialog with regards to new members joining the family, [but] I choose to continue to include [them] . . . in any decisions I make regarding new partners as this was part of our original agreement.” She added that “we are supporting choices and continue to love one another.” As a result, she is “processing all the changes, much confusion, and emotions involved in such dramatic changes” and “learning new levels of what it truly means to love someone and accept them exactly as they are with full support.” Also, “Pantagruel has entered the picture as part-time lover . . . but has since moved from part-time lover to family member. I asked for their permission, or acknowledgement . . . [and]

they are supporting my choice.”

Modesty

Modesty is a bisexual woman of mixed ethnic descent in her late 20s. She was raised in the LDS Church, and stated, “I would classify myself as Christian although my spirituality is still very open.” Modesty estimated that she has been polyamorous for about 3 years. At the time of the first interview, she had been married to one man for about 5 years, been in an intimate relationship with another man for about 3 years, and has since developed less-frequent, long-distance relationships with a few other lovers (both male and female). About 5 months later, she reported that she had had another girlfriend for a couple of months and that they’d broken up. About 13 months after the initial interview, the situation remains the same with her previous, existing relationships. She reported getting a new job and feeling insecure about whether or not to reveal her extramarital relationships although she also feels relatively close to some coworkers.

Pantagruel

Pantagruel is a man in his early 40s of mixed ethnic descent who described his sexual orientation as “I like most women, I like some men.” He was raised as “agnostic, skeptical, curious, and scientific” and described his present religious or spiritual orientation as “toward the divine.” Pantagruel estimated that he has been polyamorous for about 6 years, although he may have had “the fantasy of many beloveds” since the age of 8 or 9. At the time of the first interview, he had been in an intimate relationship with Gimel and Seven Snake for about 6 years. About 5 months later, in response to the changing configuration with Seven Snake and Gimel, Pantagruel stated that “it’s different now. I think a lot of my answers before were based on hopes, and feelings, and how it

ought to be. And I don't know what my answers are now." About 13 months after the initial interview, he had been intimate and sexual with Mabel for about 5 months, and he stated that "we give each other freedom and permission and space to be." He added, "It is gratifying to observe that my friendship with Gimel and Seven Snake is sprouting new leaves, now that the flowering stage seems to have passed."

Samantha

Samantha is a White, bisexual woman about 30 years of age. She was not raised within a religion and described her present religious or spiritual orientation as Wiccan (or Pagan). Samantha estimated that she has been polyamorous for about 12 years. At the time of the first interview, she had been married to Little Joe for about 10 years, they had a young son, and she had been in a tertiary relationship with another man for about 6 months. She also had had a close relationship with Britannia for about a year that she considers a polyamorous relationship although it is not sexual. About 5 months later, she reported, "Britannia moved in, she's taken the jump and is now primary . . . So it's been very serene, and it's been like bedlam, and it's been an interesting mix." About 13 months after the initial interview, she reported that her tertiary relationship had recently ended. Also, "It's still a mix of serenity and bedlam. Bedlam ensues when life gets so busy that communication doesn't happen. We all moved into a new house that has bedrooms for all of us. This gives us a space that is 100 percent our own, which I have come to realize is crucial to maintaining a sense of self."

Seven Snake

Seven Snake is of European descent and noted that "I am physically female, and for gender identity I identify as both." She is in her early 40s and identified her sexual

orientation as “dominant” upon a dominant/submissive axis. She was raised in the LDS Church and identified her present religious or spiritual orientation as “ceremonial magician, shamanic druidoid.” Seven Snake estimated that she has been polyamorous for sometime between 20 and 30 years. At the time of the first interview, she had been in a primary relationship with Gimel for about 18 years, and both of them had been in intimate relationship with Pantagruel for about 6 years. About 5 months later, in response to the changing configuration, she stated, “We have decided that this primary bond between me and Gimel was suffering from trying to do the insertion dock of Pantagruel. And so we’re backing off and looking at whether or not it’s feasible to find another way to dock.” About 13 months after the initial interview, “I’ve determined it wasn’t feasible to re-dock. We’re back to being friends.”

Zach

Zach is a White, heterosexual man in his mid-20s. He was raised in the LDS Church, although he considered himself and his family to be “Jack Mormon” (meaning not highly religious); he reported having no religious or spiritual orientation at present. Zach estimated that he has been polyamorous for about 2 years. At the time of the first interview, he had been married to Kierstyn for about 2 years, and neither of them had other ongoing intimate relationships (although each had been involved in previous relationships). About 5 months later, he reported that he had developed a relationship with a woman (who did not participate in the research but chose the pseudonym “Autumn”), and “then we decided Kierstyn and Autumn needed to get to know each other better, and so Kierstyn invited her over . . . just to spend the night. And that was it, and she never went home.” About 13 months after the initial interview, Zach stated that

“Autumn and Kierstyn explored a relationship together and found it wasn't working. Autumn and I just returned from our first vacation alone.”

Data Collection

Congruent with the phenomenological paradigm underlying the study, the individual and group interviews with the participants (conducted from August, 2002 to January, 2003) were the primary sources of data. Additional data sources included journal entries reflecting my immersion in the literature related to polyamory and field notes taken during the interviews, describing my experience involved in conducting and analyzing the interviews, and the development of some familiarity with local polyamorous persons and their culture. Participants were invited to share other forms of information related to polyamory, such as notes, journal entries, and poetry; however, nothing was shared.

In some sense, my immersion in the phenomenon began with the research involved for the literature review; however, immersion in the data began with data collection and continued through data analysis. Immersion was an important part of the process providing me with a multifaceted experience of the phenomenon. Also, the two types of interviews (individual and group) combined with the field notes and journal entries provided multiple data sources for analyzing the phenomenon—a practice known as data triangulation (Patton, 1990). In addition to individual interviews, I employed focus groups as follow-ups to the individual interviews for purposes of clarification and deeper exploration.

[One] way to triangulate focus groups with individual interviews is to conduct the groups as a follow-up to the interviews. This would allow the researcher to explore issues that came up only during the analysis of the interviews. It would also be a way to clarify areas in which there seemed

to be a number of different viewpoints in the individual responses.
(Morgan, p. 31)

Individual Interviews

Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982) developed an approach to phenomenological inquiry composed of three in-depth interviews (discussed in Seidman, 1991); the first interview focused on a person's life history associated with the phenomenon, the second on the details of present experiences, and the third interview integrated the narratives of the previous two by reflecting on the essential meanings of the phenomenon for the individual. This rigorous one-to-one approach provided a detailed exploration of the meanings for the 10 participants in the current investigation; however, the three-interview approach to phenomenological inquiry was collapsed into one interview comprised of three corresponding sections. The interviews were scheduled for 3 hours and lasted between an hour and 15 minutes and just under 5 hours. The longest interview was conducted over 2 days rather than 1. One or two brief follow-up interviews were conducted with individual participants as needed. All interviews were audiotaped. The essential structure of the three-interview approach was preserved and this provided a viable method of phenomenological inquiry; as Seidman (1991) recognized:

Researchers will have reasons for exploring alternatives to the structure and procedures described above. As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can easily be explored. (p. 15)

The individual interviews were conducted from August to October, 2002. All of the individual interviews were conducted before the group interviews except for two brief follow-ups conducted in late October after the first two focus groups. The interview

questions were designed to elicit stories from the participants that were then explored for meanings. The questions were organized in three sections: (a) life history; (b) details of present experience; and (c) reflection on the meanings. The interview questions are included in Appendix B. The questions provided a general framework and the precise wording changed somewhat with the flow of the interview. For example, the end of the demographic section asks the question: “Length of time that the participant has been polyamorous?” and the beginning of the next section, regarding early experiences, asks: “When did you first consider yourself to be polyamorous?” There is some redundancy between these questions; therefore, the latter question often became a transition statement making reference to the previous answer.

The main individual interviews (i.e., not follow-ups) had been estimated in advance at about 3 hours with two breaks observed between the three sections (and as needed). The main interviews were from 1 hour 15 minutes to 4 hours and 52 minutes in length and the longest interview was conducted on 2 consecutive days (covering part one of the interview questions on the 1st day, and parts two and three on the 2nd day). Follow-up interviews were conducted as necessary to acquire missing information and to give each participant an opportunity to answer the questions that were added by other participants (see Appendix C, section 3c). All of these interviews were audiotaped. The individual interviews—including any follow-ups to the main interviews—provided about 25 hours of recorded data.

Focus Groups

Following all of the main individual interviews (though not all follow-ups), all participants were invited to gather as a focus group in October of 2002. All 10

participants attended the group. At the beginning, the participants were encouraged to share whatever they wished about their experiences and meanings associated with polyamory; then the group engaged in a discussion that required virtually no facilitation. The focus group was scheduled to be 2 hours in length; however, due to unanimous interest, the group lasted for about 3 hours. This produced 1 hour and 55 minutes of recorded data (where the discrepancy was attributed to long breaks and socializing) and, at the request of the participants, another focus group was scheduled for 1 week later. The second focus group lasted for over 6 hours and produced 2 hours and 10 minutes of recorded data (again, the discrepancy was attributed to breaks and a great deal more socializing). All 10 participants were involved in the second group, although 1 participant left early and 1 arrived late. A third group was arranged in January of 2003 to gather missing information and check the status of relationships in the group for demographics (see Table 2). All ten participants attended again; the recorded data portion of this group lasted for 15 minutes (and the remainder was devoted to socializing). All of these focus groups were audiotaped, and the total amount of recorded data from these groups was 4 hours and 20 minutes.

Following data analysis, the research participants were invited to gather again in October, 2003 as a final 2-hour focus group to discuss the results. Eight participants attended and minor changes were made to the existing description of the phenomenon. Participants who were unable to participate in this group were shown the results on a personal basis and given opportunities to provide feedback (thereby including a valuable process known in qualitative research as participant checks).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began in August, 2002 and proceeded through January, 2004, when a description of the results section—also referred to as the “essential description”—had been finished and reviewed by the participants (pending minor changes). Data analysis consisted of seven steps that proceeded in rough chronological order but were not necessarily discrete; for example, transcribing in step 1 overlapped with the process of horizontalization in step 2. Steps 2 through 6 were based on Creswell’s (1998) description of phenomenological data analysis (p. 54-55). A thorough analysis was conducted on each individual interview before considering the group interviews. Steps 1 and 7 were added as enhancements to Creswell’s (1998) method. In addition, epoche—or the bracketing of preconceptions—was practiced throughout the process by engaging in reflection and soliciting feedback from peer researchers and committee members on a regular basis. The steps in the data analysis were: (1) transcription; (2) horizontalization of meanings; (3) clustering of meanings; (4) textural description; (5) structural description; (6) essential description; and (7) validation of the essential description.

Transcription

The audio recordings of the individual and focus group interviews that were collected during the data collection phase from July to October, 2002 were transcribed by the researcher from August of 2002 to January of 2003. Transcriptions included a 2-inch right margin, allowing space for observations and other notes during later reading and analysis. Because I transcribed all of the data, I was able to begin immersing myself in the data and becoming very familiar with the interviews. With regard to data analysis, transcription operated largely as an unconscious process of analysis in preparation for the

conscious analysis that followed.

Horizontalization of Meanings

The first conscious step in data analysis was horizontalization in which I identified statements that appeared to hold meaning relevant to the topic of polyamory; these statements or meanings were listed and considered as having equal value (i.e., horizontalization of the data). This part of the analysis was conducted from December of 2002 to May of 2003. To begin this process, I read each individual transcript three times. The first reading was intended as a primer in order to begin thinking about the material (consciously). On the second and third readings, I identified any statements that appeared relevant and highlighted, underlined, and wrote comments about these passages in the margin (i.e., coding of the transcript). The list of themes was developed during the coding process; then, I reviewed the emerging list of emerging themes repeatedly and developed revisions that worked toward eliminating repetitive and overlapping meanings as well as refining the labels so that they more closely described the categorized quotes. These resulting meanings are also known as the “horizons” or “the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

Clustering of Meanings Into Themes

The meanings that emerged from horizontalization were clustered together as themes and subthemes in order to better understand and describe their interrelationships. The clustering process was conducted from May to July of 2003. Quotes were chosen from the individual interviews to represent the various meanings and assigned within a larger theme. In doing so, the horizons or essential meanings of the phenomenon were grouped in a tentative manner under larger themes; for example, the meanings of “being

in the middle,” “friendship,” and “special exclusivity” were among those grouped under the theme of “relationship” (and subsequently became subthemes of relationship). The textural quotes were inserted into a database designed by the researcher that included the following functions. First, each quote could be given up to ten theme/subtheme assignments (such as “relationships/being in the middle”). This was done because quotes often included more than one meaning; however, breaking the quote into smaller subquotes would have reduced or eliminated contextual information that provided meaning. In actuality, most of the quotes were given from one to three theme/subtheme assignments and a few were assigned four or five. The database also allowed me to sort the data by participant, theme/subtheme, page number in the transcript, and the interview question to which the participant was responding. These functions assisted me throughout the remainder of the data analysis. A total of 838 quotes were extracted from the individual interviews during the clustering process, and the theme/subtheme labels were revised several times in order to more closely describe the quotes being grouped together. Through the process of integrating the individual quotes into the database, the emerging themes and subthemes were refined as a single list from one participant to the next (rather than conducting a separate analysis on each participant’s data). Also, the total number of meanings was reduced further as more redundancies appeared. The resulting clusters were then analyzed as textural descriptions.

Textural Description

The database produced reports of the quotes (representing the meanings) arranged by theme and subtheme, both for the individual participants and the participants as a whole. These “descriptions” provided the “textures of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994,

p. 122). Analyzing these textural descriptions proved sufficient to make a major revision to the thematic labels and discover further redundancies in the quotes that were removed. This step of the analysis was performed from July, 2003 to early August, 2003.

In mid-July, I also began an analysis of the group interviews in order to refine the thematic labels and check for additional meanings prior to the development of the structural description. Transcripts from the focus-group interviews were read three times in the same manner as the individual transcripts (i.e., one reading to prime the researcher with the material and two readings to identify statements of relevant meaning to the topic of polyamory with highlighting, underlining, and comments in the margin). This was the process of horizontalization. As it happened, most of the relevant discussion from the focus groups involved material related to the individual interviews and no additional meanings emerged; therefore, the data were integrated into the existing clusters of themes and subthemes. This provided an instant resolution to what would have otherwise been the clustering process.

