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an exploratory study : a project based upon an independent  
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Andria Lavine  
What is the Coming Out  
Experience of Polyamorous  
Individuals? An Exploratory  
Study

## ABSTRACT

This exploratory study considered the following question: What is the coming out experience of polyamorous individuals? The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how people manage multiple partnerships in a society that values monogamy as the accepted norm, and how people experience the process of coming out to friends, family and others in their community. The study was conducted with 73 participants via an online qualitative survey which also included some demographic questions.

The major findings of this exploratory study indicated that coming out experiences varied widely amongst participants. While all participants shared the polyamorous identity, many other factors contributed to their coming out experience including intersections with other relevant identities such as GLB, transgender, genderqueer or those who identify as part of the BDSM (Bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism and masochism) community. Despite such diversity of identities, most people indicated that they disclosed when it was relevant to the conversation or relationship. Many participants also reported that coming out to their parents and family was difficult, but that support within the polyamorous community was available.



WHAT IS THE COMING OUT EXPERIENCE OF POLYAMOROUS INDIVIDUALS?  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study explored the coming out experience of polyamorous individuals and how they manage multiple relationships in a society that values monogamy as a cultural norm. This was a qualitative exploratory internet study that yielded 73 participants. This researcher chose to close the survey at this number, though there could have been a much larger sample size.

Although this is a community that has historically existed under the radar in mainstream culture, the polyamorous community is just beginning to make a name for itself in popular culture. This population's ability to network via the internet has been a key element to its emerging voice, and it is also a place for those interested in exploring non-monogamy to find others with the same inclinations for dating purposes.

Until recently, online dating services have been geared towards helping singles find "the one," as advertised by sites such as match.com. Currently, new sites have expanded the realm of dating possibilities to the polyamorous community by allowing members to list themselves as looking for an "open relationship," for example on the site "OK Cupid" and even now on facebook.com. These important and groundbreaking new circumstances make it possible for people to easily connect with other's in their geographical locations for dating and support group purposes. Likewise, various websites have been created and geared directly towards this population, such as lovingmore.com and alt.polyamory, and Practical Polyamory.

Beyond the internet, television shows have begun to explore this community. An episode of the popular TV series, House, recently aired an episode that focused on a

married couple in an open relationship, exposing the various reactions to this from relevant characters on the show. Interestingly, this couple's plight was juxtaposed with a main character who continuously struggles with infidelity in his marriage, and highlighted the pain and deception associated with cheating. Another less known TV series that is accessible over the internet is one called "Family," which was created by a polyamorous woman named Terisa Greenan. This comedy show is based on her own experiences in polyamory, and highlights common situations such as coming out to parents and confronting the curious looks of neighbors in response to the triad relationship amongst the characters.

Also within the past year, two newspaper articles have been written about the emerging presence of the polyamorous community such as "Love's New Frontier," By Sandra A. Miller published in the Boston Globe, and "Only You. And You. And You. Polyamory—relationships with multiple, mutually consenting partners—has a coming-out party," by Jessica Bennett published in Newsweek. These articles showed the real life experiences of polyamorous community members, and exposed the fact that this population is alive and well in many cities across the country. Both articles discuss the stigmas that some people face as they navigate their relationships, but also serve to educate the public about the reasons some people choose polyamory. The closing paragraph in Newsweek's article reads as such:

It's a new paradigm, certainly—and it does break some rules. "Polyamory scares people—it shakes up their world view," says Allena Gabosch, the director of the Seattle-based Center for Sex Positive Culture. But perhaps the practice is more natural than we think: a response to the challenges of monogamous relationships, whose shortcomings—in a culture where divorce has become a commonplace—are clear. Everyone in a relationship wrestles at some point with an eternal question: *can one person really satisfy every need?* Polyamorists think the answer is obvious—and that it's only a matter of time before the monogamous world sees

there's more than one way to live and love. "The people I feel sorry for are the ones who don't ever realize they have any other choices beyond the traditional options society presents," says Scott. "To look at an option like polyamory and say 'That's not for me' is fine. To look at it and not realize you can choose it is just sad."

Given the emerging popularity of this culture in mainstream society, this research project is ever relevant. It will contribute to the research and resources available to those who are interested, and will also help clinicians who have not been exposed to this population to better help and guide their polyamorous clients. The coming out process can be difficult for anyone who subscribes to an alternative sexual or romantic lifestyle, and this project illuminates the experiences that are unique to the polyamorous community, as those who engage in it are currently on the brink of making themselves known in the greater culture.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is comprised of existing literature on polyamory, as well as writings on the gay, lesbian and bisexual experiences as they relate to the research question of “What is the Coming Out Experience of Polyamorous Individuals?” Since there was minimal literature that looked directly at the coming out experience of those who engage in polyamory, this literature review comprises as many writings on this subject as the researcher could ascertain. It also incorporates relevant literature on sexual minorities as they can also be applied to the population this research project focuses on.

The major literature reviewed was sectioned into five categories. The first, “What is Polyamory?” explains the meaning of polyamory and provides detailed information on the ways that it can be enacted, including the primary/secondary model and the poly-family model. The second section discusses writings on “Identity Formation and Coming Out Theories,” as they relate to the gay, lesbian and bisexual coming out process as well as coming out experience for polyamorous individuals. Third, this literature review delves into “Bisexuality and the Polyamorous Experience,” followed by “Experiences in Therapy” and concluding with a “Review of Polyamorous Studies.”

#### *What is polyamory?*

Weitzman (1999) quotes Hymer & Rubin (1982) by defining polyamory as “a lifestyle in which a person may have more than one romantic relationship, with the consent and enthusiasm expressed for this choice by each of the people concerned (Weitzman, 1999 p.1).” She goes on to explain that this relationship style is different from infidelity “by the presence of honest communication between partners and lovers about the existence of these relationships in their lives (Weitzman, 1999 p.1).” There are

various ways that polyamorous relationship structures take form, and these are described below.

### *Primary/Secondary Model*

The literature suggests three main models of polyamory. Although there are myriad configurations of poly relationships, several articles reference the same three basic models. Labriola (K. Labriola, Models of Open Relationships, 11/5/2009) defines the first and most common type as the *Primary/Secondary* model. She explains that this model is most closely related to monogamous coupling in that the main couple relationship is the most important focus and any outside partners or lovers are secondary. While people may have one time or longer term partners apart from their primary partner, the secondary partners will never be equal in the time and energy either primary partner devotes to the other.

In this model, Weitzman (1999) sites Peabody (1982) when she states that, “Ties with the additional lovers are seen as a source of added joy and enrichment to the partners’ lives (Weitzman, 1999 p. 2).” Ramey (1975) explains the premise is that “sex and love are independent and sex should be enjoyed for its own sake (Ramey, 1975, p. 518),” as cited by Weitzman (1999). According to Labriola (K. Labriola, Models of Open Relationships, 11/5/2009), examples of subpopulations of this group are heterosexual couples who take part in swinging and gay male couples whom frequent hot spots for recreational or anonymous sex. “Swingers” are couples that seek additional sexual experiences with other couples wherein each couple switches mates for a night. Another commonly documented encounter is when the couple seeks out an additional

lover to join them for three-way sex. In either scenario, the main goal is sex rather than emotional relationships.

The second relationship model, Weitzman (1999) citing Corbett (1999) describes one in which there are more than one relationships of equal status, and there is little connection between one's multiple partners. Labriola (K. Labriola, Models of Open Relationships, 11/5/2009) writes that quite often in this model, partners are free to explore new relationships without the consent or approval of their existing partners, and that each relationship is typically free to evolve at its own pace without interfering with other relationships that may exist simultaneously.

#### *Poly-family Model*

Third, Weitzman (1999), cites Corbett (1999) by defining as the poly-family, as a relationship structure where 3 or more people enter into a relationship where there is a strong connection and commitment between all members. The authors note that the dynamics of group relationships may vary within the group, with some pairings involving sexual relationships and others not. Labriola (K. Labriola, Models of Open Relationships, 11/5/2009) writes that often the entire group lives together and share responsibilities such as child rearing, household chores and share financial resources.

#### *Identity Formation and Coming Out Theories*

Theories on homosexual identity formation and the coming out experience are designed to explain the development of a homosexual identity. However, they are also relevant to the coming out experience of polyamorous individuals, whether they identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual because the experience encompasses a process of

realizing a non-normative sexual, romantic or affective identity. Once an individual recognizes this identity, they then face the process of disclosure within their community.

Vivienne Cass's (1979) journal article entitled, "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model," defines a model of identity development that is based on the interpersonal congruency theory (Secord & Backman, 1961, 1962, 1974; Secord, Backman, & Eauchus, 1964). Quoting Cass, "interpersonal congruency theory is based on the assumption that stability and change in human behavior are dependent on the congruency or incongruency that exists within an individual's personal environment (Cass, 1979, p. 220)." Cass goes on to say that her model of homosexual identity formation is based on the hypothesis that movement through the stages of development is propelled by incongruencies between a person and their environment, based on their non-normative sexuality.

Cass's (1979) theory is comprised of six stages. She presupposes that the person initially views themselves as heterosexuals, since this is the cultural norm. Morris's (1997) journal article summarizes these stages, beginning with *Stage I: Identity Confusion*, may begin with people asking themselves, "Who am I?" This may lead into the question of, "Am I a homosexual?" The person wrestles with questions of identity, and seeks information to help cope with the incongruency that their sexuality may not be normative. *Stage II: Identity Comparison* is noted by the realization that one may have that, "I may be homosexual." They may sit with feelings of isolation linked to feeling different. During *Stage III: Identity Tolerance*, the individual comes to terms with the notion that, "I probably am a homosexual," and moves closer to internally soothing the incongruency of identity that has been taking place. *Stage IV: Identity Acceptance*



actualizes the statement that, “I am a homosexual,” and resolves the incongruency between whether one is heterosexual or homosexual. Accepting a gay or lesbian identity completes this stage. As one moves on to *Stage V: Identity Pride*, they may begin to identify with the activism that comes along with countering the oppression faced by gay and lesbian individuals from dominant society. Also inherent in this stage is the mindset of gay pride, and taking offense when one is presumed to be heterosexual. Last, *Stage VI: Identity Synthesis* includes the resolution of anger and activism and manifests the public and private integration of sexual identity. People may come to see their sexuality as just one part of their identity, rather than the most salient part.

Opposition to Cass’s (1979) theory, according to Morris (1997), included criticism that one could not move on to another stage of development until they resolved the previous stage. Morris (1997) summarizes another theorist, Eli Coleman, whose 1982 journal article, “Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process” formulates that individuals can move through developmental stages in a more fluid manner, and that they may revisit stages of development as they encounter new life experiences. His stages of development include *Pre-Coming Out*, *Coming Out*, *Exploration*, *First Relationships*, and *Integration*.

As summarized by Morris (1997) *Pre-coming Out*, encompasses feeling difference in reference to one’s same sex attractions. *Coming Out* is defined by one’s own acknowledgment that they are gay or lesbian, and the telling of others. Moving on to explore those feelings of same sex attraction are the actions that lead to the next stage, which Coleman calls, *Exploration*. Next, individuals begin to integrate intimacy into their romantic relationships and abandon the mostly sexual exploration of the last stage to

create a “committed sexual relationship (Morris, 1997, p. 7). Last, *Integration* includes the idea that people become more successful in their relationships and leaving old relationships to begin new ones.

Cass and Coleman were instrumental in explaining the identity development that coincides with coming out as gay or lesbian. For many years, the gay and lesbian experiences were the main focus of research conducted to understand non-normative sexualities. However, little research has been conducted to explore the experience of other sexual minorities outside of the gay and lesbian binary including the bisexual identity. In fact Diamond quotes Rust (2000) in her 2008 journal article, stating, “many studies of same-sex sexuality have specifically excluded bisexually identified individuals over the years for the sake of conceptual and methodological clarity (p. 5).” This presumes that sexual identities that exist between socially prescribed binaries are elusive in mainstream culture as well as in the world of research.

Likewise, very little research has been conducted that looks at the coming out experience of polyamorous individuals. Davidson (2002) writes briefly about the social challenges faced by polyamorists who are out, and notes considerable discrimination by mainstream society and employers, the potential learned necessity for people to be leading a “double life,” and family disapproval as top burdens people face. Additionally, she mentions issues related to childrearing and disclosure and “lack of legal protection in property law, inheritance law, parenting and child custody (Davidson, 2002, p. 3).”

