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Polyamory – The Multiple Complexities of Multiple Partners

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Communication and Performance

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Storytelling Studies

by

Vianna Isbister

May 2023

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Keywords: identity, relationships, consensual nonmonogamy, qualitative, dynamic

ABSTRACT

Polyamory – The Multiple Complexities of Multiple Partners

by

Vianna Isbister

This study is an exploration of the relationship between polyamory and how polyamorous people communicate about their relationship dynamics. Drawing from six individual interviews and one focus group, the author compares key language that appears in previous research to the language created by the study participants. Utilizing grounded theory for the analysis, results indicate that the language choices of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and/or relationship model are not sufficient for singularly encompassing a poly experience. Findings indicate that individuals who identify under the umbrella of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) may use the term "polyamory" to describe their own relationship dynamic or to generally signify themselves as CNM. Participants defined "polyamory" as an ambiguous, general term that included relationships of ethical consent and romantic interest. Although participants lacked specialized language to describe their respective relationship dynamics, "polyamory" was used as a way of creating language and understanding around each relationship's dynamic.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my chosen family. You brought me through this process and encouraged me to continue growing even when I wanted to stop. May we always keep growing through the painful bits together.

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First, I would like to thank Dr. Andrew Herrmann for all his work and guidance on this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Wesley Buerkle, Dr. Christine Anzur, and Nancy Donoval for your time and effort. Without your care, I would not be on the tail end of a thesis that I thought was impossible.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“I believe that my connection with other people is what drives my ability to learn, challenge myself, and grow” (Webb, 2020, p. 15).

Alone sitting in the wicker papasan chair in my previous partner’s apartment while he was on a study abroad trip in Japan, I started chatting with a good acquaintance who was also abroad. This acquaintance was in England and typing to him on the bright screen added excitement to the still apartment. After a few catch up questions, he mentioned that he was “poly.” I had never considered what that meant. Did he mean “polygamous”? I immediately looked it up Google, but I also asked him if “polyamorous” was what he meant. Indeed, he considered himself polyamorous and explained that he was able to romantically love more than one person at a time. The thought seemed both strange and connective for me. Soon, I began thinking about how this term spoke to me and my heart.

Without the polyamorous identifier, I would not be who I am today. I came to this study because I saw a community that is underrepresented. I also came to this topic because I hope that children might have the opportunity to engage in a world that engages them back as fully as their hearts and identities can desire. This study is an ode to that wish. Hopefully, it can connect some of the many fractal parts of representation that those in the polyamory community are longing to see.

Absence of representation in popular culture, stigmatization, and rejection from friendships for “fear we will pursue their partners” (Schippers, 2016, p. 14) are just a few of the realities that polyamorists face in their daily lives. Given these challenges along with the human challenge of managing multiple relationships, I wanted to understand how other polyamorists existed in their respective contexts and the motivations that informed their decisions. I found

myself listening to polyamory content on podcasts, TikTok, and Youtube. As a researcher, I hoped to connect academic research to the media I was encountering on Consensual Nonmonogamy (CNM). Noticing a lack of academic work on the subject and the absence of qualitative research, I decided to undertake this topic as my thesis project.

When I began searching for my research question, I was disappointed to note how few qualitative studies had been conducted with polyamory as part of the inclusion criteria. I knew I wanted to address some part of the poly experience regardless, but I had been hoping to see that the research gap was narrower. While there has been some excellent poly research in the past two decades, I was troubled that there was not much mention of *poly researchers* researching polyamory. I came to this topic knowing how I identify, and I wanted to leave knowing how others within the community did as well. My two research questions are as follows: 1) How do polyamorous people communicate polyamory? 2) How does communication about identity influence relational choices as my research questions?

This study follows the following pattern. First, the review of literature presents some of the common areas of research into polyamory, particularly the concepts of polyamory as identity, polyamory as sexual orientation, and the relationship perspective of polyamory, among others. It then reviews the methods by which the data for this research was collecting, including how participants were chosen, the interview process, and the how the data was analyzed using grounded theory techniques.

The results section follows, providing the multiple ways by which polyamorous people attempt to define and explain polyamory within their own lived experiences. Participants identified polyamory as a widely defined “blanket term,” as a sexual identity, and through the

lens of relationships. Finally, I discuss these findings, including the limitations withing this project and future directions for research on polyamory.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The Oxford Dictionary (nd). defines “polyamory” as “multiple romantic (and typically sexual) relationships, with the consent of all the people involved.” However, the critical engagement of the topic follows Webb (2019) in the concept that “being polyamorous is about thinking critically about the scripts of love and understanding what feelings for multiple people are valid, strong, and true” (p. 20). Ultimately, both definitions are applicable to polyamory. As a challenge to the heteronormative hegemonic narrative, individuals who identify as polyamorous are typically stigmatized within their respective communities and cultures. As such, Webb’s (2019) concept holds true because individuals who are marginalized under the social stigmas applied to polyamory must constantly conceptualize and validate their romantic interests under the weight and scrutiny of a heteronormative, mononormative culture. As a polyamorous individual myself, I can attest to this experience. Finding myself and my polyamorous compatriots in the literature had its challenges, but it was an enlightening experience. Moreover, understanding the state of polyamory research shed light on the terrain considered and yet to be explored.

Vast differences in considerations and perceptions appeared across the literature. In this chapter, I examine research literature regarding (a) Revised History of Mononormativity, (b) Recent History of CNM and Poly Research with sub explorations of Polyamory as an Identity, Polyamory as a Sexual Identity, and Polyamory as a Relationship Model. I then introduced my research questions that provide focus for my research.

Revised History of Mononormativity

One of the first issues any researcher faces when examining the topic of identity is that of various cultural discourses. For example, early conceptions of gender identity revolved around

male-female biological dichotomies (Stoller, 1968). This idea was questioned and then the concept that men and women have different ways of communicating developed (Tannen, 1990). According to this view, women and men belong to different sociolinguistic subcultures. Men's internalized linguistic style is said to be more results oriented and competitive, while women's linguistic style is oriented toward rapport and relationships. However, many communication scholars reject the essentialist conception of gender difference and sociolinguistics (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Connell, 2005; Herrmann, 2007). Rather, they are examining gender and identity through the lens of gender as performance (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). Gender is not something a person is. It is something a person does. By framing gender on a continuum as it is performed, one can better represent the varied ways in which gender is practiced and revealed (Berry et al., 2019).

I start with this wide-angle view of gender, because despite the progress made regarding how gender is conceived, when examining relationships and relational types we confront some of the same issues. Therefore, it is important to examine the larger cultural discourses held about relationships. The most influential discourse regarding romantic and/or sexual relationships is that of mononormativity (Finn, 2012; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Mononormativity is the idea that the normal and natural way for people to practice relationships is to be in a monogamous paired dyad (Ansara, 2020; Sandbakken et al., 2021). People are to be “couple-centric” both romantically and sexually (Wilkinson, 2013).

Mononormativity and monogamy as cultural narratives have a long, complicated history, that include the intersections of religious, familial, reproductive, and national discourses (Adam, 2003; Lawes, 1999; Ruhl, 2002). From the tradition of Christianity, monogamy has been the accepted standard since the time of Augustine because it limits and confines sexual desire

through sexual exclusivity (Rothchild, 2018). Political narratives such as those of family values and family as the building block of society evoke the idea of the modern nuclear family, which is itself mononormative and monogamous (Laurie & Stark, 2021). Monogamy, as Ferrer (2018) noted, “evokes a sense of stability and security, emotional depth and fulfillment of romantic fantasies, enduring or everlasting love, shared labor and resources, cohabitation and family, and moral and religious rectitude” (p. 817).

Mononormativity is pervasive. From a mononormative perspective, monogamous coupled relationships are “superior, healthier, more mature, and ‘natural’” to other forms of relationships (Ansara, 2020, p. 1). Kean (2018) noted several ideas that sustain mononormativity in our culture, including the romantic ideal of one true love, finding one’s soulmate, that sexual and emotional fidelity are the ultimate proof of commitment. Mononormativity also normalizes that there exists a clear distinction between friends and lovers, that partner exclusivity is best, that sex is equivalent to relational seriousness, and that sex is healthy only in committed romantic relationships or marriage.

As can be seen at the heart of the monogamous narrative regarding relationships is the topic of marriage. Marriage, until recently, was considered natural if it was between one man and one woman (Barker, 2005). Despite the legalization of gay marriage in the United States, those relationships too are considered “best,” or legitimate, if they are monogamous (Isay, 2006). Gay and lesbian marriage has done relatively little to challenge the overall discourse of mononormativity, because the cultural acceptance and legitimacy of gay and lesbian relationships is tied to the idea of a monogamous coupledom (Rothchild, 2018)

Given the thousands of years of religious, national, legal, and cultural discourses surrounding mononormativity as the ideal type of relationship, it should come as no surprise that

individuals in other relational forms struggle to find their footing, to define themselves, and to understand their own relationships. As Webb (2020) noted,

To be married is to have joint income, to share health insurance, to own property and have children, and to contribute to the propagation of society. To step outside of the monogamous expectation is a risk. Ethical nonmonogamy, which is an umbrella term for different open relationship types like polyamory, is not legally protected. It is highly stigmatized, and people who come out are at personal risk of professional disrepute and personal loss (p. 244).

This experience forms the challenges that contemporary mononormative culture brings to those outside of its umbrella.

Given the omnipresence of mononormativity in Western culture, researchers trying to examine other relational types, including those mentioned by Webb, have been wrestling with several different issues. Researchers have struggled to provide distinct typologies of non-mononormative relationships, to determine frameworks by which to study said relationships, and to operationalize research into these various types of relationships. In the following section, I will walk through common definitions non-monogamous relationships including consensual nonmonogamy, ethical nonmonogamy, polyamory, and other related concepts.