The data from the group interviews validated the data from the individual interviews as consistent expressions of experience; in addition, the data suggested strong associations between particular meanings, because the group discussion wove meanings together, back and forth, from one to another. Quotes within the group interviews were catalogued by the researcher according to the existing themes and subthemes and I decided that a textural description for the group was unnecessary, because the data were adequately represented by the individual textural descriptions. Therefore, the individual textural descriptions (i.e., the quotes and their assigned thematic labels) were analyzed while giving consideration to the data from the group interviews and I developed a

structural description.

Structural Description

The next step in data analysis was creating a “structural description” of the phenomenon which involved a process known as “imaginative variation.” According to Moustakas (1994):

The task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions. The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience . . . the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the “what” of experience. How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is? (pp. 97-98)

I applied the techniques of imaginative variation during August and early September, 2003, with feedback from peer researchers and committee members; I eventually arrived at the seven-theme model illustrated in the results section (although several changes were made later to the subthemes before the results were completed). The essential meanings were organized into first- and second-level subthemes within the overarching seven. There arrived a point during the analysis when the emerging structure appeared to be ready for participant feedback: “Revised the 7-part model again. It looks like it’s good enough to take to the participants!” (Self-reflective journal, September 10, 2003) Then, in the remainder of September, I met with the individual participants to solicit feedback. A report of each participant’s quotes listed by theme and subtheme was discussed and occasional changes were made to the wording of the quote or the assignment of thematic labels. Participants also validated the seven-theme model with some reservations pending a detailed presentation (see Essential Description, below).

Essential Description

After creating the structural description, I developed a composite description of the essential meanings of the experience of polyamory that represented the group as a whole and incorporated individual variations: the essential description (also known as “synthesis,” Moustakas, 1994; and “composite,” Creswell, 1998). An outline of the essential description was developed in late September and early October, 2003 and then I met with 8 of the 10 participants as a group on October 17, 2003 to discuss it. (Two participants were traveling at the time and were disappointed that they could not attend.) In response to feedback from this group meeting, I made minor changes to the labeling of a few subthemes as well as comments were made that informed the essential description. Also, the data had suggested strong associations between specific themes, and these were validated by a significant number of group members in each case. In addition, the group provided a few more associations. This feedback session was not audiotaped as a result of mechanical failure; however, field notes were sufficient to record the participants’ feedback.

The essential description—in this case, the results section—was written from October to early December, 2003 and included textural quotes from the individual interviews as well as comments made and endorsed during the group feedback meeting in October. A mostly-polished draft of the results section was made available to all of the participants in December, 2003 for review and validation (or rejection).

Validation of the Essential Description

The essential description was intended to express the perspectives of the participants as clearly as possible; therefore, a nearly-polished draft of the results section

was made available to the participants in order to validate the final presentation of ideas. Only a few minor changes were made to the results that follow. This process provided a highly appropriate method of assessing the validity of the description and was conducted in December, 2003 through February, 2004; and this completed the research process.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting psychological research, there is always an important obligation to consider the welfare of the research participants (American Psychological Association, 2002; American Counseling Association, 1995). Prior to participant recruitment, this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Utah. Potential participants were provided with an informed consent (see Appendix C) that provided information about the research process. Especially given the controversy of this topic, great care was taken to preserve the confidentiality of the participants; identifying information was changed or deleted, and participants were given opportunities to change or delete any information that made them uncomfortable.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The Seven Main Themes of Polyamorous Experience

There were seven main themes or areas of life experience that emerged from the research (see Figure 1). Five of these themes are conceptualized as varying levels of relationship with self-identity at the center: mainstream culture, selective social circles, intimate relationships, core relationships, and self-identity. The two remaining themes—monogamist prejudice and learning and growing—were pervasive in that they overlapped

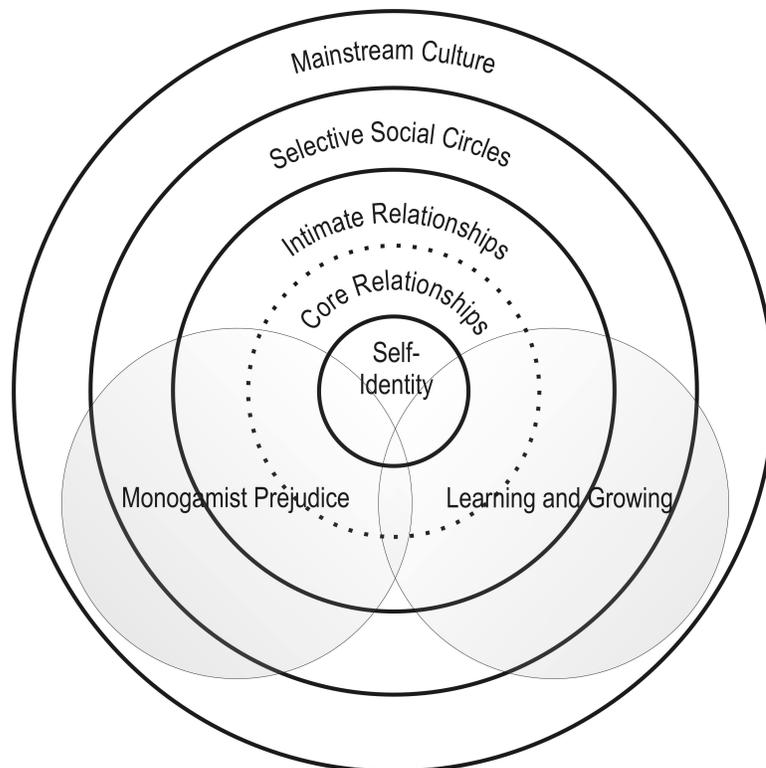


Figure 1: The Seven Main Themes of Polyamorous Experience

with one another as well as overlapping with the other five themes. The nature of this overlap differed among the participants. Some participants experienced monogamist prejudice being more pervasive in mainstream culture than themselves or their closer relationships, whereas others experienced it being more connected with self-identity and internalized prejudice. For some, learning and growing overlapped more with self-identity, and for others it related more directly to a process of living with monogamist prejudice and mainstream culture. The seven themes are arranged in the following order for discussion, beginning and ending with a pervasive theme: (1) monogamist prejudice, (2) mainstream culture, (3) selective social circles, (4) intimate relationships, (5) core relationships, (6) self-identity, and (7) learning and growing. For a complete listing of themes that includes the first and second level of subthemes, see Table 3.

Monogamist Prejudice

For purposes of this discussion, the term “monogamist prejudice” means “prejudice towards monogamy as an ideal practice.” Being polyamorous, each participant experienced monogamist prejudice in various ways that were pervasive with other areas, and these have been arranged in three subthemes. First, “mainstream prejudice” involved the institutions of a monogamist society and the assumptions of monogamy experienced in common social interaction. Second, “personal prejudice of others” manifested in a variety of ways: loss of friendships, potential for “freaking out,” prejudice and confusion with polygamy, scapegoat of polyamory, some don’t understand, and some don’t want to know. Third, “internalized prejudice” involved the conditioning that follows from living in a monogamist society, and also included the potential for “freaking out.”

Table 3. Main Themes with First and Second Level Subthemes

Monogamist Prejudice

Mainstream Prejudice

Institutional Prejudice
Social Prejudice

Personal Prejudice of Others

Loss of Friendships
Potential for “Freaking Out”
Prejudice and Confusion with Polygamy
Scapegoat of Polyamory
Some Don’t Understand
Some Don’t Want to Know

Internalized Prejudice

Potential for “Freaking Out”

Mainstream Culture

It’s Easier to Go Along

Falling Into Social Roles

Many People Don’t Know

Social Isolation and Discovering Others
Wishing to Be More Open

Social Commentary

Alternative Families and Relationships Are Out There
Critique of Monogamous Relationships and Nuclear Family
Hidden Areas or Taboos
Wishing for More Acceptance

Selective Social Circles

Acceptance From Select Friends and Within Alternative Communities

Selective and Networked Friendships

Concern for the Persistence of Friendships Before Becoming Sexual
Friendships Developing Into Sexual Relationships
Friendships Persisting After the Ending of Sexual Relationships

Intimate Relationships

Benefits With Polyamory

Diversity in Relationships
Expansive Support System
Freedom to Choose Relationships
Shared Love and “Compersion”

Issues With Polyamory

Working on Issues Is Vital!
Honest Communication Is Vital!
Being in the Middle
Complexity of Polyamory
Jealousy
Third-Person Issues
Time
Trust

Table 2. Continued

Intimate Relationships (continued)

Relationship Phases

- Becoming Familiar With Potential Intimate Relationships
- Selecting Potential Intimate Relationships
- New Relationship Energy
- Becoming Familiar With New Intimate Relationships
- Sharing a Household Is a Significant Step

Core Relationships

Family and Its Relationship With Polyamory

- Child-Raising
- Chosen Family Versus the Family of Origin

Loyalty and Commitment

- Ground Rules
- Special Exclusivity

Self-Identity

Diversity of Sexual Identity

- Personal Relationship With Monogamy
- The Nature of Polyamory
- The Complexity of Sexual Orientation

Labeling and "Polyamory"

- "Polyamory" Means Many Things
- Polyamory Before "Polyamory"

Self-Identity (continued)

Personal Meanings of Polyamory

- Changing Meanings
- Intimacy: Not Just Sex and Not Swinging
- Living Outside the Cultural Norms
- Spirituality or Profound Love

Learning and Growing

Self-Exploration and Growth

- Exploring Sexuality
- Learning and Growing From Difficult Experiences

Exploring the Unknown

Resources for Learning and Growing Are Important

- People, Internet and Publications
- Resources Seem Scarce

Mainstream Prejudice

Within mainstream prejudice there were two subthemes: institutional prejudice, which involves the institutions of a monogamous society, including its laws and systems that define acceptable behaviors within society; and social prejudice, which involved the expectations and assumptions regarding monogamous behavior as experienced in everyday, mainstream culture, and social interaction.

Institutional Prejudice

Some participants experienced prejudice from the institutions of a monogamist society; for example, Britannia is not legally recognized as a third guardian: “One thing that’s really hard is that I have absolutely no rights as far as a parent. You know, I don’t have the authority to release him from medical care. I wouldn’t have the authority to go see him in the hospital.” In legal terms, polyamory was experienced as a problematic lifestyle within a monogamist society. Little Joe stated, “I find it outrageous that we live in a country that boasts so much freedom and pursuit of happiness, and religious freedom, and we live on dogmatic little rules based on religious concepts that discriminate against everybody. It’s mind-boggling.”

Social Prejudice

The participants experienced monogamist prejudice in everyday social assumptions. Seven Snake described an example of this: “You get invited to the office party and they say, ‘and spouse’ or ‘and partner.’ Gimel’s high school reunion is coming up this year. The question on the questionnaire says, . . . ‘will there be one or two?’” In addition, some participants felt that social stories and media played a significant role in

maintaining monogamist social assumptions. According to Little Joe, “You get the monogamy myths, and the one-true-love Cinderella crap. . . . It’s in songs, it’s in movies, it’s everywhere. And especially in music, you have a big influence on your life.”

Personal Prejudice of Others

The participants experienced monogamist prejudice from others on a personal level in different ways and to varying degrees. This sometimes involved the family of origin; as with Mabel, “It’s affected my genetic family in that I have not been able to talk to half of my family about it because of judgments. And it’s just simply not worth it to me to be judged anymore.” Personal prejudice also arose in other social contexts. For example, Britannia explained that “I basically said [to my supervisor], ‘My husband and I are polyamorous,’ which the simplest way to explain it is that we have an open relationship. . . . And it made him very uncomfortable. He didn’t really know what to say.” In any case, while some participants experienced more monogamist prejudice, others experienced less. Gimel stated, “I’ve had a lot more negative experiences from being partnered with a woman than I’ve ever had from having a third in my relationship configuration. For what that’s worth.” Furthermore, the fear of monogamist prejudice on personal levels was not always based in reality. The feedback group agreed, “You can’t tell, it’s not predictable” from person to person.

Loss of Friendships

Some participants described the loss of one or more friendships as a result of being polyamorous. For example, Modesty described how a friend of several years “could not get past that I was cheating on him. And I said, it’s not cheating if I have his consent, . . . and his encouragement, . . . but she couldn’t get over [that] . . . so I was an

adulterer and she didn't want to associate with that.”

Potential for “Freaking Out”

Some participants described a potential for polyamory to “shock” or “freak out” people. A few descriptions referred to past events; however, most were anticipatory, referring to the anxiety involved in revealing their polyamorous lifestyle. As Zach stated, “It always has a possibility, it seems like with people, to freak them out. You never know until you actually get their reaction as to how they really feel about it.”

Prejudice and Confusion with Polygamy

Some participants described experiencing a strong prejudice against polygamy in our society, especially in Utah, and that sometimes there is confusion between polygamy and polyamory. On one hand, Gimel stated that polyamory is “easier to ignore, and . . . maybe there aren't any knee jerk responses built into our society to polyamory, I don't know. Here in Utah, we have some knee-jerk responses to polygamy, but this doesn't look like that.” On the other hand, Little Joe described a different experience in which the two were confused: “The funny thing is, [my dad] had brought up ‘You guys look like polygamists—like Mormon polygamists.’” There was a strong association between prejudice and confusion with polygamy and the theme of labeling and “polyamory” (a subtheme of self-identity) due to the similarity between the terms “polygamy” and “polyamory.”

Scapegoat of Polyamory

Some participants described the experience of polyamory being used as a scapegoat for problems; for example, Mabel stated, “Somehow it all gets blamed on

. . . poly, so there's no room for my family to be objective and just realize that even within a polyamorous family, there are just real everyday life things, . . . like happen with them, . . . only there are more people involved." Kierstyn also mentioned this; however, she found in group therapy that "there hasn't been what I would assume is probably typical, and that is . . . 'That's why you're having problems in your relationship or relationships.' . . . I'm always sort of anticipating the negative reaction."

Some Don't Understand

Many participants described occasions when people simply did not seem to understand the concept of polyamory. Sometimes this involves family; Seven Snake stated, "My family of origin is uncomfortable with the idea that Pantagruel is around much, because they're having a hard enough time dealing with the fact that my permanent partner is female. And to add somebody else to the picture gets really confusing." Gimel described an instance of this with a counselor: "You have to bring up the concept that there's this third person who complicates your relationship profile, and the counselor will of course be very professional and accepting but you can tell that it's non-comp going on. You know, it's like why? What?"