Geri Weitzman (2006) is one author who writes more specifically about the coming out experience of poly individuals. Although her 2006 publication focuses directly on the coming out experience of bisexual poly individuals, she writes the section

on coming out to be applicable to people of any sexual identity. She likens the experience to the coming out experience of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. She notes that the first step is “coming out to oneself,” and writes that, “There is a recognition that one’s identity is changing along with one’s romantic preferences, and that one’s evolution is taking a different path from what the mainstream of society expects (Weitzman, 2006, p7).” She goes on to explain that some people are aware that they are polyamorous before they come to an awareness that a community of people who share the same orientation even exist. They may feel a range of emotions including joy and shame.

The next important step that Weitzman (2006) describes is the experience of “coming out to a partner (p.7).” Often, people are already in monogamous committed relationships when they come into the realization of their polyamorous identities and must navigate disclosing their new identity to a partner. This may involve renegotiation of the relationship if the partner is amenable to trying an open relationship, coping with feelings of loss or jealousy that may arise, or separating due to differences of the projected outcome of the relationship.

Once a person comes out to themselves and their partner about their new identity, Weitzman (2006) writes about “how ‘out’ to be about one’s polyamory to the non-polyamorous people in one’s life (p. 9).” She writes that many people face rejection when they come out to the general public, and that loss of jobs and child custody debates have ensued in such situations. Pepper Mint (2004) writes about the ways in which non-monogamists can be punished by the law, noting a lack of laws to protect them from discrimination in states that do not acknowledge protection based on sexual or relationship behavior.

Oppression experienced by people in openly non-exclusive relationships who are “out” in the community bear similar experiences to people who identify as bisexual. Author Pepper Mint (2004) writes about the close links between polyamory and bisexuality, and the overlap in the movements of each group. This author writes about the duality between monogamy and cheating to lay a framework describing why it is that polyamorous and bisexual people are often oppressed by mainstream society, and even within the gay and lesbian movements.

### *Bisexuality and the Polyamorous Experience*

Pepper Mint (2004) explains that mainstream society demonizes cheating and values monogamy, and that the definition alone of bisexuality challenges this duality. Mint poses that people with bisexual identities are primarily viewed by mainstream society as “cheaters,” whether or not they practice monogamy. An article by Mohr, et.al. (2009) references this very bias, stating, “Bisexuals are more likely than others to be stereotyped as sexually voracious and non-monogamous (p. 164)” than others. This article goes on to describe the stereotype that because of this, bisexual people are construed to be less likely to attain intimate and committed relationships, and that infidelity is prominently assumed. Mohr et.al. (2009) quote Herek (2002), and Steffens & Wagner (2004) in stating that, “Population-based surveys have indicated that attitudes toward bisexuals are more negative than those toward individuals of other sexual orientations (p. 164).”

Although bisexual individuals are often stereotyped as being non-monogamous by nature because they are perceived to desire each gender simultaneously, this is not always

the case. Mint (2004) quotes Garber (2000) by differentiating bisexual people who date only one gender at a time as “sequential” bisexuals, and people who value having partners of both sexes at one time to be “concurrent bisexuals.” Concurrent bisexuals are more likely to be polyamorous by nature as well as in practice. It is at this apex that bisexuality and polyamory officially connect.

People who identify as polyamorous or concurrently bisexual are often not visible in mainstream culture. Mint (2004) theorizes that this is because historically, due to the societal value of monogamy, bisexual people have often chosen one partner and defined their sexuality based on the gender of that partner. It is important to note that Mint (2004) clearly acknowledges the challenge of sexual identity based on partnership when the partner is transgendered. The societal pressure of acceptance based on monogamous partnership for bisexual individuals, according to Mint (2004), has kept them invisible to society.

The polyamorous movement and implementation of alternative relationship styles to include multiple partners has been the vehicle to make bisexuals and polyamorous individuals more visible, according to Mint (2004). Again referencing the duality of monogamy and cheating, Mint theorizes that oppression of these groups stem from their association with cheating. The author posits that the internalized judgments of a community and society that values the morality of monogamy will be a challenge for poly individuals to continually confront and resist. For example, the media frenzies that ensue due to famous people cheating sensationalize the cheating dynamic, victimize the “cheated on” partner, and create a victimizer of the partner who strays. Rarely are the dynamics of any given partnership examined to investigate agreements that partners may

have about additional lovers. Society immediately demonizes cheating, and polyamorous people may internalize these judgments when friends or family concur with this perspective.

Another place where bisexual and polyamorous individuals are discriminated against, according to Mint (2004), is within the LGBT movement. Mint explains that polyphobia and biphobia exist in this realm because of the struggle between minorities. The author presents a scenario where LGBT organizations exclude bisexual and polyamorous individuals from joining because polyamorous experiences may be too radical for mainstream society to accept and the presumption is that this will impede political progress for the entire group.

### *Experiences in Therapy*

Weitzman (2006) sites in her article, “Therapy with Clients Who are Bisexual and Polyamorous,” a number of statistics that break down the perceptions of some therapists who have worked with non-monogamous couples or individuals. Considering the standard relationship conglomeration is currently monogamy, there is a significant potential that polyamorous people can be pathologized in the therapeutic relationship. According to Weitzman (2006), Knapp (1975) reports “33% of the therapists in his sample thought that people in open relationships had personality disorders or neurotic tendencies, and that 9-17% would try to influence a return to a monogamous lifestyle (p. 3).” Knapp’s study focused on interviewing therapists, and he includes data that reflects a consistent bias on the part of therapists to more severely pathologize people in

open relationships as opposed to people who committed adultery in monogamous relationships.

Another study cited by Weitzman (2006) conducted by Hymer and Rubin (1982) found that “24% of therapists surveyed felt that polyamorous people feared commitment and 15% guessed that the clients' marriages must not be fulfilling (Weitzman, 2006, p. 3).” This study can be compared to another Hymer and Rubin (1982) study, which yielded information that “among polyamorous people who had pursued therapy, 27% found that their therapists weren't supportive of their lifestyles (Weitzman, 2006, p. 3).” This is echoed in an article where Page (2004) similarly reported that “many of her bisexual research participants had trouble finding therapists who were affirming of their bisexuality and polyamory (Weitzman, 2006, p. 3).” This leads to the results that Weber (2002) found that “38% of a sample of polyamorous people who had at some point participated in therapy had not mentioned the fact of their polyamory to their therapists, and 10% of those who did reveal it experienced a negative response (Weitzman, 2006, p. 3).” Weber (2002) also includes important insight into another aspect of therapy; even when polyamorous individuals or families find a therapist who is open-minded to or affirming of their lifestyle, many people reported spending great deals of time and money educating the therapist before adequate treatment could take place.

### *Review of Polyamory Studies*

Herek, Gillis and Cogan (2009), conducted a research project titled, “Internalized Stigma Among Sexual Minority Adults: Insights From a Social Psychological Perspective.” The aim of the study was to report data on stigma related experiences of

sexual minority adults, using a social psychological framework, and defining stigma in three distinct ways. The study supposes that society's main oppressive institution is that of heterosexism, which creates a construct for stigma of those who are not heterosexual. The article defines "*enacted sexual stigma*," as the "overt negative actions against sexual minorities, such as hate crimes (Herek, Gillis and Cogan, 2009, p. 32)," whereas "*felt sexual stigma*," includes "expectations about the circumstances in which sexual stigma will be enacted (Herek, Gillis and Cogan, 2009, p. 32)," and finally "*internalized sexual stigma*" as the "personal acceptance of sexual stigma as part of one's value system and self-concept (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan, 2009, p32)."

Via this framework, internalized sexual stigma was evaluated from a population of lesbian, gay and bisexual participants, as these populations are the most prevalently acknowledged as having sexual minority status. The location of the study allowed for participants to draw from the greater Sacramento area in Northern California. Baseline data was collected from a sample of 2,259 lesbian, gay and bisexual adults, drawing from 1,170 women and 1,089 men using a self-administered. All participants were invited to participate in follow up research to be conducted 1 year later, and although 89% indicated interest at the initial session, only 65% provided data for follow-up (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan, 2009).

The degree of self-stigma, or internalized self stigma, was assessed using the "Revised Internalized Homophobia Scale (IHP-R; Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1998; Meyer, 1995)," which is described as a shortened version of the Internalized Homophobia Scale as found in the DSM III, developed to assess how people's attitudes about themselves are impacted by their sexual orientation identity. The authors of this article



state that this measurement tool has been proven to have internal validity and construct validity in its application to gay men, thus they revamped the wording to include those who self identify as lesbian or bisexual as well. Responses to questions were rated according to a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 to 5, indicating, “I disagree strongly,” to “I agree strongly,” respectively. Lower scores would indicate a more positive self-attitude.

Results concluded that most participants did not agree with any of the items that would infer a negative self-attitude, indicating positive self-images and strong commitments to their sexual orientation identity. This included 89% of lesbians, 77.5% of gay males, and 78% of female bisexuals, and 54.5% of bisexual males respondents. Bisexual males, overall, had significantly lower self-attitude ratings with 23.5% reporting a rating of 2 or more IHP-R items, again notably higher than any other group in this study (Herek, Gillis and Cogan, 2009).

This study provides good insight into the degree of internalized self-stigma that participants endure. However, sexual orientation identity can be divided into myriad categories, not only one’s identity as lesbian, gay or bisexual. While these populations offer valuable understandings of how sexual minorities cope with stigma and identity, there are many other populations and subcultures that exist in our society that do not fall into the above listed identities. For example, people with sexual fetishes, BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism and Masochism) and Kink communities, and polyamorous people. My study will attempt to fill this gap by focusing on polyamory, and how the practice of intentional non-monogamy contains its own unique challenges and benefits within today’s society. While a participant’s sexual orientation identity as lesbian, gay or bisexual will be noted in my study, this will not be the main

assessment characteristic and my study will accept individuals who identify as heterosexual to be assessed as sexual minorities based on their nontraditional practice of polyamory. Also, the gender identities of the participants in Herek, Gillis and Cogan's (2009) study were limited to male or female, which omits individuals who identify as transgendered. My study will allow participants to disclose their self-identified gender, allowing a broader spectrum of gender identity.

In addition to the above differences between my study and the Herek, Gillis and Cogan's (2009) study, there will be variations in the methodology. Their study included a sample of 1,170 women and 1,089 men who were all recruited from the greater Sacramento area in California. 65% of participants provided follow up data one year after the initial study. My study will be conducted online and will yield a lower number of participants, however, geographically my study may have a more broad range of participants

The last main difference between my study and that of Herek, Gillis and Cogan (2009) is that their study focused heavily on a 5-point scale system and my study will be more exploratory, seeking narratives rather than statistical data. I will note statistics in reference to demographic data, but personal narratives will be the main focus of understanding the population of my study.

In an article entitled, "Negotiating (Non)Monogamy: Bisexuality and Intimate Relationships," Kirsten McLean (2004) writes about the use of personal narratives in her exploratory study of 60 Bisexual men and women in Australia. Using qualitative methods, McLean interviewed Bisexual participants with the focus of addressing common stereotypes encountered by this population, including the assumption of being

“promiscuous, deceptive and unable to commit to long-term relationships (McLean, 2004, p. 85).”

McLean’s (2004) study uses a framework that suggests Bisexual individuals are stereotyped negatively for several reasons. First, she proposes that contemporary western society views bisexuality as existing between the dichotomies of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This leads to the misrepresentation of bisexuals as unable to form intimate relationships, or to form relationships that are built on dishonesty and untrustworthiness when they commit to one partner. McLean (2004) quotes Robinson (1997) stating that the ideology of monogamy “forces us to fit into neat, well-defined categories which don’t allow for the complexity and reality of the diverse ways in which human beings relate (p. 85).” The notion that the heterosexual norm of closed unions is the accepted relationship model, prescribes that monogamy defines intimacy in relationships. McLean (2004) goes on to explain, “Defining intimacy in this way means that romantic and/or sexual activity outside the primary relationship is always constructed as a negative (p. 86).” She goes on to state that this ideology creates, “our fixation on affairs, infidelity and sexual exclusivity (McLean, 2004, p. 86).” McLean (2004) highlights that intentionally non-monogamous people, especially those who have primary partners, are often “pitied for having to ‘tolerate’ acts of infidelity by their partner (p. 86).” Hence, conscious decisions to forge this type of relationship style are not legitimized in mainstream culture, and additional partnerships outside of the primary relationship are still viewed as infidelities by outsiders.