Recent History of CNM and Poly Research

Although monogamous coupledness is considered the “normal” way of doing intimate and sexual relationships, it is not the only way. Non-monogamous relationships have a long history as well, given that nonmonogamy as an umbrella term includes any romantic or sexual relationship with more than one partner (Hamilton et al., 2021). While this definition is useful, it is also very broad. It can include a multitude of different relational types, including consensual

nonmonogamy, ethical nonmonogamy, infidelity, polygamy, swinging, infidelity, open relationships, *monogamish* relationships, and important to this study, polyamory (Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2018; Ferrer, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2021; Rubel & Bogaert, 2019). There are some significant differences between all these non-monogamous relationships and understanding them and where polyamory fits is a useful endeavor.

It is important to distinguish between nonmonogamy and consensual nonmonogamy, often also called ethical nonmonogamy. Consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) includes relationships “in which all partners agree that each may have romantic or sexual relationships with others” (Rubel & Bogaert, 2019, p. 561). In other words, the partners know about and consent to their partners having extra-dyadic romantic and/or sexual relationships. As Mogilski et al., (2019) noted,

Within CNM relationships, consent refers to an explicit acknowledgement that having sex and/or falling in love with another person will not be punished so long as it occurs within previously negotiated boundaries. Establishing consent involves communicating about which extra-pair behaviors cause distress for each partner and then negotiating which behaviors are acceptable (p. 1812).

CNM, given its requirement of consent, includes open relationships, swinging, relational anarchy, being monogamish, and polyamory (Matsick et al., 2014; Resnick, 2021). Due to the deception involved, infidelity (aka, cheating) and polygamy (given the power issues involved) are excluded from CNM (Anderson, 2016).

Before going further, it is important to note that modern practices of CNM sprang up in the United States during the 1960’s and 1970’s out of “sexual liberationism, which profoundly shaped the cultural practices and political debates in many social movements. They frequently

drew on feminist, gay, and socialist critiques of the family, monogamy and private property” (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 518). CNM in its many typologies stands in direct opposition to our standard cultural hegemonic discourses of monogamy, that is, that relationships should be only between two individuals in a dyadic relationship.

While CNM is generally considered the umbrella term for all these forms of relationship, others use the phrase “open relationship” (Cohen, 2016). Open relationship, however, is also used to refer only to extra-dyadic sexual relationships, without emotional or romantic connections and connotations (Fairbother et al., 2019). This differentiation is also used to define swinging, in which partners engage in “multiple sexual relationships outside of their couple [alone or together] with minimal or no emotional or romantic involvement” (Fairbother et al., p. 695). Given these differences, this project will continue to use CNM as the overarching term.

A more recent development is the relationship type called monogamish. Primarily identified as a relationship type among gay couples, these relationships are situated between monogamous and open. In monogamish relationships, partners have agreed “to have sex outside the relationship only while together (via threesomes or group sex activities in which both members of the couple are present)” (Parsons et al., 2013, p. 303). Like open relationships, however, being monogamish is more focused on sexual activities rather than romantic or emotional ones. This brings us, finally, to polyamory.

The term polyamory itself, loosely translated as “many loves,” has an uncertain beginning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Jennifer Wesp popularized the term as part of a Usenet newsgroup in the 1990s (Taomino, 2008). She and others were looking for a term to describe extra-dyadic relationships that were emotional, romantic, intimate, and often sexual. They wanted to find a different term than nonmonogamy, which still centered monogamy as the

standard for relationships (Cordoso et al., 2021). Self-help books such as Easton and Liszt (1997) and Veaux and Rickert (2014) have helped popularize how polyamorous relationships can and should work. Polyamory deconstructs and decolonizes relationships from monogamy.

Polyamory as a form of CNM differs from swinging, open, and monogamish relationships in one distinct way. While it may include consensual sexual activity outside the coupled pair, it is not exclusively sexual. It can and often does include other relational activities including the romantic, emotional, and intimate (Webb, 2019). According to Klesse (2006) what differentiates polyamory from each of these other relational types is polyamory's emphasis on love, noting that "polyamory challenges the hegemony of the core couple as the only valid relationship formation" (p. 579). Moreover, according to Haritaworn et al. (2006), it is "possible, valid, and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person" (p. 518). The combination of sex and love in polyamory has made it particularly thorny for researchers to define accurately.

What is true is that polyamorous and other CNM relationships are on the rise (Hupert et al., 2017). According to a 2020 survey, 32% of adults in the United States said that their ideal relationship is non-monogamous. For millennials that number grew to 43%. A survey of single adults by Moors et al. (2021) found that almost 17% of participants desired to try or be in a polyamorous relationship, and that 10.7% had been polyamorous. Moreover, of those who had previously engaged in polyamory, 30.4% would be in a polyamorous relationship again. According to Cardoso et al. (2021), people in consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships tended to have more nuanced understandings of relationships than monogamous individuals.

While polyamory has been defined in terms of what it is not (monogamy) and through its historical contexts, researchers are finding new ways to examine it. Across the board, there are three different frames by which scholars are attempting to understand polyamory. First, they are framing polyamory as an identity (Klesse, 2014). Secondly, some scholars are framing polyamory as a sexual orientation (Tweedy, 2011). Third, they are framing polyamory through the lens of relationship, aka “doing polyamory” (Wosick-Correa, 2010). Next, we shall look at each of the three framings of polyamory in turn.

Polyamory as an Identity

The concept of identity is so fraught that it is sometimes considered to be in “definitional anarchy” (Abdelal et al., 2006, p. 695). There are many different perspectives on what identity is, including if it is something we are or something we do (Baxter, 2004; Bochner & Elis, 2004; Bruner, 1987; Herrmann, 2016). The Western tradition conceives of identity as something one creates and owns, i.e., “My identity is mine. It is me.” Other conceptions see identity as socially constructed in cultural contexts, or as narrative accomplishments, or as an ongoing sensemaking activity (Anderson et al., 2004; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2004). These same questions arise when discussing polyamory as an identity, because some view polyamory as a sexual identity or through the lens of sexual orientation identity. Both of these questions need to be explored in turn.

According to Diamond (2002), sexual identity speaks to the way that a person identifies themselves. It is part of the individuals’ self-concept as a sexual being. The most common categories of sexual identity are heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual (Elizabeth, 2013; Rosario et al., 2006; Scherrer, 2008). Heterosexuals identify as being attracted to the opposite sex, while homosexual persons identify with same sex attraction. Bisexuals identify as

being attracted to both genders, while asexual individuals note a lack of, or low interest in, sexual attraction to others in general. Less common – and more controversial – sexual identities include sapiosexuality, pansexuality, polysexuality, and polyamory (Gignac et al., 2018; Hutchins & Williams, 2018). Sapiosexuals self-identify as those attracted to intelligent persons. Pansexuals identify themselves as those “attracted to people of all genders across the gender spectrum” (Eisner, 2013, p. 8). While bisexuality deconstructs binary understandings of sexuality (homosexuality/heterosexuality), pansexuality also explicitly deconstructs sex/gender binaries (male/man and female/woman). Similarly, polysexual persons, identify as those that are sexually attracted to many, but not necessarily all, genders (Board, 1995).

This brings us to polyamory as a sexual identity. Those who identify as polyamorous, want romantic or sexual relationships with more than one partner at the same time, with the informed consent of all of the involved partners. Individuals can be hetero-poly, homo-poly, bi-poly, or any other combination of sexualities. Researchers often consider polyamory as analogous or as a subset to bisexuality, pansexuality, and polysexuality. As such, polyamory when considered a sexual identity, becomes extremely muddled. As Klesse (2014) noted, “Polyamory is not grounded in any particular sexual identity. Although polyamory is quite popular among some sections of bisexual communities, its position has always been contested and controversial” (p. 92). This is not to suggest that scholars have not tried to understand polyamory as a sexual identity in combination with other types of sexual identities.

For example, Barker (2005) noted that polyamory and bisexuality were more often combined in sexual identity research than polyamory and heterosexuality. Klesse (2006) found that polyamory was a recurring theme in his research on bisexual non-monogamous women. Similarly, Sheff (2005) noted that being a polyamorous woman bisexual was a fuller expression

of sexual identity experiences. Researchers found that polyamory was correlated to fluid sexuality (Klesse 2007; Sheff 2005).

Going hand-in-hand with the experience of sexual identity, changes in sexual identity are tied to variations in sexual attraction and may lead to sexual fluidity and sexual flexibility (Katz-Wise, 2015). Identity acts as a fluid, everchanging achievement in the bisexual and polyamorous experience (Diamond, 2002). According to Weinberg et al. (2001), some changes that can occur with the aging process include a change in sexual involvement, a change in preference, a change in community ties, and a change in the certainty of identity. Weinberg et al. (2001) particularly focused on bisexual experiences but mentions ties to the polyamorous experience. Although there are clear relationships between sexual identity, CNM, and polyamory, their relationship remains unclear, and further research is required.

Researchers have explored connections among BDSM, kink subcultures, and polyamory. There appears to be similar values of honesty, communication, and consent (see Sheff, 2005, 2006). Both BDSM and polyamorists also play with breaking a number of standard forms of relating and social interaction. The nuanced perspectives on relationships as discussed by Cardoso (2021) is as exciting as it is confounding to the standardization of language surrounding polyamorous experience and models.