Some Don't Want to Know

Many participants described occasions when people simply did not want to know about anything related to polyamory. Silence on the subject was preferred. Kierstyn stated, "If I remind my sister that I'm queer she's like, I know, just shut up about it, like she just really doesn't want to hear it. . . . It's kind of the same way with polyamory. People are like, 'Don't talk about it. Fine, but I don't need to hear about it.'"

Internalized Prejudice

Some participants described an inner struggle arising on occasion between polyamory and their internalized prejudice associated with being raised in monogamist society. As Modesty described, “The hardest part was . . . wrestling with [my past beliefs]. . . . If he really did care about me then why is he seeing other people, because . . . I was raised that to care about someone . . . you would just want to be with them.”

Potential for “Freaking Out”

Some participants described experiences in which they or their intimate relationships have “freaked out” (usually in those terms), sometimes described as resulting from an inner struggle between polyamory and internalized monogamist prejudice, and sometimes involving jealousy. Kierstyn stated, for example, “I woke up one day, and she was there in bed with us, and I felt really pissed. And I think some of it was insecurity, and . . . social conditioning, and you know, maybe that’s where the insecurity came from . . . but bottom line, I just freaked out.”

Mainstream Culture

The participants have experienced an ambivalent relationship with mainstream culture (which includes society), living within it while also living outside of its norms. There were three subthemes describing ways in which the participants experienced mainstream culture as polyamorous persons. First, “it’s easier to go along” with the social expectations of mainstream culture, and this includes falling into social roles. Second, “many people don’t know” about a participant’s polyamorous lifestyle as a result of being closeted, and this provided a strong association with social isolation and the significance of discovering others. Third, the participants expressed “social

commentary” related to their polyamorous perspective, arranged into four categories: alternative families and relationships exist, critique of monogamous relationships and nuclear family, hidden areas or taboos, and wishing for more acceptance.

It’s Easier to Go Along

Some participants expressed that it is easier to go along with the mainstream. According to Kierstyn, “For me it’s been a difficult choice, but I think authenticity is often a difficult choice. ‘Cause being typical is so much easier.” And while some of this pressure to conform is associated with mainstream culture, some of it may have been internalized; for example, Little Joe stated, “There’s one representative in my head that keeps saying, throw in the towel and play the game. . . . Go with the flow, and don’t cause any problems, and blah blah blah. And I hate that guy.”

Falling Into Social Roles

Related to the experience that it is easier to go along with the mainstream, some participants described a process of falling into social roles and struggling with them. Falling into social roles had a strong association with the theme of gender issues and the complexity of polyamory (a subtheme of intimate relationships) as a consequence of gender roles. According to Mabel, “It’s so much easier to follow, fall into a role. . . . Whether it’s a professional role, housewife, wife, mother, father, husband. I mean, it allows us to feel safe. And who wouldn’t want to feel safe? But . . . we sacrifice our freedom for this.” Britannia felt that roles may be a crutch for avoiding deeper issues in relationships: “I think a lot of monogamous relationships get away with not achieving [self-honesty and communication] because there are roles to fall back on.” For the participants, the most significant social role was marriage, as in Zach’s case: “It’s just a

piece of paper that the state needs . . . so we can get a car together, and things that they should do for gay couples but they don't. It makes life easier being married. So we did it. It made our friends happy.”

Many People Don't Know

As already noted in monogamist prejudice, the participants experienced an ambivalent relationship within a mainstream culture that is monogamist, and as a result often chose not to reveal their polyamorous lifestyle to people outside of their closer social circles. In the words of Seven Snake, “Now there comes the question of closets. When you are somebody who has weird stuff going on, there is a matter of do you reveal this to people or do you hide it? And when it's a relationship that you're dealing with, do you hide it or do you reveal it?” Participants differed as to how open they chose to be; however, most of them tended toward being selective, as with Zach: “I haven't shared it with anybody besides friends—immediate friends around Kierstyn. And mostly, honestly, my friends I really haven't.” The experience of being closeted related also to social isolation (as follows).

Social Isolation and Discovering Others

The participants often experienced social isolation as polyamorous persons, as well as a corresponding feeling of relief or joy in finding others. Samantha stated, “Talking to other poly people seems to ease a lot of frustration and loneliness. Freakishness. I must be a freak, you know?” Sometimes this connection with others involved the social label of polyamory and was associated with the theme of labeling and “polyamory” (a subtheme of self identity); as Gimel stated, “It's convenient to have a label for what I guess I've been for a long time, maybe always, . . . because it means that

other people are there, too. That I'm not a freak."

Wishing to Be More Open

Some participants experienced a desire to be more open about polyamory and would have done so except for fearful expectations of monogamist prejudice and a lack of understanding. In Kierstyn's experience, "So many people are so resistant to it. And in a lot of ways I really want to share this information [about nonmonogamy], but in a lot of other ways I don't want to feel negative repercussions."

Social Commentary

Several participants expressed "social commentary" or personal critiques directed toward aspects of mainstream culture relevant to their polyamorous perspectives. These perceptions of mainstream culture were arranged into four categories: the existence of alternative families and relationships; critique of monogamous relationships and nuclear family; hidden areas or taboos, and wishing for more acceptance.

Alternative Families and Relationships Exist

Some participants expressed that alternative families and relationships have existed in the past and continue to exist in the present, despite their marginalization from mainstream culture. Pantagruel stated, "Polygamy, or polyandry, cohousing, extended families, family of origin versus the family of choice, all of these phrases were here long before I was." Britannia felt that making this point held significance for children in alternative families: "I also think that it's great for kids in any kind of alternative family to realize that it is an alternative family, in such a way that they don't feel like they're some kind of freak, but they realize that . . . everybody has different families."

Critique of Monogamous Relationships and Nuclear Family

Some participants expressed points of critique directed toward the nuclear family or monogamous relationships. For example, Little Joe felt that polyamory and extended family would be better for society than the isolated nature of nuclear family: “Especially the way the world is now, . . . I hope [polyamory] will be more valid. . . . I think people will tend to revert to the extended family type of households rather than the nuclear, ‘cause I think the nuclear family is destructive.” Pantagruel felt that polyamory was an improvement over monogamous relationships for him: “It’s a lot better than dating. It also allows me . . . to have a social life without feeling the urgent desperation that seems to come with being single, . . . [which] looks like a lot of effort for very little return and the guarantees of lots of emotional games”; and discussing marriage and divorce, he stated, “The trend in our society seems to be serial monogamy.” However, for the record, he also said, “It takes a lot of effort to get . . . your complete spectrum of emotional needs met by another human being. If two human beings are committed to this path [of monogamy], it’s definitely a path of spiritual growth.”

Hidden Areas or Taboos

Some participants experienced hidden areas or taboos in mainstream culture, especially as children. Modesty stated that “becoming aware of [polyamory] helped me to seek out other things, which I thought I had to do in this society because a lot of it is hidden. . . . You do have to go looking for it if you want to know that it’s there at all.” A commonly hidden area or taboo was sexuality, as illustrated by Britannia, who stated, “I think a lot of my early sexual experiences were negative because I was just tripping around in the dark, literally [because sex was not discussed at home]. . . . I really had no

idea how to set up, . . . invest, . . . [and] seek out a healthy sexual relationship.”

Wishing for More Acceptance

Some participants expressed a desire for more acceptance of polyamory in mainstream culture (which includes society). Samantha stated, “I’d like insurance to accept polyamory, [and] multiple adult relationships. . . . I’d like poly to influence society; therefore, my life could be easier. And more fair in my eyes. . . . We’re adults, we’re consenting, so have multipartner tax forms.” In addition, there was a strong association between wishing more for acceptance and the benefits of diverse role models in child-raising (a subtheme of core relationships), insofar as diverse perspectives were perceived as promoting open-mindedness and acceptance of multiple perspectives. For example, Zach felt that polyamory and diverse role models could be good for children in this way: “I would hope that it would make those children, and possibly their children, more accepting in the future. You know, future generations.”

Selective Social Circles

In contrast with the ambivalence of mainstream culture, many participants experienced “acceptance from select friends and within alternative communities,” and have also kept “selective and networked friendships” that often involved becoming familiar with the friends of those they already know. Within this circle of friendships, the participants described concerns for the persistence of friendships before becoming sexual, some friendships developed into sexual relationships, and there were many examples in which such friendships persisted after the ending of the sexual nature of the relationships.

Acceptance From Select Friends and Within Alternative Communities

Many participants found acceptance from friends who may have been selected as being relatively accepting. For example, Gimel stated that “[having a third beloved] affects my social life sometimes. In most of the circles where I choose to put my time and energy, nobody cares in terms of nobody disapproves. They care about us, but nobody cares what we do.” Many participants also found acceptance within alternative communities; as Seven Snake stated, “Very few people want to know. But in the alternative communities, like belly-dancers, and ceremonial magicians, and pagans and such, nobody cares.”

Selective and Networked Friendships

Many participants were selective with their friendships, and some made new friendships by networking with their existing relationships; for example, Pantagruel stated that “I think I’ve made friends with Seven Snake and Gimel’s friends; I think to a lesser extent, Seven Snake and Gimel have made friends with my friends.” Some participants mentioned that the demands of time and relationships have limited social interactions for the most part to selective circles; for Samantha, “My social life consists of going to polyamory support meetings, so I go there, and I don’t have any social life outside of polyamorous relationships right now.” Kierstyn expressed a sense that her sense of friendships has deepened from polyamory: “I take my relationships and my friendships a lot more seriously, and I’m a lot more thoughtful about them. And I think more in terms of lifelong friendships.”

Concern for the Persistence of Friendships Before Becoming Sexual

Some participants expressed concern for the persistence of friendships if friendships became sexual relationships and then the sexual nature of the relationship ended or went badly. This theme had a strong association with the theme of selecting potential relationships. As Gimel stated, “One of the things that I brought up when we were discussing should we do this, between the three of us, was I was terrified of having it go badly and losing the friendship.” Sometimes this concern involved broaching the topic of even potentially becoming intimate or sexual; as Zach stated regarding a friendship that could be a potential relationship, “To approach them with [polyamory]? It’s scary. I really want [our friend] to stay our friend after. You know, if she doesn’t want anything to do with that, I want her to still be our friend. We really like her a lot.”

Friendships Developing Into Sexual Relationships

Many of the participants’ sexual relationships developed from friendships. As Gimel stated, “It has only been the past—how long has it been?—somewhere between a few and several years, that we have considered ourselves to be beloveds, mutually, the three of us. We were friends with him for years and years.” And for Zach, “The friendship part, I think that’s probably going to happen every time ‘cause I think that anyone that’s a possibility for us to be with, we’ll know them well enough to share each other with that person.” On the other hand, Britannia made a point that “it is not a good idea to set up expectations of what relationships are going to develop. For instance, there are no expectations that a sexual relationship will develop between Samantha and me. [Either way,] . . . we have a great friendship.”

Friendships Persisting After the Ending of Sexual Relationships

Many of the participants have had friendships persisting, sometimes for many years, after the ending of the sexual aspect of the relationships. Gimel remembered an important occasion with Seven Snake and an old friend: “We kissed each other for the first time over a man’s chest in a threesome, which threesome continued for quite a long time, and we are still very good friends with that man and his wife.”

Intimate Relationships

The participants experienced a level of intimate relationships that were often sexual in nature. There was a clear distinction between intimacy and sexuality for most of the participants (where intimacy may or may not include sexuality). Polyamorous experiences were often based in intimacy rather than sex and did not necessarily involve sex. There were three subthemes of experiences involving intimate relationships and polyamory. First, participants experienced “benefits with polyamory”: diversity in relationships, expansive support system, freedom to choose relationships, and shared love and “compersion.” Second, participants experienced “issues with polyamory,” involving two highly important issues: (a) working on issues is vital!, and (b) honest communication is vital! [exclamation marks were chosen to underscore the importance of these themes] as well as several other issues of importance (simply listed in alphabetical order): being in the middle, complexity of polyamory, jealousy, third-person issues, time, and trust. And third, participants had various experiences with respect to “relationship phases,” namely, becoming familiar with potential intimate relationships, selecting potential intimate relationships, new relationship energy, becoming familiar with new intimate relationships, and sharing a household is a significant step.

Benefits With Polyamory

All the participants experienced one or more “benefits with polyamory,” categorized into four areas: diversity in relationships, expansive support system, freedom to choose relationships, and shared love and “compersion.”

Diversity in Relationships

Some participants expressed an appreciation for diverse relationships offering a variety of characteristics, whether psychological, physical, or otherwise. For example, Modesty stated that “the best part of that for me is I can go off about something in one way to my husband . . . [and] then I share with [my boyfriend]. Then I can share the same experience in a completely different way.” And Zach stated, “I just really think women are beautiful in all shapes and sizes and colors, and I want to be able to love them and share that love with other people.”

Expansive Support System

Many participants expressed that having an expansive support system of multiple intimate relationships was a benefit of polyamory. The expansive support system held a strong association with self-exploration and exploring the unknown (subthemes of learning and growing), insofar as such explorations are difficult to do without a strong support system; according to Samantha, “You’ve got more of a support, so you can evolve.” There was also a strong association between the expansive support system and the relationship issue of being in the middle (a subtheme of intimate relationships). Some participants expressed the improvement of not having to be the one-and-only relationship as available in monogamy; for example, Modesty stated, “When I first got involved with [my boyfriend], it was really nice. It was a new outlet for me, and my relationship

improved with my husband as well. . . . He didn't have to be 100 percent the husband, 24-7." Participants experienced support from their relationships in different ways that included emotional and financial support, or participants presented hopes and expectations of such support. Gimel described an experience of emotional support: "It was beautiful. In that moment, . . . he was having the emotions, I was supporting him, she was supporting us, and everybody was involved in the process, and it was just working the way it's supposed to be with intimate partners sharing intimate feelings."

Modesty expressed the hope and expectation of extra financial support: "I would love it if my boyfriend did live with us . . . because then financially he could also be helping and providing, and I just think that . . . there'd be a lot more freedom." Mabel expressed a personal warning about financial support: "So if you choose to share your [financial] resources, it has to be understood why you're sharing it so there's no unspoken things going on; 'cause freedom is a clean, sweet thing, and you've really got to fight for her."