“Following on from the misrepresentation of non-monogamy as infidelity is the association between bisexuality and infidelity (McLean, 2004, p. 86).” The author then

goes on to describe that the link between bisexuality and infidelity leads to the belief that bisexuals are not capable of successful monogamous relationships. Further, if bisexual individuals do forge monogamous relationships, their sexual identity may then be challenged by society, for example they will be seen as either homosexual or heterosexual based on the gender of their partner. McLean's (2004) study aimed to dispel the stereotypes of bisexual individuals as dishonest or incapable of committed relationships. Their participation in open relationships was not assumed based on their self-identified bisexual orientation, and 25% of her participants reported being in monogamous relationships.

McLean's study (2004) culled many narratives that informed her about the experiences of the population she studied, and my study will have the same goal. Through the use of qualitative methods, like McLean, I am seeking to understand the experience of people who participate in open relationships in order to provide a voice for this population. While about 75% of McLean's participants reported being in open relationships, my study will focus only on people in open relationships.

In addition to their engagement in open relationships, my study will allow participant involvement from individuals from any sexual identity orientation. Whereas McLean's study (2004) honed in on bisexual people, my study will invite homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual and any other self identified sexualities that participants use to describe their orientation. While I anticipate a high percentage of bisexual participants, I look forward to culling narratives from a more diverse sample of participants.

The use of qualitative data collection methods in McLean's study (2004) share some similarities and differences with my study. McLean (2004) conducted 60 face-to-

face interviews with her participants to gather narratives. While I will also be seeking qualitative data, my information will not be obtained via face-to-face interviews. I will be using an online survey to collect data, which will allow for a more diverse geographic spread of participants. I aim to gather data from participants all over the United States, whereas McLean's study concentrated on the Australian population, my study will fill a gap by interviewing participants living in America.

The qualitative methods that were used in McLean's (2004) study are very similar to the methods I will use in my own study to understand polyamorous relationships. Another researcher who used qualitative methods to gather in depth information on the polyamorous population is Elizabeth Sheff (2005), who published her findings in an article entitled, "Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity and Power." This study, like mine, focuses heavily on the coming out narratives of self identified polyamorous people, with a main difference between our studies being that Sheff interviews only women, and I will gather data from all self identified gendered participants.

Sheff (2005) uses the framework of sexual subjectivity to construct the findings of her data. She cites Tolman (2002), defining sexual subjectivity as, "a persons experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being (Sheff, 2005, p. 254)." Tolman's (2002) definition goes on to add that, "Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity (Sheff, 2005, p. 254)." This study looks deeply at women's use of polyamorous identity and experience as a way to transcend patriarchal gender roles and expectations, and to create their own relationship structures for sexual and cultural liberation. Sheff (2005) argues that the ability for women to own their sexualities and

forge relationships that honor their sexual desires and expressions allows for greater self-esteem and self-agency.

Similar to my study, Sheff (2005) explores the coming out experiences of people who self identify as polyamorous. She gathers in depth information about the internal experience of women coming out as polyamorous, both to oneself and to the community. For many women interviewed in Sheff's article, a commonly shared experience was the deconstruction of stereotypical roles in the realms of family, culture, gender and sexuality. Most women reported that rejecting the accepted norm of monogamy precipitated feelings of anxiety, fright, and later liberation. Coming out internally as non-monogamous, according to some of the women in Sheff's (2005) study, meant confronting the imbalance of power that many women experience in heterosexual monogamous relationships, and taking steps to reconstruct the internalized notions of how women are socialized to gender norms.

The methodology Sheff (2005) used to conduct her study was supported by the above-mentioned experiences. Her use of a 7-year longitudinal study of the same women allowed for the research to gauge how their lifestyles became more liberating to them over time, and correlated with redefining how they wanted their genders, sexualities, and family lives to be enacted in theory as well as practice. However, many women voiced that creating relationship styles that fostered an internal sense of freedom and a more balanced sharing of power for all partners came with negative cultural responses.

All women in this study expressed facing stigmas from monogamous society. Some women experienced being ostracized from their families of origin, close friends or spiritual groups when their polyamorous relationship styles were disclosed. As the sexual

revolution of the 1960's unfolded, Sheff (2005) cites Jeffrey's (1990) in theorizing that women's "sexual appetites" were "released," but that essentially the polyamorous movement and notion of restructuring gender related power systems fell short (Sheff, 2005, p. 280). In part, this may be in relationship to the pressures and stigmas from monogamous society as directed towards poly women and the roles of poly men as well (Sheff, 2005).

Sheff's conclusion is that polyamorous women have made significant progress in designing their own relationship styles, both with their partners and the society at large. She states, "Ultimately, polyamorous women's attempts at self-redefinition were active resistance to suppression. Even though their defiance was imperfect and left their emancipation unfinished, they still attempted to forge lives outside of the narrow confines allowed by heterocentric patriarchal culture (Sheff, 2005, p. 280)." Despite the oppression and stigma endured from monogamous society, poly women in this study were able to enjoy a sense of liberation even though it may have mostly been validated and respected within the poly community.

Collecting narratives from poly women is essential to the conceptualization of the poly lifestyle. However, this is only one part of the community, and Sheff (2005) writes that she sees avenues for future research on polyamory to be conducted around poly men and same sex partnerships. My study will aim to collect some of this data, although will not be designed to *only* collect data from one self identified gender. Information from poly men will fill a gap in relation to Sheff's (2005) study. Also, narratives from younger people of any gender will serve to fill a gap in Sheff's study, which explains the experiences of women who had roots in the sexual revolution of the 1960's. It will be

interesting to hear voices of potentially younger poly folks who may be children of the generation that was involved in the earlier parts of the sexual revolution, and how their parents' redefinition of gender roles may provide smoother transitions into alternative lifestyles.

In contrast to Sheff's (2005) article which concentrates on the gendered aspects of polyamory, Meg Barker (2005) researches "the ways in which polyamorous individuals construct their personal and group identities in relation to conventional monogamy (p. 75)," and also she explores "the implications of polyamory on a person's own sense of self (p. 75)." In this study, less emphasis is placed on the gender of the polyamorous individual and more focus is placed on the person's internal and external experiences of redefining relationship structures in a monogamous world. She juxtaposes the paradigms in which dominant culture places a high value on monogamy and accepted social norms, with the queer experiences that challenge such norms, polyamorous relationships included.

This author argues that the nature of polyamory goes against the "dominant construction of sexuality in Western culture (Barker, 2005 p 76)," referencing Adrienne Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Barker (2005) outlines that these dominant constructs of sexuality are comprised of three main tenets. First, relationships should exist between a man and a woman. Second, they should be monogamous. Third, relationship roles prescribe that the man is active and the woman is passive. Polyamorous relationships contest and challenge such notions in that they often exist between same sex individuals, or within the bisexual spectrum; meaning individuals may have same sex, opposite sex, or partners of both genders. Some polyamorous individuals self identify as



transgendered as well, thus challenging the male/female binary of accepted norms. Next, the very nature of polyamory, or having “many loves,” is in direct conflict with the ideal that relationships should be monogamous. Last, many poly relationships offer women the opportunity to redefine power structures in relationships and gain greater access to sexual subjectivity, thus disproving the role of the active man and passive woman (Barker, 2005).

Beyond challenging dominant societal views of compulsory heterosexuality, polyamory, according to Barker (2005), also puts into question the “constructed nature of identity (p. 77).” Barker (2005) writes, “The conventional way of viewing the self, both in everyday life and in traditional psychology, is as one coherent, stable whole (p. 77).” Polyamorous identities tend to look to other meanings of the “self,” such as Hermans’ (1996) description of the self as a plurality of voices, or Mair’s (1977) notion of a community of selves. Potter & Wetherell (1989) suggest that the self is comprised of a range of distinct selves, without a core “self,” that are created by joining with other people in various situations. Barker (2005) writes, “It seems that polyamory has the capacity to help people to explore the different facets of themselves and perhaps come to a alternative understanding of self identity (p. 78).” She proposes that this is accomplished by viewing the self, “through the different ways they might see themselves reflected in the eyes of others they are closely involved with (Barker, 2005, p. 78).”

In order to collect her data, Barker (2005) used many of the same techniques that I plan to use. She conducted interviews via the Internet because many poly people seem to be connected to online communities, thus they are able to reach. She asked questions about “what their current set up is, and how they feel it is perceived by society in general (Barker, 2005, p. 78).” I also plan to ask these same questions, as I feel they are necessary

to understanding where a participant is coming from in their relationship set up and connection to this lifestyle. Different from Barker's study, my participants will be based in the US, as hers were based primarily in the UK and Europe, with only a few residing in the US. This is an important distinction because much of the research conducted on this topic hails narratives from the UK, Europe and Australia, whereas there is a need for data collection from within the US. Additionally, in order to fully grasp the experience of my participants I prefer to be geographically located in the same country, as opposed to another culture that might lead to my own misinterpretation of the data.

While Barker (2005) poses that polyamory may be the next postmodern relationship style, similar to the other researchers written about above, there may be criticisms from mainstream society or media. Some research participants Barker (2005) argued that polyamory is threatening to the ideal of monogamy in that it allows individuals an honest way to fulfill their needs and desires. This may be a direct threat to the dominant practice of monogamy where individuals are socialized to honor fidelity, and to neglect being open about outside curiosities or desires.

The notion that polyamory has the potential to acknowledge multiple selves within identity may also pose problems in mainstream culture. Within the population of non-monogamy, there may be a pull to claim multiple identities within the self in order to be congruent with relationship styles and a chosen alternative. However, many criticisms from dominant culture, as evidenced by the research conducted by Sheff (2005) and McLean (2004), include the claim that poly people are untrustworthy or inherently incapable of commitment due their non monogamous practices.

### *Summary*

Overall, the above studies demonstrate the well-rounded experiences of polyamorous individuals. Highlighted in each study are the paradigm changes that internally take place when people forge untraditional relationship styles, the empowerment that can be accessed from redefining the self to fit its surrounding world, and of course the stigma and discrimination that accompany change. While all of these studies have portions that concentrate on the coming out or disclosure experiences of polyamorous individuals, mine will delve deeper into this experience and draw similarities and differences to the coming out experiences of the GLBT population. I will also examine the intersections between the poly and GLBT communities, and the societal perceptions of these intersections as perceived by my participants. Additionally, I will be able to describe the experiences of heterosexual individuals who fall into the category of being sexual minorities due to their polyamorous identities, something rarely explored in sexual minority literature. As Alfred Kinsey (1948) writes, "The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex (p.639)." This study aims to contribute to the discourse on alternative sexualities and non-monogamy, a topic that exists under the surface of mainstream society and whose reality is worthy of exploration and understanding.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study asked the following question: What is the ‘Coming Out’ experience of those who self-identify as polyamorous? The aim of the study was to understand how people manage the fact that they are in multiple relationships in the mainstream world, and to whom they choose to disclose their polyamorous lifestyle to. This study’s exploration of coming out as a sexual minority, along with accounts of those who have (or have not yet) come out as polyamorous aimed to shed light on the perceived effects of society’s responses to this population. Also, it provided insight into the way participants interpreted their own experience as non-monogamous in a society where monogamy is the accepted norm. I conducted a mixed method online survey, including both quantitative demographic questions and open-ended qualitative questions to gather narrative data from my participants.

### *Sample*

In order to participate in this study, it was a requirement that the individual identified as polyamorous. They were required to be 18 years of age or older, currently reside in the United States, read and write English and have access to a computer with internet. The exclusion criteria was anyone under 18, who resided outside of the US, or anyone who engages in infidelity, meaning that they were not openly communicating multiple partnerships to all people involved. Weitzman (1999) quotes Hymer and Rubin (1982) by defining polyamory as “a lifestyle in which a person may have more than one romantic relationship, with the consent and enthusiasm expressed for this choice by each of the people concerned.” She goes on to explain that this relationship style is different from infidelity “by the presence of honest communication between partners and lovers about the existence of these relationships in their lives (Weitzman, 1999).” Participants

were eligible if their relationship started as infidelity but transitioned to polyamory over time. The proposed sample size was at least 40 participants for the online survey, and I terminated the study at 100. In total, 100 people signed on to complete the survey and 71 eligible participants took the survey.