As noted, scholars struggling to understand and research polyamory from an identity standpoint run into a number of definitional issues. In fact, it is not difficult to suggest that sexual identity is part and parcel of the overall definitional anarchy regarding conceptions of identity in general. They are not, however, the only ones facing these dilemmas. Scholars examining polyamory from a sexual orientation perspective run into similar difficulties, to which I now turn.

Polyamory as a Sexual Orientation

While scholars investigate polyamory as a sexual identity, some also look at polyamory as a sexual orientation (Diamond, 2002; Dillon et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2021). As noted above, sexual identity is a self-concept, that is, how a person identifies themselves. According to the American Psychological Association (2008), sexual orientation refers to the recognition of one's sexual attraction to others, an "enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes" (para 2). Similarly, the progressive Human Rights Campaign defined sexual orientation as "the preferred term used when referring to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to the same and/or opposite gender" (2006, para 2). Sexual orientation stresses the *object* of one's desire, rather than one's self-concept. Definitions of sexual orientation tend to always place sexual orientation as a term in relation to "the sex of one's object choice," which indicates the existence of the binary choice of one or the other *i.e.*, male/female or men/women (Ahmed, p. 68, 2006).

The dilemma with sexual orientation is that researchers cannot seem to operationalize it in any consistent manner (Savin-Williams, 2006). For example, sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity are all considered elements of sexual orientation. Therefore, an individual could be sexually attracted to members of the same sex, while identifying as heterosexual. There is little congruency between sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual identity, and sexual orientation in the research (Dunne et al., 2000). To this point, it is unknown which of the three elements is essential in defining or determining sexual orientation.

The question of whether polyamory is a sexual orientation is a point of contention for many, given that polyamorous persons can be attracted to multiple types of sexualities and genders (Diamond, 2022). However, it has been considered under the lens of sexual orientation

by researchers, particularly anti-discrimination legal scholars. In the fight for LGBTQ rights, sexual orientation is important. It is the basis for the elimination of discrimination against the queer community and one of the foundations for marriage equality in the United States (Emens, 2004). Tweedy (2011) comes to a similar conclusion, suggesting that “expanding the definition of sexual orientation to include polyamory for purposes of anti-discrimination law appears to be a reasonable choice” (p. 1509). Moreover, Tweedy suggests that polyamory as a sexual orientation should be used not as a frame for particular types of *individuals*, but for certain kinds of *relationships*.

According to Robinson (2013), “Proponents of polyamory as a sexual orientation could argue that some people are naturally and immutably predisposed toward forming multiple concurrent relationships.” (p. 21). From a legal standpoint, framing and examining polyamory as a sexual orientation makes sense. As it stands, polyamory runs afoul of current legal and healthcare discourses (Goldfarb, 2020; Landry et al., 2021; Miccoli, 2021; Struss & Polomeno, 2021). Due to the exclusion from legal protections and knowledgeable healthcare, the polyamorous community exists in a liminal space. Therefore, framing polyamory as a sexual orientation is a way for the community to gain legal protections.

This legal framing, however, bumps up against the idea of fluidity of sexual identity in polyamorous relationships. As a topic, sexual orientation is studied through essentialist scientific lenses including biology, neuroscience, psychology, and sexology. A sexual orientation implies “a fixation of the sex (or gender) of object choice, they share with classical sexual orientation accounts the insistence on stability and durability” (Klesse, 2014, p. 90). Rather than a choice to self-identify as a particular sexual identity (straight, gay, poly, etc.), sexual orientation “tends to signify a deeply rooted and immutable feature of a person’s ‘personality.’ Sexual orientation is

often seen to be a question of heredity, i.e., of inborn genetically and/or hormonally acquitted qualities and faculties” (Emens, 2004, p. 1351).

Scholars attempting to define polyamory from a sexual orientation perspective run into a number of the same dilemmas facing scholars studying the topic from the perspective of sexual identity. Therefore, another group of scholars are examining polyamory through the lens of relationships, as discussed in the following section.

Polyamory as a Relationship

Normative relationship models, as understood by the societal hegemonic narratives, are monogamous, heterosexual, and are traditionally of the same ethnic background (Klesse, 2006, 2014; Sheff, 2011, 2020). Polyamory is an expansive term that allows for numerous subjectively different relationships. As posited by Schippers (2016), “turning away from the monogamous couple through poly sexualities offers an opportunity to reorient not just relationships, but also gender and race relations” (p. 4). Given this realm of new experiences within “poly sexualities,” it is clear that a wider array of visible relationship models is what the growth of polyamory is continuing to offer to society (Barker, 2005; Barker et al., 2010; Carlstrom, 2019; Schippers, 2016).

These models are not simply unique constellations of three or more humans. They also offer space for bisexual and other nonheteronormative sexualities to exist romantically after entering committed romantic relationships. As a case for non-monogamy as a relationship model solely, Klesse (2005) reflects on how hegemonic narratives imply that bisexual people are required to engage in non-monogamy out of necessity rather than out of desire or calling. This is due to the stereotype that bisexuality is only valid when the individual is engaging in a relationship with more than one gender identity (Klesse, 2005). Understanding this navigation

plays a role in understanding relationship dynamics and preference toward hierarchical or anarchic relationships.

Polyamorous relationships can include multiple different types of intimate involvements. Some relationships use a primary/secondary structure, wherein primary partners are dyadic and secondary partners operate as non-regular or satellite relations (Taormino, 2008). Others note that poly individuals generally have two contemporaneous partners (Wosick-Correa, 2010). Polyamorous relationships are commonly configured as having a primary relationship and a secondary relationship (Veaux et al., 2014). What the difference between the two? According to Balzarini et al (2017) a primary relationship is identified as

between two partners who typically share a household (live together) and finances, who are married (if marriage is desired), and/or who have or are raising children together (if children are desired). Partners beyond the primary relationship are often referred to as non-primary partners or ‘secondary’ partners. A secondary relationship often consists of partners who live in separate households and do not share finances (para 2)

Researchers have found that polyamorous individuals generally invest more time in their primary relationships compared to their secondary relationships. Similarly, poly individuals noted that they were more committed to their primary relationship as compared to their secondary relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019).

For others, the mere use of the terms ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ conflict with polyamory in that multiple primaries are common (Sheff, 2014). For others, a primary/secondary structure reinforces hierarchical valuation and prioritization of partners. Because challenging social stereotypes and contemporary norms appear to be at the heart of polyamory (Schippers, 2016), these models are also conflict among the CNM and polyamory community because they are

regarded as artifacts of the heteronormative structure (Sandbakken et al., 2021). Regardless, polyamory is continuing to challenge the narrative and offer new ways to explore sexuality, identity, and relationships.

Important to all relationships is communication. Given that polyamorous relationships are more complicated than dyadic relationships, communication is considered extremely important (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004). As Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning (2017) noted,

Polyamorous people typically regard intimate life as something to be explicitly managed.

Polyamorous people utilize communicative strategies to reveal and manage the emotional aspects of their romantic lives. Such strategies might include frequent 'chek-ins' and 'retrospectives' (p. 17).

Wosick-Correa (2010) noted that communicating appreciation among partners was important, as was the necessity of communicating emotional closeness and commitment. Moreover, poly persons spend considerable time communicating about relationships, agreements, and rules. Given the complexities of polyamorous relations, metacommunication (communicating about the relationship rather than communicating in the relationship) is a necessity (Labriola, 2010).

Whatever formulation polyamorous relationships take, because they are not dyadic, doing the relationship, negotiating the relationship, communicating within and about the relationship is definitively different and more difficult than mononormative relationships. As such, more research into how people do their relationships is necessary.

Conclusion

Polyamory is becoming well-known in popular culture (Sandbakken et al., 2021). As such, research and popular culture alike are giving more consideration to its presence.

Researchers like Barker (2005) have laid out the groundwork and overview of what we know about the broad topic of polyamory. Polyamory research from the three perspectives of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and relationship models are good starts. However, polyamory remains ambiguous in how it is defined, experienced, and practiced.

An opportunity in mapping the universe of polyamory is through its challenge to the hegemonic heteronormative narrative. As noted by Carlström et al. (2019):

Research on polyamorous relations can generate an understanding of contemporary meanings and practices of forming relations as well as of the needs of individuals and families with intersecting marginalized identities (p. 1316).

Polyamory has the capability to be an exciting new lens through which to understand numerous identities, relations, and perspectives. Also noted by Carlström et al. (2019), “forays into the previously unthinkable” (p. 1316) seemed to appear around the discussions about experience with polyamory and the queer experience. However, this expansiveness also lends to its nebulous nature in finding definition or boundaries.

Reviewing themes found in the research, there appears to be a strong relationship between sexual orientation, sexual identity, and polyamory. However, boundary clarity in those relationships maintain a murky quality. Additionally, research has demonstrated that relationship models appear various and subjective. Even basic axiomatic relationships appear tenuous. As such, substantive research appears to rely upon approaches to definitions as well as comparison to heteronormative discourses.

Finally, most of the research into polyamory and polyamorous relationships is based upon quantitative data gathering and analysis (Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017). This is not surprising given that much of the research is currently taking place in post-positivist departments

of psychology, or from an interpersonal communication framework which leans toward the quantitative (Burleigh et al., 2016; Cohen, 2016; Moore, 2017). Connecting these themes will offer insight into the qualitative data demonstrated in this study. In order to better understand direction this research study, I turn to my research questions followed by my methods section after.

Research Questions

When this research study began, I viewed it as a general exploration into communication in polyamorous relationships. After reviewing the literature and the interview data, I found my two research questions to be: 1) How do polyamorous people communicate polyamory? 2) How does communication about identity influence relational choices?