Freedom to Choose Relationships

Many participants experienced the freedom to choose relationships as an important aspect of polyamory. Mabel stated, "I love freedom. To be given the freedom to fall in love with whoever I choose to fall in love with is a good and wonderful thing. And I like being a woman who can give the men in my life, or the women in my life, that same freedom," and she added later that this freedom can be a relationship issue as much as a benefit: "I'm giving you freedom to fuck whoever you want, what else do you want? Oh, then the homework comes in, and if people don't want to do that, and if they think that it's just about the sexual freedom, it will fail."

Shared Love and “Compersion”

Many participants described experiences of shared love among intimate relationships, or related experiences of empathic or vicarious love—sometimes referred to as “compersion” (a term used in the polyamorous community). Gimel described an experience of shared love: “[A prior relationship for Seven Snake and I] came back to Utah for a visit, and we got together with the three of us and had one of the most beautiful lovemaking sessions . . . because there was relationship all around. Everybody loved everybody.” Seven Snake described an experience of empathic or vicarious love without using the term compersion: “My life-partner, 18 years so far, she would go off to be with [someone] and I would come away feeling as good as she did, as if I had had some. I would be buzzing . . . you know, good relationship energy.” According to Samantha, who did use the term compersion, “It’s feeling the joy, and being happy for the joy of others. . . . So, you’re happy for them, you feel their joy, and it just kind of continues and spirals to a great big ball of fuzzy warmness. So that’s compersion.” Little Joe found compersion to be helpful when dealing with jealousy: “I get twinges of [jealousy], but the whole compersion concept, as a tool, is so helpful. And if I live it, then when I see Samantha and [her tertiary relationship] together, it makes me feel much better as a person.”

Issues With Polyamory

All the participants experienced one or more “issues with polyamory,” including the two highly important issues of (a) working on issues is vital!, and (b) honest communication is vital!, as well as six other issues of importance: being in the middle, complexity of polyamory, jealousy, third-person issues, time, and trust.

Working on Issues Is Vital!

Some participants expressed the strong importance of working on issues within their intimate relationships, and the other participants agreed that this was vital! [with an exclamation mark]. For example, Britannia described this with respect to jealousy:

“People have to be honest with themselves, and to say, wow, I have some real feelings of jealousy here, where are those coming from? . . . So I think dealing with those feelings, identifying where they come from, and discussing them in the open is essential.”

Samantha described this as a tiring process: “Exhaustion. Feeling like you’ve got to be working on [relationships] all the time.” And Mabel expressed a concern for personal responsibility in doing personal work: “If one of the partners, the friends, is having difficulty, we will choose to take time and help them. But then that person needs to take absolute individual responsibility to have done as much of the homework as they can on their own.”

Honest Communication Is Vital!

As with the previous theme, some participants expressed the strong importance of honest communication within their intimate relationships, and the other participants agreed that honest communication is vital! [with an exclamation mark]. Also, some participants described having problems in their relationships following a lack of honest communication. According to Zach, “We want someone who will communicate with us. . . . That is the key to polyamory. It’s communication. . . . Honest communication. Complete. Don’t leave anything out, or you’re going to hurt somebody.” Honest communication involved the making of mutual agreements; as with Seven Snake, “That’s one of the courtesies of polyamory is to check with each other before doing anything with

somebody else.” For Kierstyn, “It’s important that before any sexual contact happens, . . . especially between friends, it be negotiated in sober space.” Further, the feedback group agreed that “people change, so agreements will change.”

Honest communication also involved issues of privacy and sexual details.

Regarding privacy in relationships, Samantha stated, “I also feel pretty strongly that your relationship with each partner is a private thing. And there’s a fine line between sharing, . . . and keeping that sort of special, sacred thing between you and your other lover.”

Regarding the sharing of sexual details, Pantagruel stated, “[Sexual] details, details with other partners—as much as I feel comfortable with, and that varies from the situation to the situation.” For Seven Snake, “Knowing details helped the glow—that was all very positive. We’d discuss the encounter endlessly, and have a lot of fun doing it.” On the other hand, Modesty’s experience was different: “Even though he knows and accepts and is fully aware of my sexual relationship with my boyfriend, [my husband] does not want to hear about it. If I have a problem with that, he doesn’t want to hear about it. And with my boyfriend, he doesn’t want to know.” Jealousy had a strong association with the communication of sexual details as a sensitive area of honest communication (a subtheme of intimate relationships), and the feedback group agreed that “the boundaries associated with privacy and sexual details may change.”

Being in the Middle

Several participants have experienced themselves, or a close relationship, “being in the middle”; in other words, playing some intermediary role within the relationships. There was a strong association between being in the middle and an expansive support system (a subtheme of intimate relationships), because an expansive system allows

readily for intermediary positions. Little Joe described an experience of the intermediary in a catalyst role: “There was so much attraction and so much energy there that it was frustrating for both of us. And finally, it took Samantha and alcohol to get us to come out to each other, that we had this. And Samantha basically made this happen.” Modesty described herself as an interpreter: “I’m more of an interpreter between the two of them [my husband and boyfriend] in a lot of ways, because they’re so different.” And Seven Snake described one example where being in the middle was especially negative: “My experience of being in the middle . . . was very, very painful. I was feeling protective of the both of them . . . and I couldn’t find inside myself any resources to help either one of them. Because I was literally too close to the situation.”

Complexity of Polyamory

Several participants expressed that polyamory has been a complex experience, and normal relationship issues became magnified in the presence of multiple intimacies. According to Gimel, “It’s nothing that doesn’t happen in any kind of relationship. It’s just that it gets amplified if you’re dealing with more than two. Way amplified.” As a result, there were associations between complexity and many subthemes of intimate relationships, as well as a potential for affecting other main themes; however, the feedback group agreed that it would be too complicated a task to chart out and would likely depend on the person involved. Some of this complexity was associated with the configurations of multiple relationships; for example, consider Britannia’s abbreviated relationship history: “A triangle quad, . . . a quad that tried to more or less be equal. And then a primary relationship with secondary or borderline tertiary partners, and then . . . [a few more complex set of relationships]. You need flowcharts to understand it all!” For

some, this complexity presented one reason to avoid too many relationships (whatever that means for the person). According to Modesty, “It gets to be a far more complicated juggling act, the more balls get involved in it. And so that’s why outside of the two, I have very limited relationships with anybody else.”

There were two themes of typical relationship issues enhanced by complexity: one theme that the group agreed to label “endings, change, or loss,” and gender issues. Some participants described painful experiences involving endings, change, or loss. For example, Little Joe described how it had felt to lose a significant relationship that had been part of a larger configuration: “It’s like tasting the happiest apple ever. But you know, that’s one of the problems . . . losing that bliss, that was overwhelming to me. I felt like it was just sick and wrong that I had to experience this, and then it was gone.” In Mabel’s experience, this also involved children: “So we have had the very painful experience of having women come into our family, and I bond with their children, . . . and then they decide they can no longer do poly. And so I lose the relationship with them, and . . . with the children. Real painful.” Some participants described experiences related to gender issues, and there was a strong association between gender issues and the experience of falling into social roles (a subtheme of mainstream culture). Some gender issues were involved with communication styles; Britannia stated, for example, “I actually think that Samantha and I discuss a lot more than either of us do with Little Joe. . . . We don’t get into graphic details, unless it’s anecdotal. Like, . . . don’t you love it when he does this? We are girls sitting around talking.” And in Mabel’s experience, there was a difference in the manner that males and females approached polyamory: “Males want poly because they want to have sexual union with other women. I think

that's pretty much a given. So it's not as much about freedom for them as it is that they can have more than one female partner.”

Given the complexity of polyamory and the relationship issues that become magnified and multiplied, there were some who asked, “Is it worth it?” For the participants, answers were affirmative. Mabel stated, for example, “What I really want to do in sharing my story . . . is to name the hard work, . . . [and] name the pain, and then right along with it, the fruits. . . . It's a good, honest, down-to-earth work if we're courageous enough to do it. And it has incredible rewards.”

Jealousy

Several participants described experiences involving jealousy. This theme had strong associations with the communication of sexual details as a sensitive area of honest communication (a subtheme of intimate relationships) that potentially brings up jealousy, and also with self-exploration (a subtheme of learning and growing) as a means to deal with it. The feedback group agreed that “jealousy is a big teacher.” For Kierstyn, it has been positive to learn that “it can really be ok, and you can really work through some of the emotions that you have, and yeah, you're going to feel jealous but you've worked through that. So I guess . . . it's just a general sense of well-being.” According to the group, jealousy is more about intimacy than sex; as in Modesty's experience, “I have that emotional connection to my boyfriend, so [my husband] does not want to see that. He knows that's not just sex.” In addition, the topic of jealousy was involved with roughly 15 % of the group discussion for the initial two sessions (i.e., the main part of group data collection). Most of the participants had experienced jealousy at some time or other; however, Seven Snake presented no direct emotional experience with it, stating, “I've

never understood those feelings [of jealousy], but I understand that they are there for most people.” However, she once struggled with monogamist cultural values being at odds with her own lack of jealous feelings: “It’s in the culture. People warn you about the jealousy feelings, . . . all the stories contain jealous feelings anytime somebody does something. If you’re not feeling jealous, there’s this expectation that’s something wrong with you.”

Third-Person Issues

Some participants experienced issues in maintaining three members of an intimate relationship configuration within a monogamist culture that typically only recognizes couples and holds a bias against the “other man” or “other woman.” According to some participants, a third person often ends up getting the short end of the stick, or being objectified; for example, Britannia stated, “He brought up interest in a threesome, female-female-male . . . I just said no, flat out, because I felt like . . . it would have been about fulfilling a fantasy, and that person would have been very objectified rather than brought into a loving circle.” Another example of a third-person issue was marriage; for example, Kierstyn stated, “It’s hard to be respectful of a third party. I have a friend who’s a third party in this marriage. . . . And I worry a lot about it.” On the other hand, except for the social role of marriage, the feedback group agreed that “the role of the third person can be anyone” depending on the circumstances. In addition, some members of the feedback group agreed that three-person relationship configurations were fairly common and a significant issue. This was the case in Mabel’s experience: “Whenever I did attempt to explore issues with polyamory people on the Internet, when I suggested that it didn’t have to be limited to three, and that it could be more expansive, the walls went up.”

Time

Many participants experienced issues dealing with time and polyamorous relationships; according to Little Joe, “We try to work things out with time, which is the biggest issue. So that everybody has time with each other and we have time together.” On the one hand, polyamory presented practical issues with time and schedules; on the other hand, in Modesty’s experience, “It’s a lot of demands on the other person’s time to try and be everything for that one person. It was really nice to have other outlets when I got involved with—I guess currently I would classify him as my boyfriend.”

Trust

Several participants described experiences related to the significance of trust in intimate relationships, sometimes expressing its importance and sometimes involving a sense that trust has deepened for them in the presence of polyamory. For Little Joe, “I have so much more trust in my relationships . . . by not worrying about faithfulness, or their commitment to me. I don’t worry about those things anymore because I know it’s there and I trust that. And the trust is the hard issue.” In Kierstyn’s experience, improved communication has nurtured trust: “[Zach and I] know each other so well. He’s not afraid to say, ‘Oooh, I like that,’ or ‘Oh, I find that attractive,’ or ‘I don’t like that about this person,’ you know, whereas it might be something similar to me. . . . There’s a lot of trust there.”

Relationship Phases

The participants described experiences relating to five relationship phases; however, these phases were not seen as necessarily distinct, and so there was some overlap among them. The phases are presented below in rough chronological order:

becoming familiar with potential relationships, selecting potential relationships, new relationship energy, becoming familiar with new relationships, and sharing a household is a significant step.

Becoming Familiar With Potential Intimate Relationships

Some participants described experiences related to the process of becoming familiar with potential intimate relationships. There was a fear of revealing the polyamorous nature of their multiple intimacies and being misunderstood or rejected; according to Kierstyn, “It’s hard to meet other people, [being afraid] that they’ll think you’re a freak.” In addition, polyamory complicates the becoming-familiar process insofar as typical social assumptions are involved because polyamory ventures outside the typical; as in Little Joe’s experience: “You say . . . I’m married, and I have one child. That can throw everything off to somebody who doesn’t know anything about you, so if it’s in that circumstance [with a potential intimate relationship], then I like to shed myself of my layers slowly.” The feedback group agreed that there can be an assumption of promiscuity from people when they learn you’re polyamorous, even among the polyamorous, and in cases where a relationship is not desired. According to Samantha, “It’s hard if people know you’re poly, like in school. People think that you’re checking them out. Even though you’re married, even though they’re married, they think you’re going to jump them. That you want to jump them.” And in cases where relationships were potentially desired, the becoming-familiar process sometimes involved more than two people. In Zach’s experience, polyamory was a positive influence on his social life and his relationship with Kierstyn: “It affects my social life a lot, ‘cause Kierstyn and I both can look at women and give each other nudges and stuff, ‘Ohh, oooo, hm,’ and can

flirt with other women that flirt back.”

Selecting Potential Intimate Relationships

Most of the participants described experiences related to the selection of potential intimate relationships, and there was a strong association between this theme and the concern for the persistence of friendships before becoming sexual (a subtheme of selective social circles). Some participants expressed the idea that there is not a formula for relationships; rather, it depends on what works with the existing relationships.

Britannia stated, for example, “I don’t think there’s any magic formula that works, I don’t think that there’s something to try to achieve as far as a configuration for a poly family. I think that’s so dependent on individual personalities and what people need.” However, there may be specific criteria that are evaluated in selecting potential relationships, such as previous experience with polyamory, or safe-sex behavior. Or with Zach, regarding the possibility of another male getting involved, sexual orientation became a factor: “I’m straight, I don’t like guys. . . . I’m not attracted, so it wouldn’t work. It’s kind of got to be part of it.”

New Relationship Energy

Some participants described experiences related to the beginnings of a relationship involving an exciting, high level of energy. Pantagruel described this energy as “electrifying, . . . anticipation of sexual thrill.” For Zach, this was a positive influence in his relationship with Kierstyn: “Every time we’re with another person, it really ups our private sex life a lot. When we’re together alone we’re a lot more intimate, and fantasizing about it together and stuff seems to really excite both of us. It really helps.” This energy was sometimes referred to as “new relationship energy” (a term used within

the polyamorous community); Britannia defined it as being “caught up in a person . . . to the point where you are giddy, and your cheeks hurt from smiling all the time, and your friends are tired of hearing stories about this person, . . . and how the sun shines out of their ass, that’s new relationship energy.” This high level of energy may become a relationship issue as well as a phase, as in Britannia’s experience with a former relationship: “You need to address the emotions and fears of your primary relationships, and he was not very willing to do that. . . . For him, polyamory is about new relationship energy, . . . this warm foofy gooshy romantic person is not who he really is.”