### *Ethics and Safeguards*

Participant survey responses and personal identities remained anonymous during this study as the survey site reported data anonymously. Neither I nor anyone else had knowledge of participant identities as it was completely protected by the survey service. My thesis research advisor and I were the only people who had access to the survey data, which has been and will remain stored in a locked file for a minimum of three years as required by Federal regulations. After the three years, data will be destroyed or will continue to be kept secure if needed, for an extended period. A general summary of the findings will be used for presentation among the Smith College School for Social Work community, for my MSW thesis dissemination and for publication.

There were some risks associated with participating in this research study. Questions had the potential to bring up uncomfortable feelings for some people as I asked that they discuss personal information, including sexual orientation and sexual identity. All participants were informed that if answering any of these questions elicited uncomfortable thoughts or feelings, that they were not required to answer such questions or to finish the study. The survey was set up to be terminated at any time simply by informing the participant to exit the site prior to hitting the “Submit” button, allowing withdrawal from the survey. Participants were reminded of this information before the survey started. I informed all participants this was an anonymous study

and that neither I nor anyone else had access to their identity, as the survey site protected their identity.

A referral list was given to participants at the beginning of the online survey. The referral list (see Appendix E) included San Francisco Sex Information; information and referral service that connects people with information and services in their own geographic area, nationally, and also answers basic information about sex and sexuality.

### *Data Collection*

Recruitment took place online via social networking sites, email lists, and online organizations that were linked to or specifically designed for the polyamorous population. Recruitment for the on-line survey was sought by contacting organizations and agencies that work with the polyamorous community, specifically, San Francisco Sex Information and the Poly Professional Research List; Internet postings facebook.com; and the snowball method.

Participants mixed method online survey through “survey monkey,” including both quantitative demographic questions and open-ended qualitative questions to gather narrative data from my participants. The survey participants were asked to provide 6 answers to demographic data questions related to age, self-identified race/ ethnicity, self-identified gender, self-identified sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, and how long they have identified as polyamorous. The retrospective on-line survey was comprised of three sections which contained open-ended narrative questions and that were related to relationship structure, disclosure, coming out, support systems and community response. The section on relationship asked participants to describe their current or desired relationship structure. This section highlighted the various ways

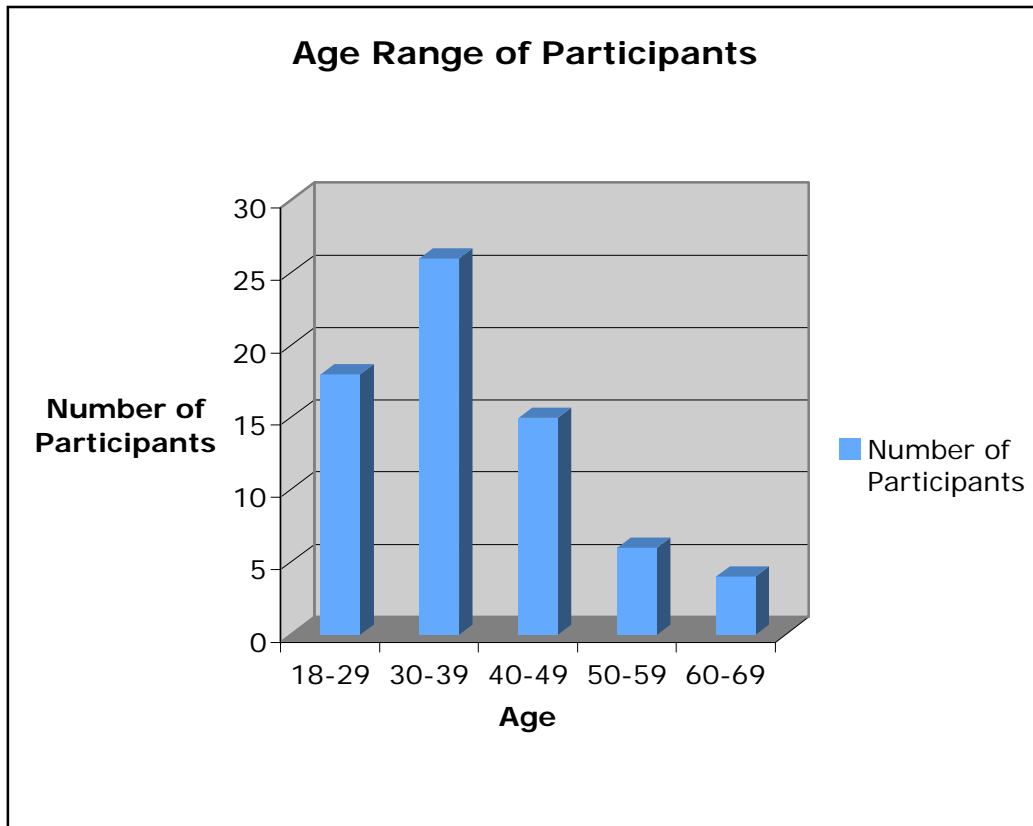
that people engage in relationships with multiple partners. The section on disclosure asked participants to discuss who knows about their polyamorous identity and how they determine who they can disclose this to, i.e. family, friends or coworkers, etc. In the next section on coming out, questions were designed to explore experiences of what occurs when people do identify with this lifestyle, and how they experience their own internal emotional or psychological processes in conjunction with those of their community. For example, questions explored whether or not people have come as out polyamorous and if not, why; descriptions of pertinent coming out narratives, poor reactions encountered as part of this process, and the polyamorous coming out experience in conjunction with other coming out processes such as sexual orientation or gender identity and the similarities or differences present. Next, support systems were assessed by asking participants if they have ever engaged with the polyamorous community and if so, how they located it. Last, the section on community response focused on salient responses to disclosure of identity from the non-polyamorous community, and any experiences that took place in a therapeutic environment as related to perceived therapist response. Depending on the depth of participants' responses, the survey took participants approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete.

### *Data Analysis*

I analyzed the data I collected according to two major themes, demographic data and qualitative data. Demographic data was examined by tallying the responses in order to break down data such as age, self-identified gender, self-identified gender, self-identified race/ethnicity, socio-economic status self-identified sexual orientation. Survey data were analyzed for thematic similarities and trends. I determined the trends by

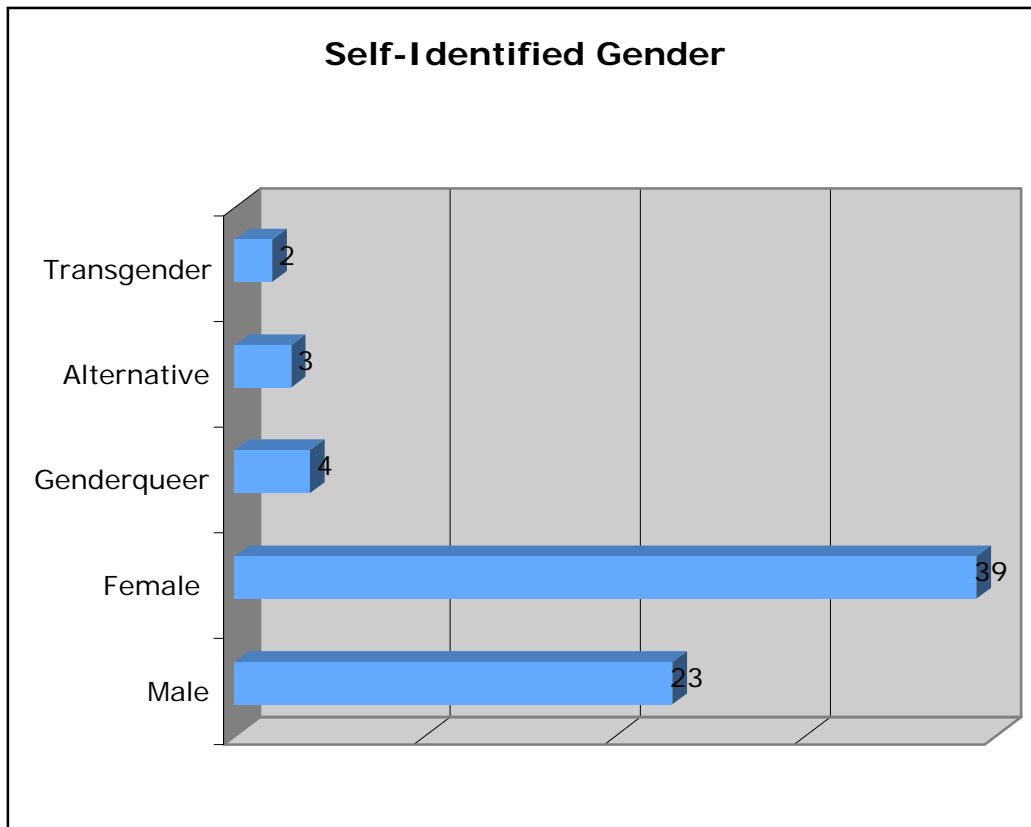
extracting themes to each question and then tallied the number of participants who responded similarly. I will present the analysis of the demographic data here, and in the next chapter I will present my findings for the qualitative data.

Of the 100 people who logged on to take my survey, 73 fit the criteria of my study. This required that they self identified as polyamorous, had command of the English language, anticipated having internet access for the duration of the study, currently resided in the US and were 18 years of age or older. In accordance with my HSR approval, participants were not required to answer all questions and had the opportunity to skip any question that they chose to, once the basic requirements as stated above were answered.





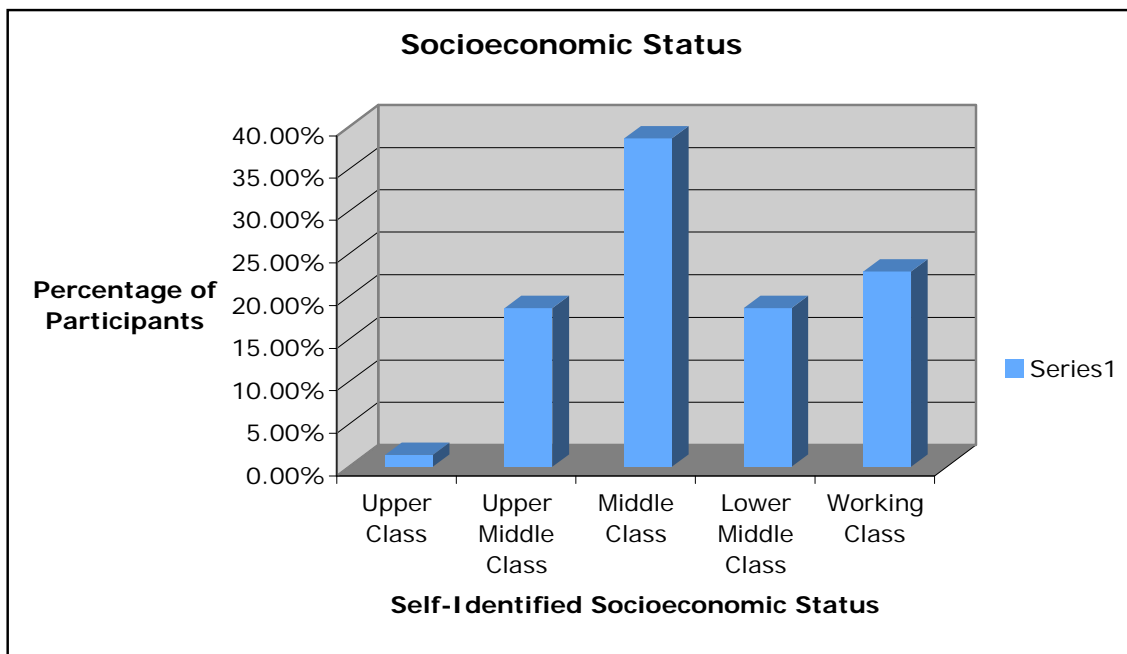
Of the 73 people who fit the criteria I prescribed, 71 answered most of the demographic questions I asked. Of those 71, 69 answered the first question, which asked the participant to fill in a box with their current age. The results yielded that 18 people were between the ages of 18 to 29, 26 were between the ages of 30 and 39, 15 were between 40 and 49, six were between 50 and 59 and four were between 60 and 69. .