Chapter 3. Methods

In this chapter, the procedures used to collect the data for this project are presented. The background and importance of doing qualitative in-depth interviews is discussed first. From there, the ways by which participants were recruited and selected for interviews, including information regarding how the interviews were performed and transcribed. This is followed by an explanation of Charmaz's (2014) conception of grounded theory, sometimes called the constant-comparative method, by which participant answers were coded and categorized.

As discussed previously, most research into polyamory is either very general or is quantitative in nature. Much of the research, therefore, lacks the autobiographical details of polyamorous individuals' lived existence. To garner the understandings that individuals hold and how those meanings make sense to them, a qualitative interpretive research framework is necessary (Bochner, 1994). Denzin and Giardina (2012) state that qualitative inquiry "refines understanding of social inquiry," and that its potential benefit to research and society is empathy and a clearer comprehension of the trajectory of others (p. 55). As Herrmann (2008) noted,

In contrast to orthodox scientific methods, which seek objectivity, theoretical abstraction, generalization, and measurement validity, interpretive approaches attempt to understand the emotional complexity and unique aspects of lived experience by focusing on intersubjective construction(s) of meaning (pp.47-48).

Various forms of interviewing fall under the auspices of the qualitative interpretive approach, including collaborative interviewing, ethnographic interviewing, interactive interviewing, narrative interviewing, and guided conversations (Ellis et al., 1997; Krizek, 2003; Laslett & Rapoport, 1975; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Taylor et al., 2021).

This study, therefore, utilizes in-depth interviewing with participants to better understand the topic of polyamory from a personal frame of reference. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their personal experiences through stories. The participants clarified that they were not just willing, but anxious, to tell the stories that “the world did not particularly want to hear” (Stein, 2009, p. 46). Hearing the stories that are woven into the fabric of the lived experiences may shed light on the world of polyamory. As a researcher, my primary objective was to be a mindful, compassionate, and accepting audience for personal stories. In order to invite compassion into my research, I was cognizant to engage in self-aware reflection regarding the researcher’s role, intentions, and emotions throughout the research process (Ellis, 2012).

In order to understand the individual experience of being polyamorous, an emphasis needed to be placed on reflection and introspection on the part of the researcher and the interviewees. Space for the interviewees to feel comfortable to share needs to be created throughout every step of the interview process. Priority is placed on awareness of the participant’s needs throughout the process. This was pursued through every step of the process by inclusion of self-reflexivity and developing an awareness of the role that shadow stories play into the overall narrative (Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2015). A researcher giving “priority” includes representing participants well through honoring their stories.

Participants

The participants for this study were volunteers who self-identified as meeting the following criteria: 1) being over the age of 18; 2) currently living the United States; 3) have been in a polyamorous relationship in the past five years; and 4) currently identify as polyamorous, with one exception.

The participants were recruited via posters (Appendix A) distributed via social media (i.e., Facebook and Instagram) and via snowball sampling. The goal was to have a demographic that was diverse in ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. Once receiving that initial email of interest, I sent an email (Appendix D) responding with questions to confirm eligibility. Once they emailed back, I determined their eligibility and send a follow-up email (Appendix D) accepting or denying their request for an interview. If the email was accepting their request for an interview, enclosed was the informed consent document (Appendix E) for them to look over. No less than 24 hours later, I contacted them again to see if they had any questions and when they would like to schedule their interview or focus group. Once the interview was scheduled, I sent them a Zoom link the day before and a reminder email the day of.

The upper limit of potential participants was 27, with a mixture of interviews and focus groups. By the end of the interview stage, there were 6 interviews and 1 focus group comprised of 3 people, with a total of 9 people participating in total. The reason for the large maximum number was to allow for as much participation as possible because I did not want to have to exclude anyone. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and the focus group lasted no more than 90 minutes with an optional follow-up 15-minute-long phone call. There were no follow-up conversations on the part of the interviewer.

Ultimately, the demographics for the study lacked the diversity initially desired. The participants consisted of nine cisgender individuals: five men and four women. All the participants identified as white. The age range for the participants was between 27 and 60. For the most part, the individuals were located in Southern Appalachia with one participant from the Illinois area and another from Washington state area. Below, I give more detail to the participants and their respective relationships.

Overall, there were nine participants. All except one identified as polyamorous. In the focus group, there were Daniel (37, Heteroflexible), Delia (38, Bisexual), and Loralie (30, Lesbian). At the time of the study, Daniel and Delia were married and Loralie was in a romantic partnership with Delia and was also a close friend and coworker to Daniel. Levi (30, Heterosexual) was in a relationship and no longer considers himself polyamorous. Lee (33, Heterosexual) identified as polyamorous, but was single. Eliza (46, Heteroromantic, Pansexual) was in a relationship with one partner. Theresa (37, Heterosexual, Female Interest, Kink) had a male partner and a female partner, but she hesitated to say she was bisexual. Kurt (40, Bisexual, Kink) was single. Lionel (30, Heterosexual) was also single at the time of the study.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in interviews where the interviewees were asked questions from a moderator field guide (Appendix C). The questions selected were from an IRB approved interview schedule. All interviews were conducted over either Zoom or phone call. The interviews were recorded using both the Zoom recording function when available along with the various recording applications available in the Android app store. An additional note regarding interviews is that they were all recorded on two devices, phone and laptop, and three recording applications: Otter, Zoom, and a smart phone recording application.

Several moments throughout the data collection process, I needed to check back in with my interview schedule to try and stay on track. I found several of the original questions were not eliciting extensive responses and the more lengthy answers and commentary came from an off-shoot question from my first category about “day in the life,” etc. I ended up providing clarification on several of the questions because the language I used was not language that worked for the participants. I was reminded that the relationship between the interviewer and

interviewee is collaborative. Both are participants in a co-constructed research process. As Chase (1996) noted, “research is a contingent and unfolding process, the results of which we cannot anticipate or guarantee. An informed consent form cannot possibly capture the dynamic processes of interpretation and authorship” (p. 57).

During one of the interviews, I was chastised for not defining one of my identity categories thoroughly before asking if the participant felt that they belonged in a specific identity category. This confrontation led to a slight tension that seemed to interfere with the flow of the beginning of the interview. I worked to mitigate this by inquiring as to how they define certain terms before I asked questions about those same terms. For a couple of the interviews, I felt the need to self-disclose to get the conversation moving. I was only asked once if I identified as polyamorous, which I did answer as it was the first interview. Only three of the participants had questions for me and most of the questions were focused on when the study would be finished and if they would be able to access the study.

To maintain the privacy of the participants, I implemented an encrypted key-code system with pseudonyms so that the participants could not be identified after the initial audio and video recordings. The audio and video recordings, transcripts, and key-code were kept on a password protected file on a password protected computer at all times with only me having access to it. For Zoom interviews, I used a password-protected meeting ID, with only the participant and myself having the link and password by using a known email address from the participant.

Data Analysis

After every interview, I would write brief thoughts and connections about the experience in a journal. While this did not happen every time, I found more success with understanding my perspective when I wrote the notes. I would underline and circle a few notes I had written during

the interview and make a star mark towards a question or thought I had after I had fully written the notes. For some of the more complex interviews, I would record my voice talking about the idea that I heard or wanted to engage with and then write notes on what themes I heard myself say. This also ended up being true for some of the further analysis of codes later in the process.

To analyze the information covered in the interviews, I used transcriptions by my recording app, Otter. I then put all transcripts on a Word Document where I would go through and immediately de-identify names and locations to maintain participant confidentiality. I checked all transcripts several times for accuracy purposes. As demonstrated in Saldana's (2016) qualitative research coding manual, I chose to code through separating transcript themes with the use of the regions colored to a corresponding code key.

Charmaz (2014) provided a solid foundation from which to begin. Within the grounded theory processes there were spaces to give "priority to the studied phenomenon or process" (p. 38). Grounded theory entails identifying possible themes, categories, and concepts that emerge from the texts and then connecting these with theoretical interpretations (Charmaz, 2003). I used Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory coding and used "gerund" coding for my first round.

According to Charmaz,

Line-by-line coding, the initial grounded theory coding with gerunds, is a heuristic device to bring the researcher into the data, interact with them, study each fragment of them.

This type of coding helps to define implicit meanings and actions, gives researchers directions to explore, spurs making comparisons between data, and suggests emergent links between process in the data to pursue and check. (2014, p. 121)

This allowed me to understand the basic elements of the coding needs and how to separate out the data under analysis.

Upon further coding analysis, I chose to use Saldaña's (2016) "In Vivo" coding which refers to "a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (p. 105). According to Stringer (2014), by following this approach researchers "are more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people's experience" (p. 140). After finding and separating a number of *in vivo* codes from the interview experiences, I also found myself naturally looking towards holistic coding. According to Dey (1993), the method is an effort "to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole rather than by analyzing them line by line" (p. 104). Through this method, I was able to observe patterns among the data sets. Thus, I began my focused coding process and engaged in theoretical coding processes as well.

After taking a week to reflect on these codes, I wrote lists of the codes in journals and began to look at patterns and merge list items with common or overlapping themes. Then, I recorded voice memos regarding the reduced list of themes in order to talk aloud about my thoughts and experiences to see what major themes would be discussed for this paper. After several meetings with my advisor, I came up with three main themes that were logical for discussion within the scope of this research. Each of the themes and related subthemes connects to basic experiences of navigating communication of polyamory from the polyamorous perspective. In the next chapter, I detail some of the major themes and sense-making processes of the participants.