Becoming Familiar With New Intimate Relationships

Several participants described experiences related to the process of becoming familiar with new intimate relationships, and how this changed the established relationship system; according to Little Joe, “Bringing in new people messes everything up.” The established system may have developed existing ways to cope with difficult situations that become disrupted by a new person; according to Seven Snake, “We know each other’s anxieties, we know what to do. And anybody else trying to step into the ‘I want to do something here’ position interferes with the rapid and smooth getting through with an anxiety event, and just blows it all up.” Participants also expressed specific concern for the new person entering the existing relationship system; for example, Britannia stated, “It is difficult as a person coming into an existing relationship, where they have their traditions, and they have their little rituals, and they have their own language, even. And taking quite a while to become initiated into that.” Within a multiple-relationship system, the becoming-familiar process may become more complex than in typical relationships, and there was a strong association with complexity as a

subtheme of intimate relationships. For example, in Pantagruel's experience: "There will be lots of exciting getting-to-know-you conversations, which may include all of us, or may include just some of us and the rest have to catch up later. That feels kind of bad, but you can't always be there."

Sharing a Household Is a Significant Step

Some of the participants described experiences or perspectives involving the significant step of sharing a household within the progression of a relationship, and there was a strong association between sharing a household and the theme of core relationships. For example, Modesty stated, "I'm staying away from the child thing because I don't want it to be too confusing right now. . . . Although I could see it being a really good thing, if we were all in one household. And two daddies is fine, as long as they're both daddy." For Mabel, a sufficient amount of becoming familiar was seen as crucial before sharing a household: "The work of understanding a person and their perceptions, and allowing them their perceptions . . . needs to take place before you move into a household, because that will tell you whether or not you can live in a household."

Core Relationships

Most participants described experiences relating to a special level of core relationships within their circle of intimate relationships, held with a special commitment or exclusivity. However, Mabel and Pantagruel did not appear to make such a distinction in their intimate relationships and presented a more egalitarian approach (in which all intimate relationships might be considered core relationships); furthermore, there may be significant overlap between the themes of core relationships and intimate relationships, so this boundary was represented with a dotted line in Figure 1. There were two subthemes

describing experiences with core relationships and polyamory. First, participants described experiences related to “family and its relationship with polyamory,” involving themes of chosen family versus the family of origin and child-raising. Second, participants described experiences related to “loyalty and commitment,” involving ground rules and special exclusivity.

Family and Its Relationship With Polyamory

Within their core relationships, the participants had experiences related to family in the areas of child-raising and the division that sometimes occurs within the family as a whole between the family of origin and the chosen family.

Child-Raising

Related to both chosen family and family of origin (as in the subtheme that follows), some of the participants described past experiences related to child-raising within a polyamorous family, and some participants, lacking experience, expressed their expectations of what that might mean for them. In both cases (i.e., the experience and the expectation), some participants described the benefits of having an expanded support system and diverse role models for the children. Britannia stated, for example, “And [our son] will have another person in his life . . . He gets the same benefits of what I was talking about before of having [larger] support systems. . . . And three people with different life experiences and different strengths for him to draw from.” In addition, the feedback group agreed that “diverse role models may promote open-mindedness and acceptance of other views,” and there was a strong association between this and the theme of wishing for more acceptance within mainstream culture. Some participants described the difficult issues of being different and raising children within a polyamorous

family. Samantha described her feelings on the subject, stating, “Fear of social services. Or incredible amounts of feeling protective over my son. . . . I don’t believe I would feel this way unless we were in a poly relationship, because I wouldn’t imagine them having any reason to take him away from us.” To some degree, raising children in a monogamist society involved exposure to monogamist prejudice. Mabel stated, “Although alternative relationship might seem like a high ideal, . . . children that are raised . . . that way will still be . . . governed by society, and society for the most part says it’s wrong. So we are placing our children in a place of conflict.”

Some participants also noted from experience or expectation that it all depends on the qualities of the caretakers as to whether polyamory and child-raising will be a positive or a negative experience for the children and the family. As Samantha stated, “So, he’s a very secure child. . . . The teachers at his school adore him because he’s so loving. So it’s very positive—but again, in our experience, we’ve got good people. If you don’t make the right choices, it could be very negative.”

Chosen Family Versus the Family of Origin

Several participants described experiences involving a sense of chosen family. According to Pantagruel, “As I think about it, I probably had these notions [growing up] . . . [of] communal living or extended household,” and added later, “I think polyamory may be an effort . . . toward recreating . . . the extended family that may not be available to a world where people have to move where the income is and can’t stay with the aunts and uncles and cousins.” Some participants had limited, positive responses from their family of origin regarding their chosen (polyamorous) family. In Britannia’s experience, “It’s something that [my parents] don’t know quite how to process, . . . they’re not quite

sure how it will affect my future . . . and so I think they worry a lot about that. But I do think that they see that what is between all of us is very genuine.” However, there were also examples of negative reactions from family of origin; again in Britannia’s experience, “It seems to be a fairly common view that what we’re doing is somehow wrong, and is somehow harming [the child]. And I think we’ve had to dispel some of that within Little Joe’s family, and even within my family to a certain extent.” Due to the fear of negative reactions, some participants have remained in the closet about their lifestyle and have chosen not to discuss it with one or more members of their families of origin. According to Modesty, “[My family is] not aware of the nature of my relationship with him. Cause they are very strict LDS, and I honestly think it might kill my mother if she really knew.” Some participants, being in the closet with their families-of-origin, would like to be more open with them—except for the fear of negative reactions. As Kierstyn stated, “I don’t think they want to hear it. And I don’t think it would benefit anyone for them to hear it. . . . I can’t be an advocate with my parents about it. . . . In a lot of ways, it makes me sad that they don’t really know who I am.”

Loyalty and Commitment

Most of the participants described having a higher sense of loyalty and commitment to particular intimate relationships. For example, Seven Snake stated that “I will continue to be open to the possibility of sharing with other people, within the context of . . . what I’m committed to with Gimel. Because that’s the important part for me. And it will always be there.” Gimel also expressed having a primary commitment to her relationship with Seven Snake, and she added, “It seems to me it would be simpler all around if the bonds were approximately equivalent all the way around the triangle,

approximately the same strength, but they're not. What relationship is ever as we ideally conceive it to be?"

Ground Rules

Some of the participants described experiences with establishing ground rules within their core relationships, and to some degree regulating their intimate relationships in general. These ground rules were sometimes vague, sometimes specific and written down. In Samantha's experience, the ground rules were written down and include a negotiated veto system: "It was my choice to have a tertiary relationship, but it's Little Joe's and Britannia's choice to veto anyone. . . . Which may seem harsh, but if it's going to work, it has to be that way. And it's my choice to agree to ground rules." In Kierstyn's experience, the ground rules have come to focus on honest communication, rather than a written system: "We've tried to write different rules, and have ideas about what the rules should be, and then our ideas rarely worked except for what I think can be the only rule, if you do it, if you really follow it, and that is talk about it." In any case, the feedback group agreed that ground rules may change significantly over time, whether they are vague or specific or transforming from one form into another.

Special Exclusivity

Some of the participants described periods of special exclusivity with specific relationships. Little Joe stated, for example, "Our high priestess and our high priest highly recommended that we . . . establish our relationship, . . . because if you do [poly] too early, it can be destructive. . . . So Samantha and I stayed pretty exclusive for two or three years." This exclusivity sometimes implied sexual exclusivity, as in Samantha's aforementioned experience; sometimes the exclusivity involved the nature of the sexual

relationships, as in Seven Snake's experience: "Gradually, as we explored our primary orientation, which is dominant/submissive, then exclusiveness started coming out there. Gimel did not wish to offer her submission to anyone else. And I could do that. I could be exclusive with her that way."

Self-Identity

The participants described experiences and perceptions that involved a sense of self-identity, and the personalized ways in which polyamory was experienced by each of them as compared with the experiences of others. There were three subthemes for ways in which the experience of polyamory related to self-identity. First, there appeared to be a "diversity of sexual identity" among the participants as a whole, categorized into personal relationship with monogamy, the nature of polyamory, and the complexity of sexual orientation. Second, the subtheme of labeling and "polyamory" involved the experience that "polyamory" means many things; and all of the participants had been polyamorous in some sense and for some time before discovering or identifying with the term "polyamory." Third, there were four categories describing "personal meanings of polyamory": changing meanings, intimacy: not just sex and not swinging, living outside the cultural norms, and spirituality or profound love.

Diversity of Sexual Identity

The participants had differing sets of experiences and personal meanings involving their sexuality. These experiences of sexual identity have been grouped into the following categories: personal relationship with monogamy, the nature of polyamory, and the complexity of sexual orientation.

Personal Relationship With Monogamy

Some participants had held a monogamous perspective at one time and then transitioned into polyamory; for example, in Modesty's experience, "I had to reclassify, redefine myself. . . . I was always . . . a one-man kind of woman, and I never saw myself ever going outside that relationship at all. I . . . only dated [my husband] from high school until the time we were married." Although polyamorous, some participants stated that monogamy would be an acceptable choice for them now; according to Samantha, "I could [choose to be sexually monogamous]. It would be easy. I could form relationships—caring, intimate, non-physical relationships—with men and women." On the other hand, other participants did not find monogamy an acceptable choice; according to Britannia, "I suppose that it would have been possible for me to choose to be monogamous. . . . And I think that I would have felt very resentful in trying it, so yes, there is some choice, but . . . [if] I'm at a point where I'm being honest with myself, there's no choice."

The Nature of Polyamory

Some participants had experiences during their adolescence or before suggesting that polyamory may be natural for them (whereas other participants did not). In Seven Snake's experience, "I was kind of shocked to find . . . I did not feel exclusive toward the first three or four guys that I fell in love with. It surprised me. . . . I wasn't feeling the feelings, and I wondered if something was wrong with me for not feeling the feelings." Other participants expressed the feeling that polyamory may be natural for them more directly; according to Little Joe, "I think it's my natural instinct to be poly, based on certain things that have happened in my past." And for Gimel, a polyamorous nature has

not been an all-or-nothing experience: “I have both tendencies, the tendency to just focus down onto a single person and enmesh with that one person, and that’s that. I have very much that urge in me. At the same time, I have very much the urge to throw myself wide and embrace much and many.”

The Complexity of Sexual Orientation

For some participants, the experience of sexual orientation has been more complex than typical labels (such as heterosexual or bisexual) can adequately represent. For example, Little Joe and Pantagruel accepted the label of “mostly heterosexual,” and Kierstyn reluctantly accepted the label of “bisexual” as a descriptive term although she prefers the term “queer” (or “nonheterosexual, nongender-typical”) to express a deeper sense of her identity. In addition, Seven Snake and Gimel experienced their sexual orientations along a dominant/submissive axis, rather than an axis of gender preference. Gimel stated, “I really believe that my fundamental orientation is along the BDSM [Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, Sadism & Masochism] axis. And I also firmly believe that having only one axis that can be labeled orientation is an impoverished way to look at the world.”

Labeling and “Polyamory”

With respect to self-identity, some participants had experiences relating to the term “polyamory,” its literal meaning (or meanings) for them, and their level of identification with it as a label. For example, Gimel stated, “It took me awhile to decide that the label fit because I’m not big on labels.” In Pantagruel’s perception, the term polyamory may be temporary: “I can imagine 10, 15 years from now, someone speaking of post-polyamorous relationships when we get tired of this label and just recognize we

are in relation, and it's a matter of degree." There was a strong association between the label of polyamory and the experience of social isolation and discovering others (a subtheme of mainstream culture), because the label of polyamory sometimes provided the means to bring together individuals and related resources in this area. For Little Joe, "polyamory" was "real and solid. . . . I had something to work with, . . . something to share, and gain from. Besides the regular definition of ethical, responsible, open, honest nonmonogamy, it meant an entire world of things to learn and things to practice." Due to the similarity between the terms polygamy and polyamory, there was also a strong association between the experience of labeling with "polyamory" and prejudice and confusion with polygamy (a subtheme of monogamist prejudice).

"Polyamory" Means Many Things

Some participants described the term "polyamory" as meaning many things to different people. According to Zach, "It kind of involves a whole circle of a lot of different circumstances. . . . Some of them probably are very sexual. And others just want to be able to share their love and experiences with other people." Zach added later that a term holding a diversity of meanings can still bring people together in a beneficial way: "Polyamory is kind of broad. . . .It doesn't narrow it down to just certain situations, but at least they're similar enough to where people can talk about it and learn from it with each other." Resulting from different personal meanings of polyamory, there were examples where one person's polyamory may not satisfy another's definition. For several participants, one example of differences in definition was the assertion that polyamory is different from swinging (a subtheme of self-identity within personal meanings of polyamory); in Samantha's words, "I believe they called themselves

polyamorous, but in my mind, I consider it more swinging, open relationship type stuff.”

And for Mabel, polyamory held a personal meaning related to freedom: “If anyone within a polyamory relationship, on any level, restricts someone’s free choices, then they are not polyamorous, even though they call themselves polyamorous. I think.”

Polyamory Before “Polyamory”

In most cases, the participants were polyamorous in some sense before discovering the label of “polyamory” or before applying the label to themselves. In Samantha’s experience, “We had no idea that [the term polyamory] existed. We had no idea that there was like tons of people out there—not with what we do as poly, but the broader umbrella of poly.” Having discovered the term of polyamory, some participants identified with the label only after a period of time or only on occasion; according to Gimel, “It’s not a label that I deal in much, but the concept in my life matters a lot.” For some participants, discovering polyamory provided a better term with which to identify; according to Zach, “I didn’t know the word [polyamory]. I knew I was nonmonogamous. Polyamory to me includes more, so I like the term.”

Personal Meanings of Polyamory

On some level, meanings of polyamory were associated with every theme and subtheme of the results. With this in mind, some of the participants’ statements provided a conscious expression of meaning associated with the experience of polyamory, such as “polyamory means . . .,” or “polyamory is about . . .,” or some other context involving this basic idea. Similar statements of meaning were grouped in the category of labeling and “polyamory” (also a subtheme of self-identity); however, these statements about labeling were concerned with the meaning of the term rather than the experience. There

were four categories of personal meanings associated with the experience of polyamory: changing meanings, intimacy: not just sex and not swinging, living outside the cultural norms, and spirituality or profound love.