The second question read, “What is your self-identified gender?” Considering the growing options for gender identity in today’s society, I created this question to be open-ended to allow for each participant to name their own gender. The yielded the response that 39 participants self identified as female, 23 self identified as male, four self identified

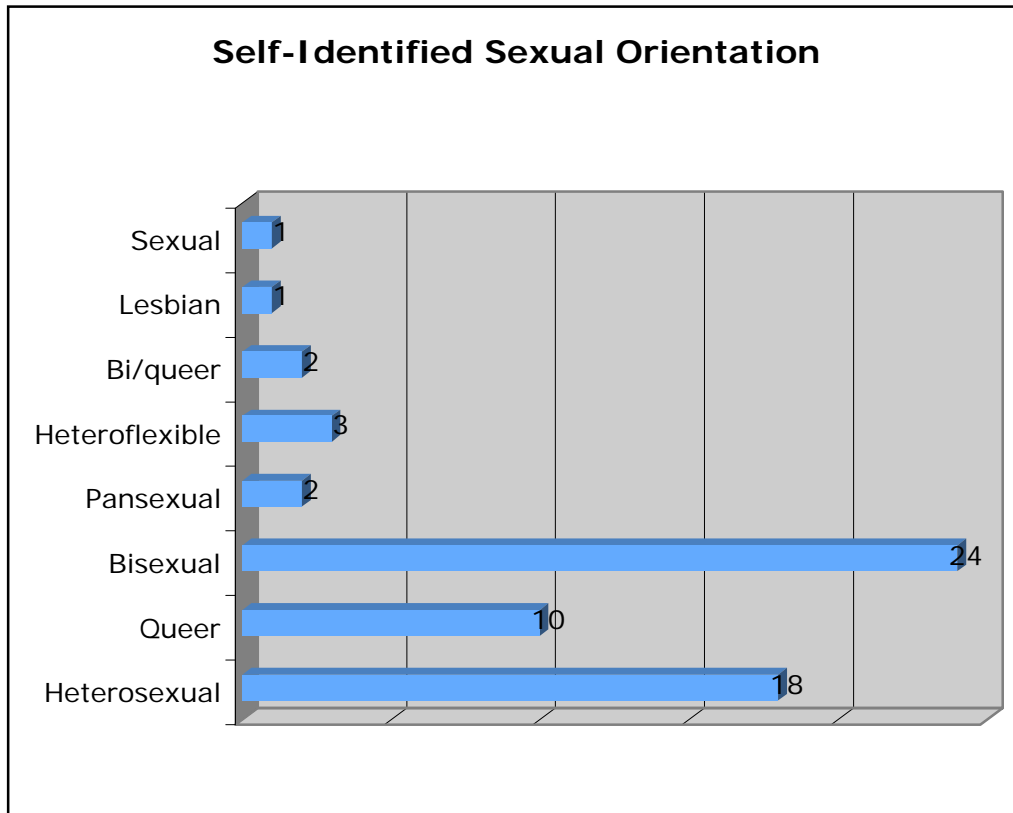
as genderqueer, two as transgender, and the rest had alternative sexual orientations. For example, one self identified as queer, one as intergendered, and another as monster.

The third question, “What is your self identified race/ethnicity?” was also created as an open-ended question to allow for each participant to label their own racial identity. With respect to this question, 52 participants identified as White/Caucasian, five as Jewish, two as Hispanic, two as Anglo, one as WASP/Mediterranean American, one as Italian, one as American, one as Portuguese, one as White/mixed, one as European, one as Scandinavian American, one as Human, one as Beyond definition and one simply as Race. No table for this?



Fourth, I inquired about each participant’s socioeconomic status. This question provided five multiple choice answers, including Upper Class, Upper Middle Class, Middle Class, Lower Middle Class and Working Class, of which participants could choose only one answer. According to surveymonkey, 1.4% of participants were Upper

Class, 18.6% Upper Middle Class, 38.6% Middle Class, 18.6% Lower Middle Class, and 22.9% Working Class.



Last, I asked for participants to describe their self-identified sexual orientation with an open-ended question, “What is your self-identified sexual orientation?” There were a vast number of answers, including ten participants who identified as Queer, 18 as Heterosexual, 24 as Bisexual, two as pansexual, three as Heteroflexible, two as Bi/queer, one as Lesbian, and one as Sexual. Some people had more detailed explanations of their sexual orientation, such as “bi with a hetero bias,” “intergender/genderqueer attracted to females,” “male attracted to females,” “faggotry,” and “Bi poly sadist dome.” Interestingly, nobody identified as gay and only one person identified as a lesbian or gay.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The remaining questions were separated into five categories, including relationship structure, disclosure, coming out, support systems and community response. Each section contained between one and four open-ended questions that yielded narrative answers aimed at exploring the experiences of people in polyamorous relationships, with a focus on the coming out process. Exact quotes will be provided with no edits from this researcher.

#### *Relationship Structures*

The first section was about relationship structures, and it asked participants to describe their current relationship. If they were not currently engaging in their ideal relationship or set of relationships, I asked that they describe their desired relationship structure as well. The descriptions that participants offered represented various relationship formations, with no two looking exactly alike. The similarities that existed allowed me to create 5 subcategories, although it is important to note that despite similarities, subtle differences made each participant description unique.

#### *Primary Partnerships*

Thirty participants reported engagement in a relationship where their primary partner was the main focus of their relationship structure. Of the 30, 23 were either open

to others or occasionally have had romantic or sexual encounters with others, yet without long lasting result. One participant described it as:

At the core, there's her and me. We are the nucleus, always, and each of us puts the other first. We do, however, enjoy the company of others now and again, independently or together.

The remaining seven had primary relationships with one to multiple established partners in addition to their primary partner. Some participants described their relationship structures as:

Married to a man. Dating one woman. On and off lovers with a man and another woman, both of whom live far away.

I am married, and have a girlfriend who I see occasionally.

While the primary was the most common amongst my sample of participants, there are several other configurations that take form in the polyamorous community.

Next, I will explain the findings for those who engage in relationships that do not encompass the primary partner model, rather the relationship configures around the idea of a triad.

### *Triad Structure*

Twenty-two participants were actively engaging in relationship structures that revolved around a triad structure. For example, a female participant may have two other partners who all participate with one another. If they are all open to dating outside of this relationship, it is considered an open triad. If the three decide that they only want to be in a relationship with each other, and agree not to date outside of the triad, then this is considered a closed triad. Various configurations of this structure were represented, and some narratives are as follows:

I currently live with my fiancé (together 5 years) and my boyfriend (together 1 year). The sexual relationship is a V – the boys do not engage each other – but the emotional/commitment goes all three ways. We are not seeking more permanent

partners, though we practice an open sexual relationship within the bounds of very specific rules.

I am in a triad relationship with two bisexual women and we all have other lovers.

Husband and boyfriend in an informal triad (we all sleep together). My relationship with my husband is long standing, formal, and (aside from our bf) closed. Our sexual relationship with our bf is new, not formally acknowledged, and (though he is not currently seeing anyone else) open.

The above narratives describe the many different philosophies and practices that can exist within the triad relationship structure. As shown, each grouping creates the rules and boundaries that are comfortable for them, and each triad works to meet the needs of all three participants. When more than three people exist in a relationship, the dynamics change and the relationship takes on a new structure, that of a clan, which will be described next.

### *Clan Structure*

Five participants who took this study described some variation of a clan structure. This is where multiple partnerships exist in sexual or emotional capacities in a larger scale group. Some participants reported the following with regard to their clan structured relationship:

I have two long-term partners, I live with one, plus her husband of 20+ years and their non-sexual life partner, and spend one night a week, usually, who lives with his life partner of 26 years.

A small clan structure. I guess you can say a commonwealth of independent people, but that makes it sound formally constituted as such. There is just as much noise and uncertainty as the 'atomic' family I grew up in.

Family structure; 4 participants are all equal partners.

### *Secondary Partnerships*

Three participants indicated that they were the secondary partners to people who were in primary relationships. One person wrote:

I'm currently the secondary partner of someone who is living with a primary partner and has one other partner. I expect to start looking for a primary partner within the next year.

While the primary, triad, clan and secondary partnership models seem to be the most common with regard to this sample as well as within the literature on polyamory, there may be relationship structures that deny these models. Inherent in the polyamorous community are those who create their own meaningful and alternative relationship models, as briefly described next.

#### *Other Alternative Arrangements*

The last subcategory includes those who are currently single and open to any number of different relationships, or those who are purposefully single but have networks of people whom they interact with on an intimate level. Some participants stated that they have no desire for primary partnerships, but enjoy casually dating friends in an open and honest context. Others stated that the role they play in polyamorous relationships is being a casual lover to someone in a more formally designed relationship, while their emotional support was derived more from close nonsexual friends.

#### *Disclosure*

After participants described their relationship structures, I asked two questions pertaining to their disclosure of a polyamorous identity or multiple partnerships. I inquired as to who knows about their relationships, and how they determine whom they will disclose to.

With regard to the first question, “Who knows about your polyamorous identity?” most people described various combinations of family, friends or coworkers, with some people mentioning their religious communities as well.

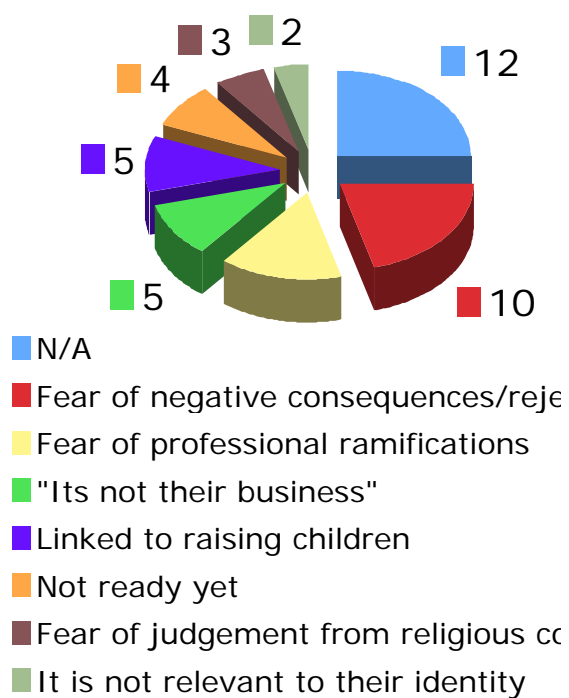
The second question, “How do you determine who you disclose this part of your identity to?” yielded more descriptive results. Most people simply stated that they disclosed this part of their identity when it was relevant to the conversation. Many of these participants conveyed the sentiment that if there were no reason to discuss this information, then they would not disclose it. However, if it became relevant to the conversation or the relationship then they would disclose. Still, others said that they were open to everyone and anyone without discrimination or fear of discrimination. Some people said that if it was safe or if they determined that they could trust someone, then they would likely disclose. Other people said that they were most likely to disclose to people they were interested in dating.

### *Coming Out*

This section consisted of four questions that comprised the bulk of my research. Questions centered around the coming out decision, the process and its impact on the psychological and emotional aspects of participants including any negative experiences, as well as the overlap between coming out as polyamorous and any other non-normative identities and the interplay between them.



**If you have not come out  
Polyamorous, please describe  
you have not done so.**



The first open-ended question in this section was, “If you have not come out as polyamorous, please describe why you have not done so.” I reviewed the forty responses given, and broke them up into eight categories. Some participants gave multiple reasons, so I took into account each reason they discussed. The largest number of common response was that this question was not applicable, meaning that they were already “out” as polyamorous, with twelve people responding this way.

Next, ten participants stated that they feared some sort of general negative response or rejection. Several participants stated that their family, parents, or extended family in particular fell into this category. Others stated a general fear of rejection or grief from the community in general. One woman wrote,

I have come out in some contexts, but not in others. It's hard to explain 'this is polyamory, and here's why it should be taken seriously,' to an unsympathetic listener like my mother, especially when I'm in the role of 'the other woman.' Its very difficult to explain why I'm not being taken advantage of, why I shouldn't look for a 'real' relationship. I feel defensive and resentful, and the easiest way to avoid it is to just not discuss the matter with my birth family.