Chapter 4. Results

Derek: If you get feelings for another guy, it's time for you to break up with me. If you find someone attractive, not a big deal. Say it, don't say it, I'm not concerned. Emotional and physical fidelity is just what I require.

I responded with comments of understanding and acceptance of his point but not agreeing to give it all up for him. After a flurry of thoughts and words that were more challenging to write, but felt acceptable, he took it all back.

Derek: I'm sorry. I was just scared....

Barker (2004) explores the notion that polyamory is different and threatening to monogamy. A disruption in the balancing act that is heteronormativity would be fatal.

After a period of half-baked apologies and demands for attention, he said,

You already have such an impact on me, you could ruin me if you wanted. You could break my heart. Let's wait until later, I will work on being better for later.

The previous excerpt was from an autoethnographic piece I wrote in order to work through experiences in my polyamory journey. Having identified as polyamorous for over two years by the time I began this thesis, I certainly came into it with my own questions, concerns, hopes, and biases. Honestly, I had no idea what to expect from the research and interview process. Living in southern Appalachia and keeping a tight schedule with academics and performance work, I had hardly met any polyamorous individuals in my area. Simply communicating with polyamorous individuals was already exciting. In addition, having the ability to ask them questions about their experiences, perspectives, and relationships was personally fascinating.

Although there are numerous directions provided by the insights from my participants, the three most prominent findings among the data were: shared language, expansive identity, and relational issues. Participants each discussed how they interfaced with societal terms and how sexual identity played a role in how they understood their own polyamory. Additionally, they shared their relationship experiences in communicating boundaries, dealing with dysfunction, and approaching commitment. These insights brought opportunities to be vulnerable, connect, and create healthy relationship experiences.

It seems that each of the participants clearly recognized how mainstream culture would negatively view their lifestyle. However, they each continued to live as they believed right for their life. Examining prevalent themes of how they placed themselves via discourses and within their relationships proved to be an insightful journey.

Shared Language

Immediately, throughout the interviews it became clear that participants found their own methods of negotiating terms and definitions regarding polyamory, consensual nonmonogamy, ethical nonmonogamy, and more. Interestingly, there were many similarities in the perception that terms like “polyamory” did not properly do justice to their non-monogamous experiences. Often, there was awareness surrounding the fact that society had one view of CNM terms, and the participants had another more nuanced view of what those terms meant for them and their relationships. Ultimately, the participants navigated the terms in ways that worked for their lives.

“A Lot of Different Shapes” - Blanket Term

The phrase “blanket term” in reference to defining polyamory appeared several times across the interviews and the focus group. Most of the participants viewed polyamory to not actually mean what the definition and term had originally set out to mean. Delia elaborated on

this in the focus group: “often people use the word polyamory as like a blanket term and that maybe they should define it differently, because they're really not. They're focused more on like sexual acts maybe.” Additionally, Levi described feeling that “polyamory is such an umbrella term that you get people talking about different things that are under the same umbrella”. As such, it had come to act as a placeholder for people not wanting to engage in typical versions of monogamy. Despite this shared perception, the focus group still referred to themselves as polyamorous for its ease of use with individuals outside the poly community.

Levi explained that polyamory “felt like too general of a catchphrase for me to signify what I was about.” Although he had been in multiple simultaneous relationships in the past, he often described how he felt “sex and intimacy are very linked” and how he is currently heavily focused on “spend[ing] a lot of time on cocreation” with his one partner. Although his current partner does not appear completely closed to ethical non-monogamy, the two appeared to be more focused on maintaining and “working on showing up” for their relationship with each other. Therefore, their relationship could easily appear heteronormative and monogamous to outsiders, however there is much nuance there which would easily fit with common perceptions of the term: polyamory.

Other participants such as Theresa did not directly discuss social and societal issues with the usage of the term “polyamory.” However, they did explain how individuals in their networks might be “more monogamous than anything” despite tendencies of dating more than one person. In other cases, they described a male friend they knew who was “not poly as much as he is open.” Later she spelled out how they are not in a “relationship, relationship” although they do “spend some time together” and “have some fun”. This indicates that the term “polyamory” is an unsatisfactory blanket term even in describing simpler non-monogamous interactions.

In addition to directly and tacitly pointing to polyamory as a blanket term for many relationship styles, participants delved into the less ethical side of using the term “polyamory” as a cover. In congruence with Delia’s thought that people using the term were “focused more on like sexual acts maybe,” Kurt pointed out how he noticed that some people “call it poly, but they’re basically trying to cheat and trying to get accepted.” In Kurt’s and Theresa’s stories, the term “polyamory” was also used to cover intentions such as: breaking relationship rules or finding partners with whom to become monogamous.

At other times during the interviews, generality around the term “polyamorous” appeared acceptable and non-problematic. For Eliza, the generality allowed for a range of options which appeared to feel reasonable for her thought process: “it’s you know commitment. Either commitment to the sexual relationship or commitment to the emotional relationship, or romantic way...” This appears to be a non-controversial form of how “polyamory” is a blanket term. It clearly describes at least three forms of commitment: sexual, emotional, and romantic.

Additionally, she does not appear to preclude any particular combination of these commitment styles. Along with this openness to embrace a blanket-style definition, Lee explained that he would give a “boilerplate” definition regarding how it is “a romantic situation that involves more than two people”. He also went on to explain how it could take “a lot of different shapes”.

Having the openness of interpretation was non-problematic for Lee.

In many conversations, the “blanketness” of the term appeared to work as an opening to discussion. Much like how the focus group used polyamory to describe their style to those who were uninitiated in the language, Theresa used it to describe the relationship styles of the individuals who tended to transition from monogamy to polyamory and back as was the case with one of her male exes. In Lee’s case, it is a term that houses discussion of “group geometry”

as he termed it for people who were practicing commitments that were beyond simply platonic connections. For participants such as Eliza and Theresa who had physical attraction limitations with romantic female interests, using the term “polyamory” felt reasonable because it allowed for a spectrum of interactions.

Interestingly, both Delia and Daniel described having friends who they might consider to have been polyamorous with in retrospect. Daniel explained: “by all intents and purposes I had a relationship with that person, you know, I mean, but we weren't romantic or physical or whatever,” He went on to elaborate “but looking back that, you know, was probably like the first like polyamorous relationship that all of us had”. Additionally, Delia also described a close friend “that left my life, and it breaks, broke my heart in the same way it would, it felt very similar.” She explained how this similar feeling “as a romantic love” was due to her belief that these are “things that don’t have edges”. This sentiment in overlap of borders and borderlessness appeared throughout all discussions regarding the appearance of the term “polyamory” and what it meant to the participants’ experiences in defining themselves outside of monogamy and heteronormativity.

In contrast, Levi had recently decided to no longer identify as a polyamorous person. I chose to include him in this investigation because he wanted to discuss how polyamorous people communicate. As he stated about, he and his current partner: “we, um, both have experience in ethical non-monogamy... we chose to be, at least in this point in the relationship, monogamous because it makes the most sense for us.” He further explained his experience as “kind of a there and back again” narrative where he was monogamous, became polyamorous for a period of time, and then he began a relationship with his current partner where they “are trying our best to show up in the relationship fully” and heal from traumas and personal issues. Levi did explain that

“ethical non-monogamy communication” informs their conversations with each other.

Interestingly, he left the door open to change by indicating numerous times that they were “currently” monogamous.

Despite the use of the blanket term polyamory, interviewees provided several different frameworks to define polyamory, including sexual identity, sexual orientation, and as a relationship model. I review each of these varied definitions below, beginning with sexual identity.

“I’ve Always Had It” - Expansive Identity

Some participants defined or explained polyamory in terms of a sexual identity. It created the structure for how they viewed themselves and their capability of loving more than one person. The participants who used “sexual identity” as a way point for understanding their polyamory tended to focus on it as a foundational element of their experience. As I was going through, I found I needed clear definitions on sexual orientation and sexual identity relationship models because there were discrepancies with the third category: relationship model. Several participants agreed that they found it to be a relationship model but not exclusively. One participant went so far as to say that they “had more to give” as their reason for pursuing polyamory. That specific idea would fit more under the language of identity but was not completely conclusive as to where the best fit would be. After experiencing these forays into the different lenses, I recognized the importance of examining sexual identity in findings. However, the majority of sexual identity comments appeared in regard to the moment or period of time where each participant recognized their CNM and polyamorous inclinations, as described below.

Seeing sexual identity appear in the interviews was unsurprising as it was present in the literature regarding polyamory research. However, little was discussed in the literature regarding

participant experiences of self-recognition regarding polyamory. Instead, similar to what was pointed out in research by Carlström (2019) where participants experienced marginalization and awkwardness when claiming polyamory, most recognition commentaries in the literature were about avoidance of or difficulty found in identifying as polyamorous. Understanding where their recognition began can lend insight into the formation and adherence to identity.

A number of participants discussed the fact that they had understandings about being romantically interested in multiple people simultaneously, but as Delia explained: “we definitely didn’t have words for it back then.” It seems that until the emergence of Easton and Listz’s text “The Ethical Slut” in 1997, language regarding polyamory was not commonplace. Despite the lack of terminology, participants still recognized their inclinations toward multiple romantic partners.

As Loralie explained regarding her multiple simultaneous relationships early in her dating experience: “It was this thing that kept attracting me... I like connections.” She appeared to tie the things that “kept attracting” her to the fact that she likes connections. Even after a breakup that involved an attempt in an additional partner, she kept pursuing a lifestyle of polyamory and now considers herself polyamorous and “part of a polycule.”