Changing Meanings

For some participants, the personal meanings of polyamory have been changing; for example, Gimel stated that “there are probably other times when my perspective on polyamory has changed—in fact, I know there have been. There have been many. It’s a living thing.” For some, changes in the personal meanings of polyamory were associated directly with the experience of living it; according to Samantha, “The term [polyamory] isn’t different [in its meaning over time] but the reality is different. Because it’s one thing knowing that it means, and believing loving many, it’s another thing having that in your life.” In contrast, Zach provided one example where the meaning of polyamory clearly had not changed (contemporary with the first interview): “It hasn’t really changed yet. It hasn’t had time to change yet. It’s only two years old.”

Intimacy: Not Just Sex and Not Swinging

Several participants expressed the personal meaning that polyamory is not just about sex; rather, polyamory is about intimacy. The feedback group agreed. As Mabel stated, “Here’s the difficulty I have with polyamory, and it’s even labeled in your description of it. Sexual, the word sex is in there. And as humans we are so much more than that.” For some, polyamory may not necessarily involve sex. Pantagruel had a nonsexual experience that he felt may have been polyamorous and wondered, “I was hanging out with several girls who loved each other, and I don’t think I had sex with any of them. Is that polyamory? We cared about each other, we took care of each other—I

think that was just for a summer.” Some participants stated that polyamory is not the same as swinging; as Modesty stated, “To me, [polyamory] is not being a slut, which a lot of people initially have figured that it was—and perhaps that I did as well—or the term adulterer, or swinger.” For the record, however, there were sometimes qualifiers that although swinging was not polyamory for the participant, it might qualify as polyamory for someone else. As Modesty added shortly after the previous quote, “Swinging is just a type of polyamory, I suppose, but it’s not necessarily one that I participate in.” So for some, it would be more accurate to state that polyamory was not swinging for these participants, who may have known others to use the term differently (associated with the experience that “polyamory” means many things—a subtheme of self-identity and personal meanings of polyamory). For these participants, polyamory was about the experience of intimacy. As a strong example of this, Samantha described what she perceived as a nonsexual and polyamorous relationship that was based in intimacy: “I am in a polyamorous relationship with Britannia. . . . She and I are not intimate [sexually], but I only consider it to be in a polyamorous relationship with her because I fully trust and love her.”

Living Outside the Cultural Norms

Some participants clearly expressed that, for them, polyamory meant living outside the cultural norms, and there was a strong association between this and the experience of exploring the unknown (a subtheme of learning and growing). In Kierstyn’s experience, “Overall, I guess polyamory means ability and willingness to be open to experiences that may not fit within the social paradigm that one expects that you’re going to live out.” And for Mabel, “It’s not about loving more. It’s about

understanding what it is to be a human on a really difficult planet, and what it means to have the courage to step outside of what is considered right, and normal. . . . It's a very profound work for me.”

Spirituality or Profound Love

For several participants, polyamory was associated with a personal meaning of spirituality or profound love, and the feedback group agreed that this was an important theme for most of them. In the experience of some participants, polyamory allowed them to experience a greater level of love and the divine. For Gimel, “My goal spiritually is to open myself up to love in all its manifestations. And, for me, the fact that my mundane life can manifest a wider interpretation of love than it used to be able to manifest is very important to me.”

Learning and Growing

The participants described experiences of learning and growing that have been involved with polyamory and were pervasive with other themes or areas of their lives. These experiences have been arranged in three subthemes. First, experiences involved in “self-exploration and growth” were mentioned often, and included the subthemes of exploring sexuality and learning and growing from difficult experiences. Second, a sense of “exploring the unknown” was associated with living a polyamorous lifestyle. Third, participants mentioned that “resources for learning and growing are important” and discussed some resources that were helpful, although resources also seemed scarce.

Self-Exploration and Growth

Many participants described experiences involving self-exploration and growth, and such experiences were mentioned often during most of these interviews. Sometimes self-exploration involved being in an ambivalent relationship with mainstream culture; for Kierstyn, being polyamorous was “definitely a process of discovery, and figuring out my emotional responses, and trying to tease out what’s a valid response and what I see as an invalid response or as a socialized response.” Self-exploration usually involved an experience of personal growth, evolution, or becoming more complete; shortly after the previous quote, Kierstyn stated: “I think underlying it all is learning to trust myself.” Usually these experiences of growth were reflective on past experience while including an experience of confidence in an ongoing process of growth; according to Pantagruel, “I am quite happy to be growing to be a more complete human being. . . . People all around me are sexual and emotional and intellectual and spiritual and physical, and as my own restrictions . . . obstruct me less, I can see more of the beauty.”

The group agreed that jealousy (a subtheme of intimate relationships) was strongly associated with self-exploration and growth as a response to dealing with it. There were also strong associations between self-exploration, exploring the unknown (also a subtheme of learning and growing), and an expansive support system (a subtheme of intimate relationships), because such explorations are more difficult without an expansive support system. Self-exploration and growth involved many different experiences depending on the participant, such as learning self-honesty, honesty in relationships, self-awareness, self-image or self-acceptance, and an ability to trust. There were also experiences shared more often among the participants, grouped into two

categories: exploring sexuality and learning and growing from difficult experiences.

Exploring Sexuality

Some participants described experiences involving the exploration of their sexuality, and this exploration may or may not have been intentional. For Seven Snake, the exploration may have occurred unconsciously: “When I met the term polyamory, we were doing three-ing and four-ing, . . . sort of as a way to introduce sexuality with each other. I’m not sure it was all that conscious. We didn’t have the term polyamory at the time.” On the other hand, Modesty described an intentional example of sexual exploration: “We had . . . a very close friend of ours, and [my husband] suggested that maybe I could explore other areas sexually with him, because . . . he would basically care for me and it would be a good experience for me.”

Learning and Growing From Difficult Experiences

Several participants described a process of learning and growing from difficult experiences, and some participants framed their experiences along those terms. As described by Britannia, “Even the experiences that I had that caused me pain are experiences that hopefully will lead to growth and more emotional relationship health than hurt, as long as I try to process and accept them.” And as stated succinctly by Pantagruel, “What does most negative mean? Not getting what you want, or failing to learn from a learning opportunity?”

Exploring the Unknown

Several participants described an experience of exploring the unknown through living a polyamorous lifestyle; as Gimel stated, “If you don’t know that there are other

people who are doing this in real life, . . . if you don't know that there are books out there on the topic, and you know, back then there weren't even Internet support groups. . . . We truly were making it up as we went.” Exploring the unknown held a strong association with living outside the cultural norms (a subtheme of self-identity), because being outside the cultural norms largely brings about the unknown. There were strong associations between self exploration (the previous subtheme), exploring the unknown, and an expansive support system (a subtheme of intimate relationships), because the exploration would be difficult without the support system. In Little Joe's experience, having a spiritual support system was also important: “[I] later found out that my high priest and high priestess were also polyamorous, . . . and so the idea of having a multiple relationship within the religion made me feel better . . . [since] I didn't know if this was something that was going to make sense.” And Pantagruel expressed the perspective that exploring the unknown is an ongoing social process: “I believe that loving is a frontier, [and] that people will continue to invent and innovate new ways of living together and relating, over distances, over the Internet. Whether they're sharing households, . . . jobs, . . . [or] the raising of children.”

Resources for Learning and Growing Are Important

Some participants described the importance of having resources for support in their learning and growing process. According to Little Joe, “The thing about being poly is you need poly guidance. You need new tools, and you need to reprogram, deprogram, reprogram. Otherwise, you're doomed every time.” There were two subthemes for these resources: people, Internet and publications, and despite the knowledge of some existing resources, some participants expressed that resources have seemed scarce.

People, Internet and Publications

Participants experienced supportive resources in three categories: people, Internet and publications. First, meeting people who were familiar with polyamory—or willing to discuss it—was very helpful for some participants. As Little Joe stated, “Other people being out there, and living a poly life for other people to see. It’s been inspiring.” Also, Kierstyn described her husband as a resource: “Having a person, my husband, that I can be honest with, and . . . that encourages honesty, honest dialogue, that’s been helpful.”

Second, some participants found the Internet to be helpful in discovering other people and resources and in communicating with people. For example, in Pantagruel’s experience, “It was comforting to recognize, when I discovered the Internet, . . . that given a broad enough population of people you will find someone who is not only interested in what you are interested in, but is knowledgeable and willing to share.” On the other hand, the Internet was not as useful for all who discovered it; in Seven Snake’s experience, “I haven’t found any good resources. Let’s see, alt-dot-polyamory [an Internet site] actually was a resource that I used once.”

Third, some participants mentioned specific publications that have been useful resources for them, and Table 4 lists recommended reading from the 5 participants who made suggestions. There were examples in which specific publications were more helpful for one participant than another—or simply not helpful. In Samantha’s experience, “Little Joe ordered all the back issues [of *Loving More Magazine*]. It doesn’t matter which one I pick, there’s always something in it that’s relevant to me right now”; but in Mabel’s experience, “*Loving More Magazine* . . . didn’t act as a very good support for me. . . . Something about it just didn’t feel right.”

Table 4

Recommended Reading by Those Participants Who Made Suggestions

	Britannia	Gimel	Kierstyn	Little Joe	Samantha
<i>Bi Any Other Name</i> (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991)	●				
<i>The Ethical Slut</i> (Easton & Liszt, 1997)	●		●	●	
<i>Fire in the Belly</i> (Keen, 1992)				●	
<i>The Forbidden Tower</i> (Bradley, 1987)		●			
<i>Love Is Letting Go of Fear</i> (Jampolsky, Prather, & Keeler, 1988)					●
<i>Love Without Limits</i> (Anapol, 1992)	●	●		●	
<i>Loving More Magazine</i>				●	●
<i>Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus</i> (Gray, 1993)	●			●	●
<i>The Myth of Monogamy</i> (Barash & Lipton, 2002)			●		
<i>Radical Honesty</i> (Blanton, 1996)	●				

Resources Seem Scarce

Some participants expressed the feeling that resources for learning and growing were scarce, or at least seemed scarce. Sometimes this involved a lack of supportive and knowledgeable people; as Mabel stated, “Alternative relationships weren’t being done. I certainly wasn’t able to talk to my family. So there was nobody that I could go to [in order] to possibly get the tools—you know, what am I doing wrong here?” And sometimes this involved other resources for learning and growth, such as self-help publications or research. According to Kierstyn, “I’d flounder for tools that would be helpful. I’ve despaired at the lack of tools that were helpful. I was really excited about your project because of the lack of dialogue that happens, and the lack of resources.”

Summary of the Results

The seven main themes were discussed in the following order: (1) *monogamist prejudice*, (2) *mainstream culture*, (3) *selective social circles*, (4) *intimate relationships*, (5) *core relationships*, (6) *self-identity*, and (7) *learning and growing*.

(1) Participants experienced *monogamist prejudice* as pervading the other themes to some degree. Monogamist prejudice manifested within the areas of *mainstream prejudice*, *personal prejudice of others*, and *internalized prejudice*. Mainstream prejudice involved *institutional prejudice* and *social prejudice*. Personal prejudice of others involved the *loss of friendships*, *potential for “freaking out,” prejudice and confusion with polygamy*, *scapegoat of polyamory*, *some don’t understand*, and *some don’t want to know*. Internalized prejudice associated with monogamist social conditioning also involved *potential for “freaking out.”* The apparent redundancy of the potential for “freaking out” appearing twice essentially indicated one implied and

important subtheme that was pervasive within the theme of monogamist prejudice.

(2) Regarding *mainstream culture*, participants described three types of experiences or perceptions as polyamorous persons: *it's easier to go along, many people don't know*, and *social commentary*. The experience that it is easier to go along implied mainstream social expectations and involved *falling into social roles*. The experience that many people do not know about a participant's polyamorous lifestyle involved *social isolation and discovering others*, and experiences of *wishing to be more open*. Social commentary directed toward mainstream culture involved four categories: *alternative families and relationships exist, critique of monogamous relationships and nuclear family, hidden areas or taboos*, and *wishing for more acceptance*.

(3) Within their selective social circles, participants experienced *acceptance from select friends and within alternative communities* and maintained *selective and networked friendships*; in other words, they were often networked with the friends of those they already knew. Within these friendships, there was *concern for the persistence of friendships before becoming sexual, friendships developing into sexual relationships*, and *friendships persisting after the ending of sexual relationships*.

(4) Within their intimate relationships (where intimacy may or may not include sexuality), participants experienced *benefits with polyamory, issues with polyamory*, and experiences related to *relationship phases*. The benefits with polyamory involved *diversity in relationships, expansive support system, freedom to choose relationships*, and *shared love and "compersion."* The issues with polyamory involved two highly important issues: (a) *working on issues is vital!*, and (b) *honest communication is vital!* [with exclamation marks], and other issues of importance: *being in the middle*,

complexity of polyamory, jealousy, third-person issues, time, and trust. Relationship phases involved becoming familiar with potential intimate relationships, selecting potential intimate relationships, new relationship energy, becoming familiar with new intimate relationships, and sharing a household is a significant step.

(5) Most participants experienced a level of core relationships within their intimate relationships. Within their core relationships, participants had experiences related to *family and its relationship with polyamory, and loyalty and commitment*. Family and its relationship with polyamory involved issues associated with *child-raising and chosen family versus the family of origin*. Loyalty and commitment involved *ground rules and special exclusivity*.

(6) Participants had experiences and perceptions related to their self-identity and the personalized ways in which they experienced polyamory, assigned to three categories: *diversity of sexual identity, labeling and “polyamory,” and personal meanings of polyamory*. Diversity of sexual identity involved *personal relationship with monogamy, the nature of polyamory, and the complexity of sexual orientation*. Labeling and “polyamory” involved the experience that *“polyamory” means many things, and polyamory before “polyamory”*—in other words, the participants had been polyamorous in some sense and for some time before discovering or identifying with the term “polyamory.” Personal meanings of polyamory involved *changing meanings, intimacy: not just sex and not swinging, living outside the cultural norms, and spirituality or profound love*.