Seven participants cited that their professional identity may be compromised if they were open about their multiple partnerships. Participants had a variety of narratives about their professional lives, some stating that they were teachers or worked with children and feared losing jobs, another reported that being open in the workplace might compromise their chances for promotion or advancement. One person described being active in business and politics, which are already "controversial fields," and implied that this part of their identity was not necessary to disclose. Last, one person stated that they were not out at work because most people at their workplace did not discuss personal/family matters, so their coming out would be inappropriate based on that fact alone.

Five participants stated that their polyamorous identity was not other people's business, so did not feel the need to be "out." One person simply stated,

For the people I haven't told, it's mainly that it's not their business to know.  
Another person said,

Old fashion notion of keeping our personal lives, well, personal.

Five people reported that they were not out either due to the legal or social ramifications of childrearing, or that they did not plan to disclose their multiple partnerships unless they decided to raise children as a polyamorous family unit. One narrative included,

...if my secondary partner agrees to help father my child, I might use that as an opportunity to talk about other aspects of our relationship, because I know that my parents will be far more understanding of multiple people joining together to raise a family than they will be of multiple people joining together to date. So I might come out to more people if we decide to have a family together. Another wrote about the dangers of coming out, as related to their role as a parent:

I'm currently in the process of a divorce and I have two children and I'm worried about whether my soon to be ex-wife will attempt to affect child custody based on my being polyamorous.

Four responses had to do with the participants not being ready to come out as a member of the polyamorous community, as shown below:

I have not entirely come out because I am not fully immersed in the lifestyle yet. That being said, I am hesitant to tell people, "look how great this works," when I myself do not have personal evidence of this.

Three participants discussed the fear of judgment from a religious community. One person wrote about not coming out to a particular friend who is religiously conservative, and the writer was unsure of how this friend would react. Another person working with "people who are Christian," which stated, "so it isn't very safe." One person wrote,

Same considerations as coming out as Pagan or Witch – not public, I'm active in business and politics in some very controversial areas and also in projects where I need to relate positively to conservatives so this is dangerous.

Last, 2 participants stated not coming out due to it not being a relevant part of their identity to acknowledge publicly. One stated that coming out would be a distraction to relationships where this part of their identity is not relevant, and the other stated that their identity is not a secret nor is it public knowledge. The second question in this section was, "If you feel you have had experienced a coming out process in reference to

your polyamorous identity, please describe any significant narratives that accompany this experience. Please feel free to comment on your own internal process of coming into this identity, emotionally or psychologically.” In total, each narrative collected from this question was unique to the individual’s own experience. The following narratives represent some of the different internal and external experiences that contribute to the polyamorous coming out experience:

It was really helpful to me to find out I was not the only person having an open relationship, as I often felt that way when I was younger. It is helpful to have a name for it, and groups of other polyamorous people to compare experiences and get advice from. I was always against monogamy, against letting jealousy rule one's life. From my first relationship, it was an open relationship, and I broke up with some people because they could not accept it, over time. It was several years before I had a name for it.

I self-identified when I was a teenager, but due to my environment, I was unable to come out. Last year when my wife and I separated and I decided to start dating, I saw how many poly people where in my city and I felt like I could finally be who I really was and be accepted. Since accepting this and beginning to live this way, I've been the happiest I've ever been and my relationships have been the best they've ever been.

I realized that i didn't want sexual exclusivity from my partner as a result of a monogamous partner having sex with her ex. I realized that the lies bugged me as well as the violation of an agreement but the sex was irrelevant and her love of another was not a problem for me. It became self evident that I was unwilling to enter into an exclusive relationship. I neither needed nor wanted my partners physical or emotional exclusivity. I like connecting emotionally and romantically to women, I feel truncated when I hold myself back from the possibility of such connection. While I hold myself to my commitments I find that only allowing romantic connections to one individual is abhorrent and deadening to me.

My internal process was a slow one. I knew there were a few women I'd met in my life that I liked just as much as I liked men I'd been interested in. ....long story short, it took me awhile to people to put into words (even in my own head) what exactly I wanted out of a relationship but I realized that if I had my way I'd be with a woman as well as a man. I had to give myself permission to think outside the box.

After exploring coming out narratives, I moved on to the third question, which read, "Has anyone had a poor reaction to your coming out? If so please describe it." The most highly correlated responses made mention of people's parents, and in most cases, their mothers. Reactions spanned from the mother simply being confused or not understanding, to their concern that the child was not being treated well, to avoiding the participant's romantic or sexual lifestyle. Many people described situations where a family member or parent was weary or not accepting at first, yet over time became accepting. Not one person reported that they were disowned or had engaged in a formal cut off from a family member or parent. The narratives below capture some of the negative experiences people have endured, as well as misconceived notions about polyamory:

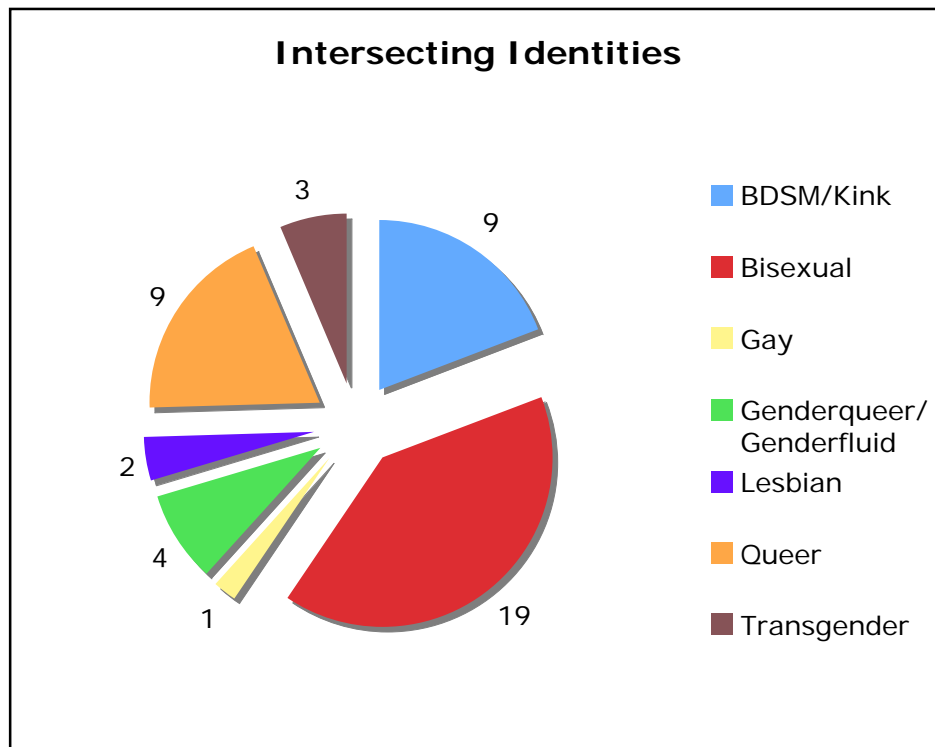
My mother says I am a freak, but she says that a lot. Mostly she says I should "settle down" and actually commit to my relationship. She has requested that I not tell certain other family members about it. I have respected this request, but mostly because there has been no need to disclose to those people. Several years after I came out to her, I found out that my father asked my mother if he could date another girl while dating my mother, and she said no. He didn't, and nothing ever happened. I am not sure if that has impacted her reaction, but I am sure it has.

My parents don't truly understand it, particularly my father-- he initially thought (and may still think) I'm being taken advantage of. However, there was never any question that they'd be upset with me or treat me badly because of it-- they accept it, even if they don't get it, so I've been fortunate.

Yes. I had a female friend tell me that the only reason any woman would be in a poly relationship is b/c a man "made her". I tried to explain that I am of free will and in a consenting relationship. Also I have been doing this multiple partner thing in every relationship that I have ever had so I am very much deciding to live this way. We are no longer friends.

Some of my friends who are monogamy-minded have had negative reactions and judgments, equating poly lifestyle with stereotypes of queer men such as having huge sex-drive or making relationship decisions based on sexual urges.

Having explored coming out narratives and also poor reactions from community members, the last question in this section was, “Did your coming out as polyamorous come before or after any other coming out experiences such as sexual orientation, gender identity, etc? What was similar or different about this coming out experience?” I wanted to find out what other identities people claimed, and how this one fit in. Other salient identities that people noted were Lesbian, Gay, Transgendered, Genderqueer or Genderfluid, Bisexual, or identifying as Kinky (part of the BDSM community). It should be noted that some people included two to several of the above-mentioned identities. Additional closeted identities that people mentioned were their religious identities and political affiliations, and one person noted their “fandom involvement.”



In reference to other identities that intersected with their polyamorous practice/identity, some people noted that they found their polyamorous identity to be

more of a stigmatized or closeted factor, and others noted that they found it to be less so than their other affiliated identities. Still, some found that their coming out about various identities in conjunction to their polyamorous one were similarly difficult, and others noted that they were similarly simple. Last, some people noted not having other identities that required a coming out process.

For example, these narratives represent responses that show a polyamorous identity as more difficult to disclose or come out about than other identities:

As I mentioned above, it is easier for me to accept my identity as a queer woman than it is for me to accept my identity as polyamorous. And I have remained partially in the closet about being poly, while I am fully open about being queer, for the same reason: I am not as comfortable with the poly part of my identity, and I know that some members of my family (who are still trying to accept me being queer) will be even less comfortable with me being poly.

I came out as bi/queer at 24 & poly at 26, all in San Francisco. being queer is way easier, way more accepted/acceptable, way better understood. you have tons of allies/champions. not so much being poly.

Some participants had the opposite experience, where their coming out as polyamorous was less difficult than coming out in other arenas:

I am not out about gender identity in nearly as many places as the poly one. Coming out as genderqueer is much harder and provokes many more questions. Being poly just has never felt like that big a deal, it's just a part of who i am and how i do things and the only people it effects is those i play with or have sex or intimate relationships with.

I came out poly at the same time as I discovered BDSM; that was harder to accept and was a lot more scary and caused me more worry as to whether people would accept that part of me.

Well before coming out as a BDSM practitioner. Coming out as poly was casual; coming out as kinky was fraught and uncomfortable.

This participant noted that their coming out experiences were both similar and challenging in their own unique ways:

I've come out to myself and a few other people as kinky-- I'd say that was more difficult in some ways, since it involves things that are more intimate, and potentially frightening, but in other ways that was easier since I don't feel the need to discuss details of my sexuality with my parents or anyone who is not a partner or a close friend who is supportive and open to discussing such topics.

Yet, this participant noted that their coming out experiences were all part of the same ongoing process:

i came out as ...  
bi at 14  
lesbian at 15  
poly at 17  
queer at 18  
kinky at 19/20  
genderqueer at 19/20  
ftm at 20/21

they were pretty similar experiences for me in that i did not feel like i was discovering something new about myself, so much as discovering a new way to explain myself. (after i came out as lesbian at 15, there was never a time when i identified in a particular way and kept it a secret.) also, coming out as a lesbian, and definitely as ftm, had a huge impact on my then-partners and how they were perceived. being out as poly similarly affects my partners. i can't admit to dating someone without having everyone assume certain things about they're sexual and relational orientation.

Last, there were voices from people who had either not had another significant coming out experience, or who did not attribute their affiliation with various identities as having a notable coming out experience:

As I said above, I'm terrible at coming out. I just sort of allowed my sexual orientation to be not hidden (if that makes sense), and when I changed my sex, I didn't have an internal identity shift process--my "gender-identity coming out" was pretty much, "So I just found out I could change my sex. That's what I'm doing. Please shift pronouns accordingly."