Interestingly, the other two participants in the focus group seemed to have a similar experience of recognizing that having multiple relationships fit with their identity. Delia explained: “I finally feel comfortable with my own self.” She even went so far as to explicitly state that “it’s more like an identity than a choice of a lifestyle.” This fact was further substantiated by her anecdote about how early in her relationship with Daniel, she was awoken to a call from him where he apologized for having accidentally kissed another woman. Delia “didn’t care at all” about Daniel about having kissed another woman. Humorously, she expressed

that what she cared about was that he had woken her up simply to tell her about something she felt was inconsequential.

Daniel and another participant, Lionel, had a similarity in terms of self-perception prior to and after encountering language regarding polyamory. Daniel described how in high school he was a partner to a female who had two additional male partners at the time. In reflection of this experience, he said: “I’ve always had that. I just didn’t know there was a word for it.” In this instance, his “that” refers to love for more than one person. As for Lionel, he described that he “was one of the people who always had a crush on multiple people.” Once he began dating a polyamorous partner, he decided to “give it a try and it ended up working out well.” Here, both participants noticed polyamorous inclinations prior to using language surrounding ethical non-monogamy.

During our interview, Lee also described an early recognition moment for his polyamorous identity:

“Well, I had, I was in a monogamous relationship and a girlfriend was sitting outside smoking a cigar thinking. I mean it might not have even been this moment, it probably occurred to me before, but I was just thinking, what's the difference between a lover and a very close friend?”

He felt “that you couldn’t get much closer on an at least on an emotional level than these friends that I have.” He then asked: “[w]hat really is the difference with a romantic partner?”

Interestingly, he found out that his girlfriend at the time “had actually been in polyamorous relationships before.” He explained that he realized his polyamory identity at 23, and it has “worked out pretty damn good for my life.”

In regard to identity recognition, there were statements from a number of participants regarding their view that polyamory was something some people try to “dip their toe into the water,” as said by Levi. He went on to say that “a lot of people talking about ‘poly,’ as they would say. But not very many people who thought deeply about relationships. And mostly being poly just meant dating other people.” These kinds of differentiations lead to the concept that the participants felt firmly enmeshed in their identity categories of *polyamory* and/or *ethical non-monogamy*.

As Daniel was specific to point out “I do have the ability to hold love for more than one person” because he was not like monogamous individuals who claim polyamory because they, as he said, “just want[ed] to fuck more”. Daniel certainly identified as poly and part of a polycule. This method of saying I am not X, but I am Y was also found with Levi when he explained his post-poly mentality. In his case, he described his personal history and how it led him to no longer consider himself under the guise of monogamy, but he also no longer considered himself polyamorous either. He appeared more concerned about cocreation in the relationship with his current partner.

“A helper and a pleaser and a communicator” – Relational Issues

As noted in the ‘blanket term’ section above, one of the people who reached out had made the decision to no longer identify as polyamorous. His reason for the discontinuation of being polyamorous was because believe polyamory was being used incorrectly, that it should be the umbrella term, rather than ethical non monogamy. Moreover, as previous research had noted polyamorous relationships are contrasted to and defined by monogamous standards. Therefore, standard relational models do not account for relationships that include metamours (the romantic partners of one’s partner). Thus, I found that there were no appropriate standard definitions of

relationship models. Instead, I focused on how the participants observed themselves to be in relationships.

A number of the participants demonstrated how they perceived themselves within their respective relationship dynamics. Levi explained: “I’m a helper and a pleaser and a communicator” in his previous polyamorous relationships during good times as well as difficult breakups. Although he no longer considers himself specifically polyamorous, he purported to be working on building his “sense of self kind of in the relationship” and how he and his partner are “trying our best to show up in the relationship fully.” Levi claimed his current partner is open to polyamory despite the fact that she is not currently seeking an additional partner.

Daniel explained how he is “Mr. Nurturer” and in his high school polyamorous relationship story noticed that he was “the caretaker” boyfriend. His focus on being “the caretaker” appeared to enlighten and strengthen his interest and ability to be in relationships. During the interview, Daniel explained how he accidentally walked into a bar where Delia was on a date: “when I saw her I was like oh shit like this is the most confidence I've ever seen her with, and like this her shoulders were... her posture was perfect.” In this moment, there was much smiling and laughing between the three participants. Daniel went on to say excitedly to everyone “It was the most powerful I've ever seen her.” Loralie, who was not present in this story, was “excited” and even exclaimed “Oh yeah!” in support of Delia during Jacob’s story.

Within the same focus group interview, Delia explained how she found herself to be a delegator while Daniel and Loralie communicated verbally quite often. Seriously and humorously, Delia explained: “Yeah it's like 90% talking. Yeah the first year, it was like could we just not talk about it today.” Sentiments about communication, over-communication, and

jokes about technology usage such as Google calendar and text groups appeared across nearly all interviews.

Interestingly, this led to discussions about what was within and outside of acceptable boundaries for participants. The focus group discussed how if they all lived together they would all require their own bedrooms and personal space. Discussions of roles in relationships, such as Kurt's role in his relationship dynamic with a married woman, quickly led to discussions of who had which boundaries as well as the ethical maintenance of those boundaries.

Relational Boundaries

Each of the participants vacillated between describing boundaries within their relationships. The way others navigated and communicated boundaries played a large role in whether the relationship held together. The following exploration of quotes explored the failures, successes, and works-in-progress of language regarding relational boundaries. Beginning the discussion with failure, Levi expressed that his relationship with his South Carolina girlfriend ended because there was a misunderstanding about sex with other partners. As he claimed, she “was furious... because she felt like there was no ambiguity” regarding her intention to break up with him should he have “had sex with someone else.” Sadly, a number of participants were as “mortified” as Levi was when their partners left them over experiences with additional partners despite previously discussed expectations.

The focus group participants discussed how they work on boundaries. Loralie gave a general view of this in their “polycule”:

“Yeah, and a lot of it is trial and error because we're still like learning how to talk to each other, as well. And sometimes we overshare, and sometimes we under share so yeah we

like learning our boundaries because we want to share everything, but also you should.

Some things like are best not shared with certain people.”

In agreement, Delia later explained how sometimes “it’s something really intimate [Loralie] and I might talk about for a while.”

Kurt described how he had his own boundaries with continuing a relationship without a clear affirmation for a metamour, or partner’s partner “which I did finally get assurance that he was okay with it, so at that point it continued and everything was better. So, but yeah. That was probably the most, that’s probably a difficult one.” Here, he explains his concern about her spouse: “because he was not poly and she was and I got the impression that he just sort of accepted that she was.” Once Kurt understood that he was acting within safe bounds and it was not a begrudging experience for the husband, he felt comfortable and confident to continue his romantic partnership.

Without explicitly stating it, Theresa demonstrated how she constructs boundaries around honesty in her relationships. She explained that she’s “all about honesty” and that one of her “big rules is, if you have a partner, they have to be consensual towards this, they’ve gotta be okay with this. I’m not meeting you in secret. I’m not going to be a secret; you’re not going to be a secret...” She even went on to share how because a long term partner refused to talk to their other partner about his relationship with Theresa, she decided that she would be “exiting this before it hurts me anymore than it already does.” Additionally, she had other experiences where she had to “draw the line” and end relationships for similar reasons.

Relational Dysfunction

Discussing dysfunction does overlap with discussion of relationship boundaries. However, this section of codes examines miscommunication, misguided perceptions, and

problematic power dynamic models. The primary topic of discussion in these codes was communication, which was at the root of manipulative behaviors. Each of the participants had stories of dysfunctional polyamorous relationships. It appeared that all of the participants had found paths to healthier relationship situations whether they are currently single or with one or multiple partners.

Nearly all participants discussed how they know people who wore polyamory as a moniker for their dalliances outside of their monogamous relationships. As Daniel explained: “Yeah, I think that polyamory is terrible for people that like, just want to fuck more, actually, but they’re actually monogamous people.” This sentiment was echoed by Kurt when he complained about others who claimed the title: “They call it poly, but they’re basically trying to cheat and trying to get accepted the cheating accepted by calling it polyamory when you know it’s not fully accepted, you know by both members in the relationship.” In many ways the perception on these behaviors seemed to be because polyamory is not “something necessarily people have accepted as regularly” as Lionel put it. Therefore, various kinds of monogamous relationship recursiveness, like cheating, tended to appear in narratives of poorly performed polyamory.

Eliza discussed being somewhat on the other end of this spectrum where she was providing workshops for polyamory and taught how to avoid infidelity in polyamory. However, as she said, “we just couldn’t stand up in a room full of people and be like, you know, do as I say, not as I do.” Within her relationship there was infidelity, and she did her best to shield it from her child, but there were certainly negative boundaries crossed.

Interestingly, a number of interviewees introduced the concept of those who were “well read” in polyamory. However, this distinction had negative connotations, as Loralie explained

I actually got my heart stomped through by the person that gave me a book, so that's nice. That's the person that hurt me the most. I just had a relationship early on that was with someone who had all of the words to use of all the books about polyamory has done the work and lives the lifestyle.

Daniel and Delia echoed the sentiment of having experienced this kind of situation and how it ranked among their worst experiences in ethical non-monogamy.

In terms of power dynamic dysfunction, there tended to be either experiences where one personality dominated others in the polycule or where there was a specific rule that there could only be one male in the dynamic. As Kurt pointed out:

Oh, it's a you know say male female couple and the males like oh it's fine for you to have another relationship as long as it's a woman. You can't have another guy as a relationship because I'm the only guy that's supposed to be in this relationship... it goes both ways.

Kurt certainly appeared annoyed by this dynamic, and the focus group referenced this kind of experience. It appeared ubiquitous that it was an unattractive and avoidable circumstance among the polyamory community.