(7) Participants experienced learning and growing as pervading the other themes to some degree. Experiences within the theme of learning and growing were arranged in

the areas of *self-exploration and growth, exploring the unknown, and resources for learning and growing are important*. Self-exploration and growth included *exploring sexuality and learning and growing from difficult experiences*. Exploring the unknown involved many aspects of the participants' lives. Finally, resources for learning and growing are important and participants described some resources in the form of *people, Internet and publications*; however, participants also reported that *resources seem scarce*.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Among the seven main themes, *intimate relationships* related most closely to the practice of polyamory and provided the greatest number of subthemes; also, the theme of *core relationships* would be considered a select subcategory of intimate relationships. The other five themes presented either contextual or adaptive functions. The participants experienced polyamory as a minority group within mainstream culture; as a result, the themes of *self-identity* and *mainstream culture* were important contextual perspectives from which to better understand the experiences of the participants. *Monogamist prejudice* was a pervasive theme that provided another important context for many experiences. *Learning and growing* was a pervasive theme that appeared to be adaptive in the face of interpersonal stressors associated with a polyamorous lifestyle as well as the other pervasive theme of monogamist prejudice. Similarly, *selective social circles* appeared to be adaptive in the face of monogamist prejudice or its expectation—especially given the experiences of participants in which personal reactions of prejudice against (or acceptance of) polyamory were unpredictable from person to person. Following a discussion of specific themes and their relationship with the existing research, limitations of this study will be discussed, as well as implications for further research and for practitioners.

Intimate Relationships

The theme of *intimate relationships* related the most closely to polyamory in practice and provided the greatest number of subthemes. The emphasis on intimacy redirected the original focus of the research, which was multiple sexual partners. Nevertheless, participants in this study stated that polyamory means different things to different people. Anapol (1997) also emphasized intimacy in polyamorous relationships—referring to them as “lovestyles” (p. 178)—on the other hand, she recognized that different people have been living a variety of lifestyles and calling them “polyamory” (Anapol, 2001). There is ample evidence for diverse meanings and forms of polyamory (alt.polyamory, 1997; Munson & Stelboun, 1999; Rust, 1996). Therefore, looking at the big picture, polyamory presented a variety of lifestyles that emphasized both intimacy and sexual relationship to some degree. The participants in this study placed a strong emphasis on intimacy; however, these results were not generalizable, and the roles of intimacy and sexuality as manifesting in other populations are unknown. Nevertheless, a significant question was raised regarding the appropriateness for some persons of a relationship paradigm defining intimate relationships—or alternative forms of family—in sexual terms. Also, *core relationships* raised a question insofar as 2 participants preferred egalitarianism among their intimate relationships, rather than giving special loyalties to particular intimate relationships; this may relate to the evidence that communes with layered commitments tended to be more successful (Smith, 1999). Furthermore, the various categories of research that appeared relevant to multiple sexual partners—such as polygamy and group marriage—often overlapped without recognizing one another and the implications of their results. In brief, the big picture regarding

intimate relationships presented a complex and multilayered phenomenon that was difficult to describe and investigate using current terminology.

This research reflected some issues and benefits that were previously associated with polyamorous relationships among bisexual persons (Rust, 1996). Common issues were ground rules or agreements that grow and develop with the relationship, honest communication that may involve negotiated disclosure concerning specific amounts of detail, concerns for safe sex practices, and ample potential for jealousy. Common benefits were the freedom to choose diverse partners and meet diverse needs and a desire for the excitement of new partners (labeled in this research as “new relationship energy” and categorized as a relationship phase rather than a benefit). It is interesting to note that these essential benefits as well as the issues of jealousy and time factors were shared by swingers (Jenks, 1998); furthermore, ground rules and honest communication were implied to some degree in the informed consent of the swinging lifestyle.

Within core relationships, child-raising in a polyamorous family presented perceived benefits from diverse role models and multiple caretakers, as well as risks associated with monogamist prejudice. Also, a participant expressed social commentary that *alternative families and relationships exist* (a subtheme of mainstream culture) and that child-raising benefits from alternative cultural perspectives—paraphrasing Britannia, “it’s good for children to know that there are different types of families and they are not freaks.” This perspective appeared relevant to the evidence suggesting that functions, attitudes, and values associated with polygyny within a given society will influence its effect on children (given the potential overlap between polygyny and polyamory within core relationships or family). Furthermore, polyamory presented many interpersonal

stressors (as well as pervasive experiences of monogamist prejudice). This may be similar in some respects to the experiences of polygyny among Mormon fundamentalists (Altman & Ginat, 1996), although it would be difficult to compare the two cultures.

Contextual Themes

Some themes provided important contextual perspectives. Being polyamorous, the participants belonged to a minority group within mainstream culture; therefore, the themes of *self-identity* and *mainstream culture* were important contextual perspectives. In addition, the pervasive theme of *monogamist prejudice* was another important contextual variable that framed many of the participants' experiences. There was an interesting relationship between the contexts of self-identity, mainstream culture, and monogamist prejudice. Participants experienced monogamist prejudice within mainstream culture through sociopolitical institutions as well as storytelling and the media. Thus, the participants perceived themselves as living outside of cultural norms and might appear to be in an oppositional stance against mainstream culture; however, mainstream culture was not described as being completely nonaccepting, and reactions of acceptance or prejudice on a personal level were often unpredictable. With this in mind, mainstream culture presented some degree of acceptance or its potential—being monogamous does not necessitate prejudice. Therefore, mainstream culture and monogamist prejudice were separate despite significant overlap. Issues with monogamist prejudice and its manifestations in mainstream culture were evident with other polyamorous relationships (Rust, 1996); and, like some participants in this study, other polyamorists have questioned cultural norms (Anapol, 1997; Munson & Stelboum, 1999). It is significant to note that similar issues with monogamist prejudice and mainstream

culture were associated with intimate friendships (Ramey, 1975), swinging (Jenks, 1998), and Fundamentalist Mormon polygynous families (Altman & Ginat, 1996), and these issues likely apply in some sense to alternative lifestyles in general (Rubin, 2001).

One interesting aspect of self-identity arose from the participant demographics rather than the results. Although this study was not intended to be generalizable, the participants' demographics were consistent with demographics associated with intimate friendships (Ramey, 1975) and swinging (Jenks, 1998) on two factors: the participants were (a) mostly White and (b) possessed a relatively high level of education. On the other hand, Rust (1996) administered questionnaires in several countries regarding a wide range of sexual and social practices, and the respondents were mostly White and highly educated; therefore, these demographics appeared to suggest an elevated socioeconomic status related to willingness to discuss the topic of sexuality in general, rather than specific relationship practices.

Polyamory, for participants in this study, emphasized intimacy over sexuality, although other forms of polyamory emphasizing sexuality do apparently exist. The personal meanings of *spirituality or profound love* associated with polyamory for the participants in this study were not discussed in the research, although Anapol (1997) emphasized spirituality as a key component of polyamory. The presence of spirituality or religion in some polyamorous households may also relate to the evidence suggesting religiosity was a common component in successful communes (Smith, 1999); however, further research would be necessary to explore this.

With diversity of sexual identity, the self-identities of the participants presented a complex phenomenon similar to the diversity of meanings and forms associated with

polyamory. Some participants had had a *personal relationship with monogamy* (or its internalization), and had then transitioned into polyamory in some way; others had experiences suggesting that polyamory was natural for them. *The complexity of sexual orientation* questioned the discrete labels applied to describe orientation (such as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual), and reflected points on a continuum; however, the questioning of labels also included a critical examination of the descriptive qualities of a given label (such as bisexual or queer), as well as raising the question of whether sexual orientation should include multiple axes in order to describe preference (such as adding a dominant/submissive axis).

Adaptive Themes

Some themes appeared to be adaptive for the participants. *Learning and growing* was a pervasive theme that appeared adaptive in the face of interpersonal stressors associated with living a polyamorous lifestyle, as well as coping with the other pervasive theme of *monogamist prejudice*; in a similar manner, *selective social circles* appeared to be adaptive in the face of monogamist prejudice or its expectation.

Regarding the theme of learning and growing, Rust (1996) described polyamorous relationships among bisexuals as a process of development, and some experiences of lesbian polyamory (Munson & Stelboun, 1999) emphasized a sense of self-exploration and growth; for example, Dal Vera (1999) expressed this quite clearly in her experience:

Life is a patchwork quilt of experiences, each part fitting into a pattern. . . . Just as each piece of the quilt adds to the pattern, color, and texture of the whole, each of the women I've loved has contributed to my understanding and experience of polyamory, and love, and life. The quilt of my life continues to evolve as I continue loving women. (pp. 11-12)

Prior research on polyamory did not present the importance of resources for learning and growth—that included supportive people, publications and the Internet—as discussed by the participants in this study. However, the general importance of available poly-friendly resources was mentioned by Anapol (1997), as well as being highlighted by Wietzman (1999) and Davidson (2002) in their presentations to professional conferences in psychology. And, on a related note, the Internet appeared to be an important resource for the growth of the polyamory movement (Rubin, 2001); in addition, the same thing may be said regarding the growth of the swinging movement (Jenks, 1998).

Selective social circles helped to provide a network of accepting friendships, and this appeared especially significant given the experiences of participants who found that personal reactions of prejudice against (or acceptance of) polyamory were unpredictable from person to person. It is interesting to compare the phenomenon of selective social circles among these participants—in which friendships may develop into *intimate relationships*—with the concept of intimate friendships (Ramey, 1975): “otherwise traditional friendship in which sexual intimacy is considered appropriate behavior” (p. 515). Taking the comparison further, Ramey (1975) compared intimate friendships with an earlier concept—“Upper Bohemian”—that did not necessarily include sexuality but emphasized a network of support:

In the 1950s, as academic, professional, and managerial people became increasingly mobile, Russell Lynes (1953) coined the term “Upper Bohemian” to describe these nomads who soon established extensive networks of compatriots across the nation, and indeed, across the world. (pp. 527-528)

This comparison appeared relevant because, in addition to the networking of friendships within selective social circles, an expansive support system emerged as a benefit of multiple intimate relationships for participants in this study. Perhaps, for some,

a networked support system may include both friendships and intimate relationships; besides, some persons may experience these interpersonal roles along a continuum of friendship and intimacy. Such questions were not explored in this study; nevertheless, the complex nature of relationship calls for taking a closer look at the terminology inherent in “typical” relationships, as well as the invisible assumptions behind these terms—a view shared by Rothblum (1999), for example.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

This study had limitations and demonstrated areas that would likely benefit from further research. Regarding limitations, this study was localized to a single region and its culture; i.e., the Salt Lake City metropolitan area. The defining characteristics of polyamory such as degrees of intimacy versus more recreational forms of sexuality may likely differ in other areas and cultures. In addition, the sample demographics were significantly biased with regard to ethnicity (White), sexual orientation (bisexual), and level of education (relatively well-educated). Similar research on polyamorous lifestyles in other places and cultures would continue to triangulate the big picture; for example, the fact that there were no “only children” among these participants may be interesting to explore in other studies. Other research, suggested by Weitzman (1999), could explore the needs of polyamorous persons in a mental-health context from their perspectives.

Empirical research would be beneficial to understand, as well as to generalize, various factors—such as levels of intimacy or sexual activity—involved in different relational forms such as polyamory, monogamy, or polygamy (and resembling the questionnaire administered by Rust, 1996), and comparative data would help understand the meanings and prevalence of different relational forms across different cultural groups.

Such research could explore intimate relationships that may or may not include sexual intimacy. Another important area of exploration would be a comprehensive multicultural study of relationships, their labels, their associated and applied meanings, and the overlap among them, with the intention of developing a more advanced taxonomy of intimate relationships and facilitate a more unified body of knowledge and research. A more unified taxonomy would help mental health practitioners identify relationship issues and phases across various relational forms; it would also provide a greater understanding of these issues and phases in monogamous relationships as well as in other relational forms—including alternative forms of family.

Implications for Practitioners

Given the existence of lifestyles such as polyamory and the risk of internalized monogamist prejudice for anyone living in US culture, it is imperative that mental-health practitioners confront their own biases regarding these lifestyles in order to provide fair services that “do no harm.” Moser (2001) critically evaluated the diagnostic criteria in various editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) regarding the concept of “paraphilia.” In doing so, he found that some DSM criteria appeared to be subjectively influenced by mainstream values. He concluded that this is a significant concern:

Therapists need to be cognizant of the societal messages they and their clients have internalized, before judging others as mentally ill. Even those individuals who are more than two standard deviations away from the perceived norm are not necessarily ill. If the trait is the ability and desire to throw a football accurately, that person is rewarded in our society. If it is the ability and desire to engage in sex multiple times a day or with multiple partners, Kafka and Hennen [(1999)] would consider that person mentally ill. (p. 99)

Polyamorous persons are likely at risk to be stigmatized and pathologized as a result of monogamist prejudice. In addition, they are likely at risk for pervasive stressors

related to monogamist prejudice, as well as additional stressors on an interpersonal level related to typical intimate relationship issues being multiplied. Therefore, it is likely that polyamorous clients will present with relationship issues such as communication or the negotiating of boundaries, as well as elevated needs for acceptance and normalization that might be facilitated in a mental-health setting—provided that mental-health practitioners are able to do so (also noted by Rust, 1996). Multicultural awareness requires open-mindedness, education, and the confrontation of personal biases, and practitioners would benefit from educating themselves about polyamory (and alternative lifestyles in general), as well as clinical research on relationship issues and phases. In addition, practitioners would benefit from becoming aware of available resources—with many community-based resources easily accessible through an Internet search—that may be valuable tools for clients who are living (or perhaps exploring) polyamory or other alternative lifestyle. In exploring the suitability of different lifestyles with clients, mental-health practitioners may wish to consider an ego-development model (Loevinger, 1976) with regard to the potential stressors involved in multiple intimate relationships, or to explore the client's value stances (Stayton, 1985) with regard to dealing with personal values that may conflict with mainstream values; however, it must be noted that the efficacies of such interventions have not been empirically validated.

Summary and Conclusions

A polyamorous lifestyle related most closely to the themes of *intimate relationships* and *core relationships*, and the other themes appeared contextual or adaptive in nature. Participants usually described core relationships within their intimate relationships that received a special level (or perhaps levels) of commitment, whereas a

minority of participants preferred to be egalitarian in their intimate relationships without imposing a hierarchy; in either case, alternative forms of family were presented. Some issues in polyamorous relationships that validated existing research were ground rules or agreements and their ongoing development, honest communication and negotiated levels of disclosure, safe sex practices, and jealousy. Common benefits in polyamorous relationships were the freedom to choose diverse partners and meet diverse needs, and a desire for the excitement of new partners. Child-raising within polyamorous families was an issue that has received little academic attention, although the results of this investigation suggested that there appear to be risks associated with monogamist prejudice; furthermore, evidence regarding child-raising within polygynous families suggested that cultural values, such as mainstream values or the values of alternative cultures, will likely influence the children.