This was probably my most significant coming out, though I am not socio- or psychonormative in a variety of ways. Since I have always been polyamorous, and never made any significant attempt to hide it, I didn't have a single event or period of time that I would consider "coming out". At each stage of my life, the issue would occasionally come up; sometimes it caused significant stress, and other times it was barely noticed. The other ways in which I am not

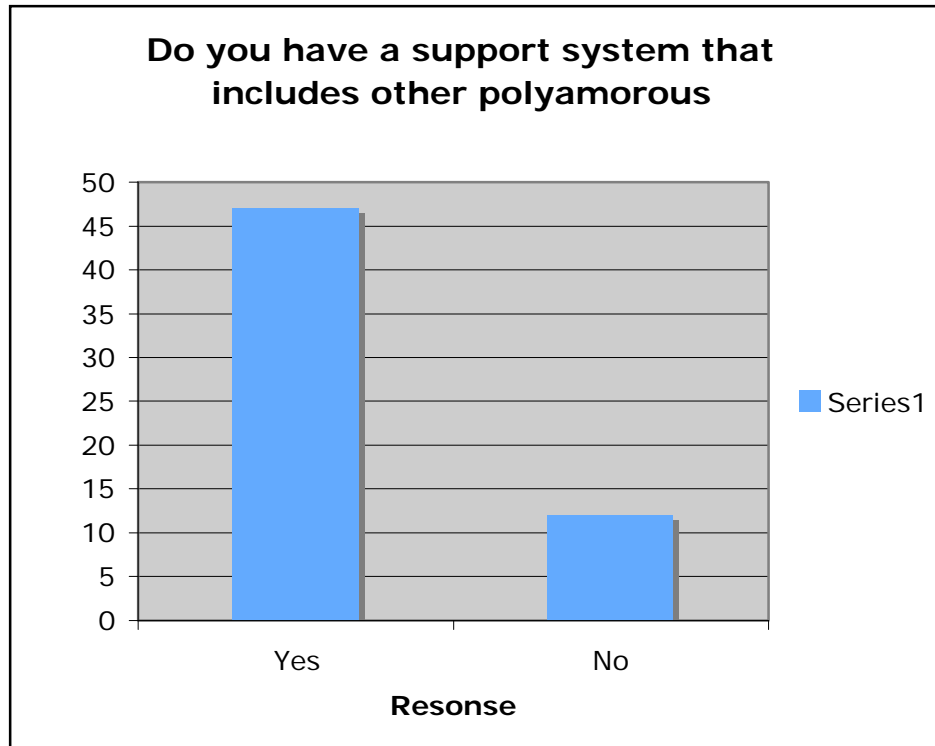


psychonormative are mostly ones that don't affect the way I present myself to other people, so even though they play a significant role in my own development, my owning of an identity didn't necessarily require that others acknowledge it in any way-- in most cases, they would have no way even of noticing it \*as an identity\*.

The data collected on coming out experiences of polyamorous individuals was essential to getting to the heart of this study. Narratives provided by participants on the reasons they were not out, as well as their coming out stories, poor community responses, and intersecting identities helps to expand the data on this population as well as provide readers with a more detailed view of this population's coming out process. The following subcategory of questions looked at the supports available to those who practice this non-traditional lifestyle.

### *Support Systems*

After questioning participants about their relationship structures, disclosure practices, and coming out experiences, I followed up with them about support systems. I asked two questions in this section, the first being, "Do you have a support system that includes other polyamorous people," and the other was, "If you have connected with a polyamorous community how did you find it?" The chart below represents the responses from the first question.



The second question, “If you have connected with a polyamorous community how did you find it?” yielded a multitude of answers. Many people referenced the internet as a main source of finding a polyamorous community including specific sites such as Loving More, Intinet, Beyond Monogamy, polyamory.org, alt.polyamory, usenet, livejournal, while others simply noted less specific social networking and dating sites, and polyamory mailing lists. Some people noted finding community through other partners or lovers, or through the BDSM/Kink or Queer communities. Several participants noted word of mouth and friends or local newspapers to find community and local meet up groups. Last, several people mentioned living in the San Francisco Bay Area as their introduction to a polyamorous community and one person noted that they “thoroughly loathe the ‘polyamorous community’ and want really nothing to do with it.”

Having looked at the previous aspects of the polyamorous experience of disclosure, coming out and support systems experience thus far, the last section of questions was aimed at the external response of disclosure and coming out which is that of the community response. This was important to integrating the internalized notions that polyamorous people pick up from their environments and community members with regards to how they choose to live their lives with multiple partnerships.

### *Community Response*

After finding out more about the support systems that participants have found, I asked about the response from the non-polyamorous community with a question that read, "What are some responses from the non-polyamorous community upon disclosure of your polyamorous identity?" Some people responded to this question by replicating the questions and quick responses they often get from disclosing while others noted common judgments they have encountered. Additionally, some participants noted statements people have made about their own preferences in response to a participant's disclosure, and other people noted responses that carried messages of acceptance as well as avoidance of the topic or indifference. The responses gathered for this question are listed below, under the categories described above:

The following quotes are examples of common questions that are asked to participants upon disclosure of their participation in polyamory, and provide a framework for what many people are curious about when they hear someone disclose this part of their lifestyle:

- "don't you get jealous?!?!?"
- "How does that work?"
- "Does your husband know?"
- "So you're all involved with each other?"

- Most annoyingly: "So this is because you're bisexual, so you have one of each?" (Note: I have a husband and a boyfriend.)
- "why would you want to do something so complicated?"
- "doesn't it bother you when your partners sleep with other people?"
- " Really. What's that?"
- "Does that really work?"
- "Don't you still love each other?"
- "How long is this going to last?"
- "When are you going to get serious and settle down and have children?"
- "are you batshit crazy? You're going to let your boyfriend fuck other women?"
- "...and you guys TALK about that kind of stuff? I thought you weren't supposed to talk about those things with your significant others..."
- "Does everyone know about everyone else?"
- "Do you all sleep in the same bed?"
- "Isn't that illegal?"
- "Aren't they jealous of each other? If they really loved you, they'd be jealous."
- "So... Is this some sort of weird sex thing, like swinging?"

Next, is a list of common judgments encountered by participants and gives insight into the difficult community responses that can coincide with coming out:

- Occasionally, "Oh No, but your loved one is so wonderful."
- "see i just think that's wrong. if you're married it's to one person"
- "I don't understand how you could do that."
- Some in a religious setting have, of course, suggested my lifestyle is deeply sinful and contrary to God's design.
- Mostly that they can't wrap their heads around the idea, or that they can't grok how I'm okay with my partner having other partners, or that they can't grok how my partner is okay with me having other partners.
- We've had some people stop talking to us since we came out. They just don't accept poly. They see it as immoral or cheating.
- "That will never work."
- "its agiants god"
- "you just want to cheat"
- "women and men were designed to Pair up"
- You're lying. You're delusional. There's no way you aren't jealous. It doesn't work that way. You are going to lose your boyfriend. You are a whore. You're not really in love. You aren't having a real marriage. You're really weird.
- assumptions of promiscuity and shielding of partners.
- Sometimes they say I'm pathetic, settling for miserable scraps of relationship because I'm not good enough (or not willing to work hard enough) to get a man for myself. Sometimes they say I'm betraying my boyfriend's wife-- how dare I! (This hasn't come up since they've had a child, but I'm sure it would be worse...) Nobody says I'm betraying my girlfriend's husband,

because they think "obviously" her relationship with him is more important than what we have. \*eyeroll\*

- They don't want to pursue a romantic relationship.
- I've occasionally talked to people who got a smidge tense or uncomfortable when nonmonogamy came up, but I just steered the conversation elsewhere.
- Vague displeasure to intellectual assault.
- It is often perceived as an assault on 'traditional' marriage and monogamy.
- I have never had a violent reaction, but it seems like there is always a period of 'smoothing over the corners' when it is known.
- "You're going to destroy your relationship together!"
- "So, I bet you just get to have sex all the time."
- "Your partner must not make you happy."
- "You don't know what you want."
- "You must be a nympho"
- "You are being used by a patriarchal society for your sexuality."
- "I don't think this is crazy, but I'm very concerned about you."
- Some assume it means I will have sex with just anyone, without an emotional connection and without any standards.
- "It's not going to last, you know. That kind of thing never does."
- some assume that I can not make a commitment and am a slut, some think it is hot/exotic.
- a lot of shame, and oozing self oppression. Jealousy, mistrust, guilt...
- Everything from interest, to disinterest, to mild disapproval, to disgust, to violent opposition. I've seen them all.

The next set of community responses provide examples of how some people refer to their own preferences and relationship desires in response to one's coming out as polyamorous:

- "i could never do that."
- "Well, it's not for me, but if it works for you, okay."
- Some were familiar with polyamory and knew it wasn't for them, others hadn't heard of it and just felt they'd definitely get jealous or unhappy in such a relationship.
- from women "I could never do that i'd be too jealous" and from boys who think they are men, "dude, i would never sleep with a girl who slept with other guys, i mean gross man." I avoid males such as this, they don't come up to my standards...
- Sometimes they can grasp poly intellectually but aren't comfortable with the idea for themselves.
- "I could never handle that"
- I get some "I could never do that," either because people think they'd be jealous or because relationships take enough time and work that they don't want to try more than one along with the rest of the things in their lives.
- "I could NEVER do that."
- "Thats fucking awesome. I wish I could do that."
- "Wow, I could never do that. I'm too jealous."

In contrast to some of the negative judgments that many people encounter, this next list provides examples of acceptance and support that they came across upon coming out:

- Most everyone I've talked to has been incredibly accepting of it.
- The open minded seem to just accept it.
- Since anyone I've told is a pretty laid back person, they were very accepting. I had a couple of friends who wanted to make sure I was going into this willingly.
- "That's an interesting way to live."
- "That must keep you busy"
- We have only told one family member; she asked if everyone was enjoying themselves, then jokingly asked why I get two boys. (She's single.)
- A little confusion about the fact that we are a triad, but most people have been pretty accepting and matter-of-fact.
- Once they see that my husband and I are happy the way we are, they are usually accepting, or at least just don't bring it up.
- people are very interested in our lifestyle

Last, these responses show that some people express neither positive nor negative response in relation to a person coming out as polyamorous:

- "Whatever floats your boat, I guess,"
- Curiosity, indifference - Usually the just say, Oh
- "Oh, OK."
- I live in San Francisco, and I travel in sex-positive circles. Even folks who aren't in the poly community at least know about it, and their reaction is generally some flavor of "sure fine whatever".
- sort of a 'that's weird, but whatever makes you happy' sort of theme.
- i wouldn't say that I really get support from anyone, but I'm not sure that I get a whole lot of condemnation.

The culmination of this set of questions, in accordance with community response, was centered around a question about experiences in therapy. The question read, "If you have seen a therapist and disclosed your relationship style, please explain your perception of your therapist's reaction or response." This question was essential in tying the theme of this study with the social work and therapeutic community.

The majority of answers that came from this question yielded positive responses. Several people reported that they pre-screened therapists for open-mindedness, sex-positivity, or experience working around a polyamorous relationship style. Factors that

people attributed to positive experiences were that the therapist asked clarifying questions, made sure that all partners were on board, honesty about their comfort level discussing polyamory, concentration on issues not related to polyamory (i.e. mental health issues), specialization in open relationships or alternative lifestyles, and an ability to talk about relationship issues as they come up.

On the other hand, some people reported having negative experiences in therapy upon disclosure of their polyamorous relationships. Factors that lead to such negative experiences were based on the perception that therapists were pathologizing the clients (i.e. linking it to mental illness), displays of visible discomfort, avoidance of the topic, informing clients that they feared commitment, attempts by therapists to convert client to monogamy, concentration on polyamory rather than significant presenting issues (i.e. anxiety or nightmares), and most commonly the need for the client to educate the therapist about this lifestyle choice.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the following question: What is the coming out experience of polyamorous individuals? There is limited research on how polyamorous individuals handle the disclosure of their multiple partnerships in a society

that values monogamy as the cultural norm. The purpose of this study was to collect narratives that explored the different factors that contribute to a person's own self identification as part of this population, as well as to whom they choose to come out to, and the reaction that this disclosure provokes within the community.

The remainder of this chapter will include summarizing some important finding from this study. I will then present a discussion of the findings, which will briefly touch upon most of the themes highlighted in the findings chapter of disclosure, coming out, and community response, followed by a summary. Next, I will present the implications for social work practice that can be derived from this research project and then the implications for theory. Last, I will write about recommendations for future research, which will conclude this thesis.

### *Relationship structures*

The responses that comprised the section on relationship structures were interesting in that each participant described a unique relationship set up. While most were classified into the categories I constructed of the primary/secondary model, triad and clan structures, no two responses looked the same. This was significant because it showed the vast diversity in how people chose to create multiple partnerships that work for them and their loved ones, and even though the umbrella term of polyamory resonated with each participant, their experiences of this relationship style were each very distinctive. Since there is no previous literature describing this, it is a new finding.