These narratives of partner rigidity tended to be looked down upon by the participants because as Eliza explained: "exploring polyamory can, you know, have an impact on your sexuality." Theresa described romantic attraction to men and women, Daniel described himself as "heteroflexible" and Delia is "interested in woman" in addition to men. Levi and Lee had a more heteronormative outlook but did not appear completely closed to the presence of male presenting individuals in sexual scenarios. Even Lionel dated pansexual women. All of this is to say that degrees of open sexuality tended to be a common principal among participants. As such, nearly all participants seemed to have a view of inauthenticity and negativity towards

relationships with strong controls over whether only one male or only one female could be present.

In regards to power imbalance, Theresa discussed her experience with a partner who broke fidelity boundaries while “he did not want [her] to go outside of anything else but that.” In this case, “that” includes another partner, Drew. Eliza discussed a female partner in her closed triad relationship who created a hierarchical situation in “more of a personality sense” due to “her being the primary focus, of everything.” Theresa is no longer with the aforementioned controlling partner and Eliza exited the triad some time ago and is currently in a monogamous relationship dynamic “healing” from the triad experience.

Most dysfunctions tended to come from situations where, according to Lionel, that one of his partners who ended their relationship “didn’t communicate with me about, basically anything.” He noted this was his “worst polyamorous experience.” Granted, communication is key to any relationship type. However, nearly all narratives of failed polyamorous relationships had a clear point of decline when the lack of communication became part of the narrative.

As noted, communicating and interacting less were mentioned in most of the participant interviews. Sometimes this was due to distance, as was the case for Theresa, and joked about by Eliza. Sometimes communicating and interacting less were due to polycule dilemmas, including with adjacent polycules. Regardless, relational functionality tended to come about through direct, clear, and regular communication. Tools like google calendar and group chats were nearly ubiquitous among the participants’ narratives of polyamorous success stories. Conversely, lack of attentiveness to schedule, uncommunicated shifting of rules, lack of discussion, and silence often connoted serious relationship dysfunction.

Relational Commitment

Among the interviews, commitment emerged as a theme in numerous narratives regarding relationships. Each relationship may have had different rules, but each relationship narrative housed discussions regarding commitment to relationships and the rules. Whether it was through communicating the ability to adhere to relationship rules or time management of relationships, commitment was a major theme found among the data.

In the case of Eliza and Theresa, commitment issues tended to dominate their narrative of their polyamorous experiences. Both participants shared stories regarding moments of adaptation to or reject rejection of relationship rules. In Theresa's case, she stayed with her current partner Derek and allows additional partners who can "follow the rules" as she is interested to "grow with it if it's concrete." Here, I felt there was an implication that the "concrete" dealt with relationships that we committed. Although polyamory implicates "many loves," these loves should be able to commit to certain expectations in the case of the participants' experiences.

Similarly for Eliza, she and her partner M "discussed it as a family" regarding J's extra-relationship interests. Yet, J broke trust too many times in secretly going outside of their triad relationship to be with other partners. Although the two, Eliza and M, remain together, they are "open to the possibility" of additional partners. Ostensibly, they are considerate of individuals who can commit to their needs and boundaries. Often, these commitments can relate to time spent together.

Eliza and the focus group also discussed the concepts of "shared time" and scheduling time together. In the case of the focus group, Delia explained that "icalendar was very helpful" due to all of their changing needs and schedules because they all tried to get "enough time" with each other. As for Eliza, she discussed the need for everyone to get "equal time" in order for

everyone to feel satisfied with the relationships. In many ways these time needs were at the heartbeat of what the commitments were about. At one point, the focus group humorously added that would consider themselves to “be part of a larger polycule” with polyamorous friends outside of their community, but they were too far away “to spend time with.”

In the case of Kurt, he discussed how he “refused to spend time with” one of his partners until he was able to directly discuss potential tension between he and her husband. Here, there was a heavy implication the time together was their commitment and that he would discontinue it until the tension was resolved. This was similar to Theresa’s experience with her partner who “could not follow the rules.” She explained that although she still considers him a friend, she does not spend time with him due to their differences.

Levi gave several examples of how a great deal of time was required in his experiences in order to maintain multiple relationships. At one point, he discussed his parents’ misgivings with polyamory, but his concession to their argument primarily dealt with time and scheduling:

“Maybe they've got a point in that to do commitment justice, it does require a lot of time, and I don't think that most people living their lives would have access to the time needed to cultivate multiple relationships.”

This sentiment was also echoed in Lee’s interview where he discussed his current relationship and how they “put a lot of time” into “showing up for each other” and helping each other “heal” and grow from past difficulties and traumas. As Levi pointed out, there are helpful and “unhelpful” ways to approach these issues of commitment and time requirements. Ultimately, each relationship appeared to cultivate its own rhythm and dynamic with its commitment needs.

Conclusion

Participant interviews revealed two major categories regarding polyamory. First was the definitional fluidity of terms regarding polyamory. Participants often navigated many nuances in the definitions in their personal life and in society. Second, participants often regarded polyamory via their sexual identity. Lastly, they discussed polyamory through the lens of their relationships. Interestingly, each one of the categories tended to have a relationship to the other topics under discussion. For example, it was difficult to discuss identity without participants (and myself) bringing in concepts about boundaries and limitations. Likewise, talking about definitions of polyamory often dovetailed with conversations regarding identity. This appeared to derive from the concept of how participants came to know polyamory and what it meant to them. Then, they would discuss how they view themselves within the poly dynamic.

Most likely, this attachment of discussing the definition of polyamory in relation to discussing their identities and boundaries probably derived from the fact that there are no standard definitions or norms. As such, there were few avenues by which to explore the topic other than comparing and examining polyamory within their own lives. In fact, the focus group discussed how they do not spend much time reading literature about polyamory. Instead, they prefer discussing their needs and experiences with each other while being critical about themselves and each other in a caring way.

In order to understand these experiences more clearly, it appears that a wider range of qualitative research regarding lived experiences and perspectives of polyamorous individuals and those, like Levi, who have come and gone through the polyamorous title, is required. Thankfully, the participants took the time to share their experiences in such a candid and thoughtful manner. I wonder what understandings future research will garner in this realm.

The following section discusses the implications and my own thoughts about the study. Additionally, it looks at the research limitations and ends with the possibilities for future research into polyamory and polyamorous relationships.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This research project sought to develop an understanding of the two research questions: (1) How do polyamorous individuals communicate their polyamory? (2) How does communication about identity influences relational choices? Although this research began as a general exploration into the polyamorous experience, I narrowed its focus through my experiences with the participants. Being a polyamorous individual myself, I noted how participants decided to term their experiences and how they communicated their needs in relationships. How they navigated acceptance and rejection of boundaries and rules in their relationships became fascinating as I delved deeper into the data from the interviews. I noticed that labels such as polyamorous, open, and ethically non-monogamous appeared to be locations of discussion rather than clear signifiers of individuals' expectations. As such, I was inspired to ask my two aforementioned research questions.

This project found that polyamorous individuals communicate about CNM and polyamory in a variety of ways. Additionally, communication about identity appeared to play a role in relationship expectations and understanding. Polyamory is, as can be seen through the answers given by the participants, slippery and liminal. Research into polyamory tends to focus on how to conceptualize polyamory within the realm of consensual non-monogamy (CNM), how polyamory is defined and practiced, how it challenges heteronormativity, and how it expands our conceptions of sexuality in general. Through addressing gaps in the current state of research, this study sheds a light on potential communication strategies and outlooks regarding what is reasonable to expect in CNM communications.

Implications

Due to the fact that identifying beyond the bounds of monogamy may create personal, social, professional, and family distress, individuals who consider themselves as polyamorous may be considered a vulnerable population. As such, this research provokes discussion around finding unifying language regarding Consensual Nonmonogamy, Ethical Nonmonogamy, Polyamory and other non-monogamous terminologies. This research combines the array of overlap in definitions regarding CNM, ENM, and Polyamory from previous literature and the experiences of the participants. Understanding how polyamorists and CNM individuals use relationship language may illuminate communication tools for the CNM community.

First, the therapy community may benefit from understanding terminologies and perspectives of the CNM community. Since stigmatization on multiple levels could occur from outsiders knowing CNM identities, much mental health work could benefit from communication tools and experiences of CNM individuals. Additionally, improvement of outreach tools could be created to connect with vulnerable or isolated individuals in the CNM community. Provided the different paradigm of the CNM in navigating their relationships, traditional therapy communication and signifiers may adjusting in order to properly provide support to those within the community. Participants noted and acknowledged periods of social isolation and feeling identity confusion in their journeys among the CNM experience.

Understanding how relational boundaries and dysfunction occur via communication experiences could allow for therapy intervention during critical periods of difficulty. Eliza's relationships may have benefitted from support during J's gender transition, subsequent breaking of relational boundaries, and final relationship exit. Additionally, Caroline's experiences of isolation during previous CNM experiences may have found an earlier exit or positive

intervention had there been knowledge or possibility of mental health resources geared toward non-monogamous individuals.

This study lends insight into how individuals in CNM relationships navigate boundaries, rules, and dysfunction. Such insights may lead to further discussion into CNM relationship maintenance, longevity, and culture which could benefit both the mental health community as well as the CNM community itself.

This study may also benefit artist work in discussing CNM work through adding language and insight into the experiences of this community. Given the stigmatization of the CNM community, artists can use this study to educate themselves on how to better tell the stories of polyamorous individuals and others connected to the CNM community through having a more detailed insight into the lived experiences of negotiating relationship communications. Although requiring further research, the information regarding polyamory communication demonstrated by this study moves into territory which will allow for richer conversations among the lay population and research populations alike.