The contextual themes—*self-identity*, *mainstream culture*, and *monogamist prejudice*—provided important frames with which to understand the participants' experiences. It was interesting that self-identity may have appeared to be in opposition with mainstream culture as well as monogamist prejudice; however, monogamy does not necessitate prejudice, and the two themes were different. Issues associated with monogamist prejudice, including its manifestations in mainstream culture, have appeared in previous research with polyamorous persons and individuals in other alternative lifestyles. Regarding self-identity, participants in this study emphasized intimacy and spirituality as meanings of polyamory (despite other forms of polyamory). Also, the diversity of sexual identity for the participants critiqued the use of discrete labels such as “bisexual” or “heterosexual” both in their discreteness and descriptiveness, and

suggesting the addition of at least one axis (dominant/submissive) to the concept of sexual identity.

The adaptive themes—*learning and growing*, and *selective social circles*—appeared to be adaptive in the face of monogamist prejudice and interpersonal stressors. Learning and growth appeared to be an aspect of polyamory; furthermore, resources such as supportive persons, publications, and the Internet may be valuable tools for personal and relationship growth in polyamorous relationships. Selective social circles that included networked friendships raised the question of networked support systems, because an expanded supported system emerged as a theme in the research—within intimate relationships, a term that does not necessarily involve sexual relationship; this finding raised questions about labels such as “friendship” and “intimate relationship,” as well as “family.”

This study was limited in its sample demographics, and similar research involving other locations and cultures would help to triangulate the bigger picture regarding polyamorous lifestyles (and perhaps alternative lifestyles in general). Empirical research could provide comparative and generalizable data on different forms of relationship and a variety of relationship factors. Furthermore, critical analyses of relationship labels, their meanings and their interrelationships may help to develop consistent taxonomy of intimate relationships and a more unified field of knowledge and research.

This study provided a robust model with detailed and culturally-specific results that were not generalizable; nevertheless, considered with other evidence, the research presented the following conclusions for mental-health practitioners: (a) polyamorous persons are likely at risk for monogamist prejudice in many contexts; (b) practitioners

may be at risk for internalized monogamist prejudice and may need to confront this when serving nonmonogamous clients; (c) practitioners should educate themselves regarding polyamory (as well as other alternative lifestyles), and become aware of available resources—including information on the Internet—that may be helpful to polyamorous clients (or clients living other alternative lifestyles); (d) practitioners may wish to consider clients' levels of ego development and/or their personal value stances with regard to various lifestyle complexities and potential conflicts with mainstream values; (e) polyamorous clients will likely benefit from exploring relationship issues such as negotiating ground rules, communication, safe sex practices, and jealousy; and practitioners should educate themselves about relationship issues and phases; (f) these clients likely experience an abundance of stressors due to typical relationship issues being multiplied, as well as pervasive experiences of monogamist prejudice that may be unpredictable and include “freaking out” (as found in this investigation); and, therefore, (g) polyamorous clients may present needs for acceptance and normalization from mental-health practitioners who are able to model unconditional positive regard. Given the particular circumstances and risks, this final point may not be understated with regard to “doing no harm” with these clients.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH ANNOUNCEMENT

Exploring the Experiences and Meanings of Polyamory

- Are you polyamorous?
- Have you been polyamorous for at least one year?
- Are you 25 or older?

If so, you are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Matt Keener, a master's candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Utah. The study will explore the experiences and meanings of polyamory in the lives of polyamorous persons, with the purpose of raising polyamory awareness and understanding in the mental-health profession.

Polyamorous persons living in the Salt Lake City area will be interviewed individually, and then will be invited to gather with the other study participants for one or more focus group discussions. If you are interested, please contact the researcher:

Matt Keener
University of Utah
Educational Psychology
1705 Campus Center Drive RM 327
Salt Lake City, UT 84112-9255

(801) 581-7148
keener_m@ed.utah.edu

AND PLEASE PASS ON THIS INFORMATION TO ANYONE ELSE
WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Life history:
 - a. Demographic information. All responses are open-ended (i.e., allowing for elaboration or commentary) and optional. Survey items are (1) age; (2) gender; (3) sexual orientation; (4) ethnicity; (5) present religious or spiritual orientation, and the religious or spiritual orientation in which raised; (6) marital or relationship status and brief history; (7) disability status and a brief history; (8) present socioeconomic status, and a brief socioeconomic history; (9) geographic place of origin, and a brief history; and (10) the length of time that the participant has been polyamorous.
 - b. Early experiences:
 - i. When did you first consider yourself to be polyamorous? And would you describe one or more experiences associated with your early polyamorous identity?
 - ii. What did the term 'polyamory' mean for you at this time (if anything)?
 - c. Formative negative and positive experiences:
 - i. Would you describe your most negative early experience involving polyamory?
 - ii. Would you describe your most positive early experience involving polyamory?
 - d. Pivotal experiences (moving toward the present):
 - i. Were there any times in your life when your perspective on polyamory changed significantly? And would you describe one or more experiences that happened during each change?
 - ii. What did the term 'polyamory' mean for you at these times (if anything)?
2. Details of present experience:
 - a. Day-to-day experience:
 - i. How does polyamory affect your family life? And would you describe

- one or more examples of this?
 - ii. How does polyamory affect your social life? And would you describe one or more examples of this?
 - iii. How does polyamory affect your professional life or career? And would you describe one or more examples of this?
 - iv. How else does polyamory affect your life? And would you describe one or more examples of this?
 - b. Recent negative and positive experiences:
 - i. Would you describe a recent negative experience involving polyamory?
 - ii. Would you describe a recent positive experience involving polyamory?
3. Reflection on the meaning:
 - a. Past to present:
 - i. From your early experiences to the present, how would you describe the overall process of polyamory in your life?
 - ii. Are there deeper meanings behind this process for you?
 - b. The big picture:
 - i. What does the term 'polyamory' mean for you now? And does polyamory hold deeper meanings for you personally?
 - ii. What role (if any) does 'choice' play for you in being polyamorous?
 - iii. How do you expect polyamory to influence your future?
 - iv. How would you want polyamory to influence your future?
 - c. Things remaining to be discussed (i.e., further questions raised by participants in response to the last interview question; see question xiv, below):
 - i. How many major polyamorous relationships (involving significant time and commitment) have you been in?
 - ii. What polyamorous configuration(s) do you tend towards?
 - iii. What type(s) of polyamorous configurations have you been in?
 - iv. What kinds of resources have been helpful for you as a polyamorous person?
 - v. Have you had any interactions with the psychology or mental-health community in which the subject of polyamory came up? If so, what was your experience?

- vi. If relevant to you, how have you dealt with putting households together in poly relationships (emotionally, practically, and so forth)? Did that change the nature of the relationships, and if so, how?
- vii. How does coming into or bringing someone into an existing relationship (or configuration) affect the relationship (or the configuration)?
- viii. Did you witness polyamorous relationships growing up?
- ix. In your experience, what effect does polyamory have on child-rearing?
 - x. In your heart of hearts, what effect would you hope for polyamory to have in the structure of households with children?
 - xi. What are your motives for wanting to be in a polyamorous family?
- xii. If you had siblings, how many siblings were there and where are you in the birth order?
- xiii. How much do you discuss the details of your sexual relationships with other partners?
- xiv. [The question that was always asked last during the interview:] Can you think of any other questions that you would add to an interview like this one? And how would you answer them?

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent Form for Participation

The experiences and meanings of polyamory for polyamorous persons

PURPOSE:

I understand that Matt Keener, a master's candidate in the Professional Counseling Specialty of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University, is requesting my participation in his research on the experiences and meanings of polyamory for polyamorous persons.

PROCEDURES:

I understand that my participation will include the following:

- a. Matt, the researcher, will interview me individually for approximately 3 hours about my life experiences with polyamory and what polyamory means to me.
- b. I will be invited to share journal entries, writing, poetry, or art that may be relevant to me as a polyamorous person. This is optional.
- c. I will be invited to attend an optional group discussion. The group will meet once for 2 hours so that the research participants (including me) may share and discuss our experiences and meanings of polyamory. Additional meetings will be scheduled for this discussion if a majority of us wish to do so.
- d. The individual interview will be audiotaped. The group discussion(s) will be audiotaped and videotaped if the group members are comfortable with the idea; otherwise, the group discussion(s) will only be audiotaped. Matt will transcribe the recordings, replacing my name with a code name which I will have the option of choosing. My actual name will not appear on the transcript.
- e. If I attend the first group discussion, I will be invited several months later to attend another group discussion after Matt has completed his analysis of the transcriptions. This group will discuss the results of Matt's analysis and the proper manner of its presentation in the thesis. This group discussion will only be audiotaped, and this recording will not be transcribed.

- f. Whether or not I choose to attend group discussions, I will be given the opportunity to read all material in the developing thesis that pertains specifically to me. I may choose to change or delete anything in this material.
- g. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary.

DURATION:

The full extent of participation will begin as early as March 2002 and is expected to terminate by the end of March 2003. The total amount of time that I will be asked to commit is 3 hours for the individual interview, in addition to the amount of time required to examine the research material that pertains to me and provide feedback. There will be at least two group discussions—one following the individual interviews and another following data analysis—and others may be scheduled due to group interest. These group discussions are optional and will each last two hours.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

I understand that Matt, the researcher, will make every effort to preserve my confidentiality, including the following:

- a. Matt will keep participants' names, addresses, and phone numbers in a password-protected database. The informed consent forms, audio/videotapes, transcripts, and researcher notes will be kept in a locked safe in Matt's possession and to which only he has access.
- b. A code name (that I may choose if I wish) will replace my actual name in all notes and transcripts.
- c. At the beginning of each group meeting, the subject of confidentiality will be discussed. Group members will be encouraged to respect confidentiality while being informed that the researcher cannot guarantee the actions of the group members. If I participate in a group discussion, I will make every effort to preserve the confidentiality of other group members.
- d. All audio/videotapes, transcripts, and researcher notes will be destroyed when no longer needed for research purposes.
- e. The results of this study will be published in a thesis, and an abbreviated version could be published as a journal article. My confidentiality will be guarded by employing a code name, and changing or deleting other descriptive information.

RISKS:

I understand that I may experience a range of positive and negative emotions as a result of the interview process and possible group interaction. Negative feelings might include sadness, anger, fear, and confusion; whereas positive feelings might include happiness, empathy, understanding, and insight. I understand that I have the right to refuse any question, end any interview, or leave any group discussion, at any time.

Also, despite efforts taken to maintain confidentiality, there would be a slight risk that someone with enough prior knowledge may associate me with the published material.

BENEFITS:

I understand that this research will provide me an opportunity to explore my relationship with polyamory, and I might choose to share this exploration with other polyamorous persons. Also, I will be contributing to research that is needed to raise polyamory awareness in the mental-health profession, and I will receive a copy of the finished thesis.

WITHDRAWAL:

I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary. I may decline to answer any question, and I may withdraw from the research at any time by contacting Matt at the phone number, email or postal address listed below.

If I choose to withdraw after the individual interview, I may ask for my data to not be included in the study. Audiotapes of the individual interview will be erased and all documents related to me will be shredded. If I choose to withdraw after participating in one or more group discussions, all documents and audiotapes of group discussion will be kept; nevertheless, my participation in the group will not appear in the data or the study.

CONCERNS:

I understand that I may contact Matt if I have questions or concerns about this research. If I feel that there has been any injury, wrongdoing, breach of confidentiality, or any other concerns that should not be discussed with the researcher, I may contact Matt's advisor and thesis chair, Dr. Sue Morrow (801-581-7148) or the General University Institutional Review Board at the University of Utah (801-587-9134).

CONSENT:

I acknowledge that I have had this consent form explained to me, and I agree to participate in the study, including the audiotape recordings of my individual interview and group participation. I also have been given a copy of this consent form.

 Participant's Signature

Date

 Researcher's Signature

Date

The code name I would like to choose for my transcripts and all resulting data is:

Researcher:

Matt Keener
801-581-7148 (work)
keener_m@ed.utah.edu

University of Utah
Educational Psychology
1705 Campus Center Drive RM 327
Salt Lake City, UT 84112-9255

APPENDIX D

TIMELINE

Pre-Entry into the Field (November 2000)

The researcher began attending a monthly meeting held in the Salt Lake City area for people to discuss issues related to polyamory. This was done for personal interest and education as well as the possibility of meeting potential participants for a study exploring polyamory. The researcher attended this monthly meeting every few months until data collection (and then more sporadically as life interfered with more frequent attendance).

Development and Proposal (January 2001 – December 2001)

The proposal—involving the literature review and methodology sections—was written and successfully passed a colloquium on December 5, 2001. In addition, the researcher's self-reflective journal was started (as part of a graduate course on qualitative research) on January 28, 2001 and was maintained throughout the research process.

IRB Application and Approval (January 2002 – June 2002)

The initial application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Utah on January 28, 2002. The first memorandum from the IRB was received in April and revisions were submitted by the researcher soon thereafter. A second memorandum involving minor changes was received in May and those revisions submitted soon thereafter. The IRB approved the research on June 9, 2002.

Recruitment (June 2002 – August 2002)

Recruitment was an ongoing process in the beginning of data collection and overlapped with the individual interviews in August 2002. Copies of the research announcement were distributed among those attending the monthly meeting mentioned above in the "Pre-Entry into the Field" section and on Internet discussion groups. In addition, recruitment relied on snowball sampling to find participants.

Data Collection (August 2002 – January 2003)

This involved the individual interviews (August 2002 – October 2002) and three focus groups (meeting twice in October 2002 and once in January 2003). With the exception of two brief follow-up interviews, the individual interviews were conducted before the first focus group.

Data Analysis (January 2003 – February 2004)

The data analysis process consisted of transcription (August 2002 – January 2003); horizontalization (December 2002 – May 2003); clustering of meanings into themes (May – July 2003); textural description and an abbreviated analysis of the group interviews (July – August 2003); structural description (August – September 2003); essential description (September – December 2003); and validation of the essential description (December 2003 – February 2004).

Defense (March 2004)

The researcher successfully defended the study on March 4, 2004.

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