Limitations

This study conducted all of its interviews through one on one discussions over the phone and via Zoom. As such, only participants who had access to reliable technology and safe spaces to openly talk about their experiences appeared in the study. Additionally, those participants had a reduced ability to use non-verbal cues and body communication when discussing their experiences. Additionally individual associations with phone and computer technologies may have discouraged more “off-the-cuff” realizations and comments from the participants. Additionally, limiting research to the United States disallowed for voices and connection with

polyamorous and CNM communities from areas where they may be more vocal and ready to discuss their experiences.

Another limitation was the number of participants. Originally, I had intended to interview twenty-seven people in order cast a wide umbrella of experiences. The final total of participants concluded at nine individuals, breaking down into one focus group of three and six interviews. I ended up interviewing only white people, most of whom were between the ages of 30 and 50. While this demographic is valuable, the lack of diversity prevents the application and reflection of this material to POC communities or in the outside boundaries of the age demographics.

Additionally, the social media snow-ball method of advertising my study had limitations. I found limited success by using my primary starting point my personal social media. The numbers of shares kept cycling my ads to the same people, and that demographic was unlikely to share my ad because of their religious beliefs. The way most of my participants found me was from friends and colleagues personally sending them my ad. While I recognize that is still the snow-ball method, I found that I struggled to get participants past the first round of posting the flyer. I anticipated this limitation due to the smaller size of my social media network and the number of people that are included in my daily algorithm.

A limitation I did not expect was including “currently polyamorous” into my requirements for participants. In order to find the boundaries of how poly people engage with labels, I needed to consider the boundaries of when people stopped identifying. The interview with the former polyamorous individual brought a great deal of insight to the study and gave perspective when I was struggling to code the interviews. While his interview was not the last, I found that particular interview provided a framework that allowed me to see some clear lines and

delineations. A future study in a similar vein as this one could benefit from a greater variety of poly experiences.

As noted previously, I found that some of my questions proved inadequate to get to the answers that I *thought* needed to be discovered. For example, the questions did not consider people who were on various neurological spectrums. One participant struggled to engage with the questions because he was on the autism spectrum. For this individual, my questions were too vague and amorphous.

Due to the stigmatization felt in CNM's challenge to heteronormativity as well as the low visibility of CNM on the world stage, it is possible that many CNM individuals chose not to participate due to fear of being outed to their respective communities. Additionally, the low visibility of CNM may cause many potential participants to not even recognize that they are among or adjacent to the polyamorous community. Even the focus group participants had discussed that they had polyamorous experiences before they even knew that they might identify under those terms or even that those terms existed.

It is possible that participants may have enjoyed the physical distance and privacy afforded by the interview technologies employed in this study. Thanks to their bravery in choosing to share their personal experiences in a stigmatized realm, this study was given insight into the communications of polyamorous experiences. Certainly, this study opens the door for more research to be done. I now turn to future directions of this research.

Future Directions

There is much space for expansion into new avenues of polyamorous research. There are two codes that I want to touch on that I felt were not conclusive enough to include in the results section but that have promise for a different study. I will expand upon those first. Secondly, I

will explore additional directions extending beyond my research and into the wider polyamorous community.

One area of future research is to examine polyamorous individuals and their community interactions. In this research, the importance of community as both an aid and a deterrent to the success of the polyamorous person was implied at times. In order to fully articulate the need for community and the role that community plays, an additional study focused on the impacts and effects of community would be useful. A couple directions that have promise from my study include the moment of realization and societal placement.

Another possible research direction is to examine moments of epiphany. Several of the participants inferred that there was a moment or a series of moments of noticing something was missing. Theresa described the feeling as a “lacking.” Examining epiphanies – these moments of transformation - is an important aspect of research into individual identities (Bochner & Ellis, 1994). Studying the moments of epiphany in the lives of polyamorous individuals could provide insight self-acceptance and personal acknowledgement of polyamorous inclinations.

Given discussions of relational boundaries from participants, there was consistent unity regarding the necessity of checking in about partner needs. The idea was reiterated across several participants' dialogues that there needed to be constant communication and clarity into what each person wants. Crystal explained that communication was so constant that she sometimes wished she could have “a break from it.” Such exploration may provide insight into the boundaries of polyamory regarding community with the larger CNM family.

Several participants used language that could be identified as cautious and hesitant. Cardoso et al (2021) found a possible connection with stigma, particularly in regard to the larger non-poly outside community. A relationship seemed to emerge across the participants' narratives

regarding responses received from the outside community. Some of the participants reflected that they worked to not disclose regularly because of the supposed bias and lack of safety for disclosure. The intersection between stigmatization and disclosure of personal information regarding polyamory is an additional area for future study.

A final future direction is the exploration into how polyamory fits into contemporary conversations and discourses regarding sexual identity and sexual orientation. An in-depth study regarding articulation of the polyamorous experience in relationship to the dominant narratives about sexuality seems necessary. Hopefully, this current study is one of many that will emerge and provide a glimpse into to the experiences of polyamorous people from a qualitative perspective.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Social Media Post

Polyamorous Individuals and Dynamics

This research study is to explore the processes of communication inside and outside of the polyamorous relationship dynamic. I am looking for polyamorous people to interview in individual interviews or multiple person focus groups.

If you:

- Are at least 18 years of age
- Are currently living in the United States
- Have been in a polyamorous relationship in the past five years
 - Currently identify as polyamorous
- Are interested in participating in a study for research

Contact: Vianna Isbister

Graduate Student at East Tennessee State
University

Email: isbister@etsu.edu

Phone: (423)-491-3891

Your voice and story matters!

Appendix B: Online Post

Online posts:

Have an interest in talking about Polyamory and Communication? Check out the flyer below for more information! If you have any questions, please reach out and email me at isbister@etsu.edu. Please share!

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

General Introduction Questions

- What are some major identity categories in addition to being polyamorous?
- What region of the USA do you live in?
- How old are you?

1. What do you interact with polyamory on an intrapersonal level?

Prompts to include selections from statements such as:

- How did you discover you were polyamorous?
- What was the worst polyamorous experience you have ever had? Was the situation worsened because you were poly? What characteristics of the experience can you associate to being prevalent because of the nature of being polyamorous?
- What is the definition of polyamory according to you?
- How has polyamory played a role in your life?
- How has communication played a role in your dynamics?
- Do you identify polyamory as an identity, sexual orientation, or a relationship model? Or is it some combination of them? How does this present itself in your dynamics?

2. What is your experience with the polyamorous community?

Prompts to include selections from statements such as:

- Where did you learn to communicate about polyamory?
- What kinds of conversations do you have within your community?

- How does your language change from conversing with someone who is polyamorous versus someone who is not?
- Is there another community that you can converse with who understands your experiences as a polyamorous individual? How do those conversations compare or contrast?
- What is the definition of polyamory according to the community that you are in?

3. How have you experienced being polyamorous on a macro or societal level?

Prompts to include selections from statements such as:

- What discourses do you experience and interact with on the day to day?
- How do those discourses affect how you communicate with others within and outside of your community?
- How do those discourses affect how you communicate with current or future partners?
- How have others communicated to you upon learning that you are polyamorous?
- How does privilege affect how you define polyamory within your relationship and to the world as a whole?
- What is the definition of polyamory according to society?

4. How have you experienced being polyamorous from the lens of media?

Prompts to include selections from statements such as:

- How does media portray polyamory?
- How does that affect how you communicate with the world around you?

- Does the media have any effect on how you communicate with current or future partners?
- What media sources do you regularly consume?
- How does media interact with the discourses discussed above?
- What is the definition of polyamory according to the media that you consume?

Appendix D: Initial and Follow-up Email

Initial and Follow-up Email

Item 1 (Email 1, after potential participant's initial contact)

Hello,

Thank you so much for your interest in the Communication and Polyamory study. The first thing we need to do is confirm your eligibility. If you can accurately answer YES to EACH of the criteria below, we can move forward with your participation.

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. Have you been in a polyamorous relationship in the recent five year?
3. Are you currently polyamorous?
4. Are you located in the United States currently?

If you are able to answer YES to all of the above, please reply to this email to say so.

Thank you for taking the time to respond to these questions. I will reply to this email with next steps regarding your participation in the study.

Sincerely,

Vianna Isbister, ETSU graduate student

Item 2 (Email 2a, in response to non-eligible participant)

Hello again,

Thank you for replying to my email. Unfortunately, based on your reply email, you do not meet the eligibility requirements for the study, so we won't be able to move forward with your participation.

Thank you again for your interest in the study.

Sincerely,

Vianna Isbister, ETSU graduate student

Item 3 (Email 2b, in response to eligible participant)

Hello once again,

Thank you for replying to my email. Based on your reply, you DO meet the eligibility requirements for the study, so we can now move forward with your participation.

Attached you will find the Informed Consent Document. Please read over this very carefully.

You will have at least 24 hours to review it. After that time, I will contact you to see if you have any questions about the consent document or the study. I also will ask whether you wish to move forward with the study and, if you do, I will ask whether you are interested in the individual interview or the focus group. We will then set up a time for your interview or focus group.

To aid my efforts to contact you, please identify your preferred method of contact (email, phone call, text, or some combination of these) and, if you identify phone and/or text, please share with me your phone number.

Thank you again for your interest in the study.

Sincerely,

Vianna Isbister, ETSU graduate student

VITA

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- Education: M.A. Communication and Storytelling Studies, East Tennessee
State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2023
B.A., Theatre, East Tennessee State University, Johnson
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Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of
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