One possible reason for this may have a connection to Barker's (2005) notion that through multiple partnerships, people have the opportunity to explore the world through the reflection of many different partnerships. Perhaps the unique relationships formed by



participants and their partners enable them to actualize the multi-dimensional parts of themselves that become enhanced through relationships that honor different parts of the self. Since we are all separate beings who seek different experiences in the world, each set of partnerships can forge its own nuanced structures that fit the needs and desires of those involved.

### *Disclosure*

Once polyamorists begin to engage in their preferred style of non-monogamous relationships, they then encounter the decision of disclosure. Overwhelmingly, the majority of participants stated that they only disclosed this information to members of the monogamous community when it became relevant. I believe that this may be a common response for three reasons. One, gauging a person's response to this can be quite unpredictable because of the notion that non-monogamy can become a point of contention for those who feel threatened by the idea of it, as well as those who may initially associate it with infidelity rather than an openly communicated choice. Second, disclosing one's status as gay, lesbian or bisexual may indeed be relevant to a person's identity, and thus comprises an important part of who they are. In contrast, who a person chooses to engage with emotionally or sexually may be more personal to them than the knowledge of their queer identity. Thus, protecting that disclosure to times when it becomes relevant may allow people to preserve the privacy of their sex lives, and make more precise decisions about who to tell and in what context. Third, many researchers and theorists on this topic (Weitzman 2006, Pepper Mint 2004, Scheff 2005) discussed the social stigmas that members of this population can face when they disclose this part

of their life experience, and outing oneself without discrimination could in fact lead to loss of jobs or threat to childrearing.

### *Coming Out*

The topic of disclosure and when to disclose leads into the internal and external processes of potentially coming out in general. Interestingly, many people stated that coming out to their parents was the most difficult. Barker (2005) acknowledges polyamory as the next postmodern relationship style, and I believe that this may play a role in the interaction between a polyamorous child and a parent who both personally, and due to the norms ascribed to their generation, may have never considered the option of multiple partnerships. Parents may initially presume that their child is entering a relationship style that rejects the monogamous relationship style that they may have modeled. Parents may worry about the risks involved with forging a nontraditional relationship structure in a society that values monogamy, or believe that their child will be vulnerable to emotional or physical danger. Additionally, parent's who have had negative encounters with infidelity in their own experience may feel triggered by their child's decision to willingly explore those fear inducing places of non-monogamy, even if it is intentional.

One participant, as quoted in the findings section, spoke of her own struggle with the decision to come out to her mother. Describing a relationship where she is in the traditional role of "the other woman," she feared that her mother would be "unsympathetic." She anticipates that that her mother will perceive her involvement in the partnership as one in which she is being "taken advantage of," and it will be deemed not a "real" relationship. Perhaps due to the newness of such openly communicated

relationships where all partners are supportive of each other's lovers, this participant's mother may feel protective over her daughter, and thus not realize the importance of her daughter's relationship with this partner.

Another participant whose mother reacted with concern to her child's coming out, included in their narrative their father's past desire to date another woman while simultaneously dating his or her mother. The participant's mother was not open to this option, and therefore the father did not pursue the other relationship. The participant speculates that this may play a role in the mother's statement that they should "settle down" and "actually commit to a relationship." It is possible that parents who felt hurt by the attempted or completed infidelity of a previous or current monogamous partner may attach those feelings to their child's engagement in polyamory and thus have a more difficult time conjuring acceptance than parents who have not had this kind of experience.

Both of the above participants encountered the bias that Pepper Mint (2004) discusses in which polyamorous people are often labeled cheaters because of the perceived victimization attached to polyamory by the monogamous community. This author's theory that polyamorous people will internalize the negative judgments constructed by a society that holds monogamy as the healthy way to partner are at play in both narratives. Therefore, the polyamorous nature of the relationships that these participants forge may trigger in parents the idea that that someone must enact the role of the victimizer/cheater and the other must become the victimized/betrayed.

Of course, the argument against these bias's are that people are actively choosing to create worlds where they can express the multiple facets of their identities within a

community of others who accept them for who they are. When examining identities that intersect with their polyamorous membership, two additional identities in particular stood out to me. The first was identifying as bisexual and the other was that of being part of the BDSM/Kink community.

It is important to highlight the intersection between bisexuality and the polyamorous community because of the fact that the most people who noted significant identities beyond polyamory also identified as bisexual. This was anticipated as evidenced by much of the research already published on this topic (Weitzman 2006, Pepper Mint 2004, McLean 2004). Bisexual people in multiple partnerships are often assumed by the general public to have an inclination to polyamory due to a desire to have partners of each gender (Weitzman 2006, Pepper Mint 2004, McLean 2004). In fact, many bisexual identifying people who took this study described that their multiple partners were of one gender, which goes against this assumption.

Unexpectedly, I found a large intersection between the polyamorous community and those who identify with the BDSM community, otherwise known as the kink community. In reading participant narratives it became clear to me that there are many similarities within these two populations, with strong emphasis on rules, interplay between multiple people, and clear communication of boundaries being the main tenets of successful engagement in each community. This is not generalizable because one of the organizations I sent the survey to contains a strong BDSM population. It is unclear which participants came from that particular organization as opposed to other lists or websites the survey was posted to. Previous research did not mention this possible connection.

In short, coming out experiences varied widely amongst participants. While all participants shared the polyamorous identity and the coming out process involved with membership of this group, many other factors contributed to their personal experience of coming out. Interestingly and worthy of note were the multiple gender identities disclosed by participants as well as the diverse array of sexual orientations presented. Included in the many dimensions of sexual orientation were those who identified as heterosexual, which was interesting because it is rare that heterosexual individuals ever experience a coming out process at all.

### *Community Response*

An important part of the coming out experience is gauging the response that individuals receive from those they come out to. I again reference Barker's (2005) notion that polyamory may be perceived as threatening to the ideal of monogamy by posing an alternative to this dominant practice by challenging the notion that two people constitute a relationship. Some participants noted the responses that non-polyamorous people typically displayed as statements that centered around their own relationship preferences, such as "I could never do that," or "I'd be too jealous." As I speculate into the internal process that takes place when someone responds to another person's coming out by stating their own preference. I wonder if they feel as though their own decision to practice monogamy is threatened on a micro level, or perhaps they feel as though their own jealous feelings would never allow them to try an arrangement other than monogamy,. Similarly, it may be that some monogamous people struggle to maintain fidelity, and perhaps feel jealous that polyamorous folks have found a way to openly

indulge in their fantasies and desires while maintaining long term and committed relationships,

### *Summary*

Much insight and information was obtained in this study exploring the coming out experiences of polyamorous individuals. Gathering responses from participants about their relationship structures, disclosure practices, coming out experiences, support systems and the perceived community responses provides information that adds to existing literature and expands the literature on this population. Research into the unique experiences of each participant in this sample adds a new voice to the realm of relationship and sexuality studies important to understanding the community we live within.

### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

The findings of this study can be helpful to clinicians as this study questions the idea that many people engage in multiple partnerships because they fear commitment or have poor attachment styles. There is evidence in the narratives that commitment is of the utmost importance in polyamorous relationships. Also, it is helpful for clinicians to understand that each person treats their relationships in a different manner, and listening to individual narratives is necessary to understand the unique experience of their client.

This may be a population that many clinicians are not familiar with as of yet. Working with clients around non-traditional relationships and sexual practices can be difficult for clinicians who have not had the opportunity to process their own feelings or judgments around this difference. This can then be conveyed to a client, creating an impasse that is challenging to overcome. By reading about the various ways that clients

engage in romantic or sexual relationships, clinicians can begin to understand the nuances of different populations and minimize any shock or negative judgments on their part that can impede into the therapeutic relationship. This can reduce discomfort for both the therapist and the client and allow for a nonjudgmental response from the therapist and aid both therapist and client in the process of helping the client work through their presenting problems, be they tied to a polyamorous identity or not.

### *Implications for Theory*

This section will explore how this study's findings related to the coming out theories presented by Cass (1979) and Weitzman (2006). Facets of each of these theories were evident in the narratives provided in this study, and I will briefly touch upon how I perceive they were important in understanding the responses to this survey.

Many coming out narratives collected in this study can be conceptualized via the interpersonal incongruity theory that provides the basis for Cass's (1979) theory on homosexual identity theory. It is unclear whether or not participants experienced coming out in accordance with her six stage model, and this may be difficult to assess due to the nature of the study. The questions asked in this online survey were not designed to gather enough detailed information to accurately investigate this. Also, the method of data collection via online survey does not allow for follow up questions that might have helped to fill in the necessary gaps, such as the stages of coming out as Cass (1979) presents them.

However, many participants discussed the incongruity that they felt between their practice of polyamory in a society that designates monogamy as the accepted norm. The narratives that participants included in which friends or family members placed

negative judgments on their relationship styles that then precipitated participants to feel shame or lack of confidence in their relationship structures shows evidence that the interpersonal incongruency theory is at play in the polyamorous coming out experience. Likewise, those who attempted to engage in monogamous relationship structures because it was the norm, yet knew this was not right for them, explained feelings of incongruency between their internal desires and the reality of their romantic relationships. While they were conforming to society's norms, they felt an incongruency that was only relinquished when they were able to come out as polyamorous and engage in relationships with multiple partners. Despite the fact that there was incongruency between their relationship style and the dominant perspective within the community, these participants felt a greater congruency between their desires and the benefits of a polyamorous relationship.

While facets of Cass's (1979) theory on homosexual identity formation are most certainly present in the coming out experience of polyamorous individuals, Weitzman's (2006) account of the coming out experience presents a more modern view of coming out which is more applicable to the polyamorous community, as it is designed to speak to this population. Many participants made note of the process of coming out to themselves, which is necessary to one's journey of identification as anything outside of the norm. Next, it is implicit that all participants at one point or another had to come out to their partners. Some participants spoke directly to this process, and while not all participants discussed this, the very nature of polyamory implies that all partners are out to one another. Last, Weitzman's (2006) final stage of coming out uses language that includes "how out to be (Weitzman, 2006 p. 9)" rather than the typical language in coming out theory that simply states that the end result is to be "out." This language seems to



resonate more with the responses from my sample, in that while some people felt the desire to be out to anyone and everyone, many people felt as though there was a need to be careful about who to be out to. Some people noted religious or professional reasons as to when not to disclose their polyamorous identity, and others noted several other reasons as explained on the chart on page (see chart on page 41).

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

This researcher does not believe this sample pool is representative of all members of the polyamorous community. However, the results of this study may serve as a helpful guide into understanding the coming out experiences of those who identify as polyamorous. One benefit of this research was that it was able to incorporate the voices of about 71 polyamorous individuals. A limitation of this study was that since it was conducted online, the ability for the researcher to ask follow up questions was not available.

Another limitation of this study was that the researcher did not ask the geographic location of the participants. This data may have been helpful to assess the levels of community support accessible to participants around their polyamorous identity. For example, gauging proximity to major urban areas may have shown that there were more supports available, whereas participants living in rural locations may have felt more isolation from their community in their practice of polyamory. This may be an important factor to include in future studies on the polyamorous experience. I also felt this seemed to be a highly educated, articulate community and would have liked to ask about level of education of the sample.

In conducting this project, it became clear to me where other important areas of research on the polyamorous experience could be explored. For example, I think it would be interesting to see research conducted on the perspectives of heterosexual polyamorous men, and their perspectives on women's rights and women's acquisition of sexual freedom within relationships. Additionally, I think that research specifically geared toward the experiences of polyamorous partners who attend "couple's therapy" as a unit would be quite beneficial to the annals of clinical therapy, and to my knowledge has not yet been written about.

This researcher believes that any and all research that explores people's romantic, sexual or affective relationships are a welcomed addition to the field of clinical social work. Such research helps to break down ingrained social norms that contribute to the personal judgments that can intrude in therapy and lead to impasses in the therapeutic relationship. Hopefully this research project serves to help illuminate the coming out experiences of some polyamorous individuals and can also inform those who are questioning their own non-monogamous inclinations. Similarly, this project may come to help friends and family of polyamorous people embrace their loved one's identity and can also help guide those who want to empower them via clinical treatment.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent Form

My name is Andria Lavine. I am a student at the Smith College School for Social Work Masters Program. Thank you in advance for taking the time to consider participating in my online survey! The purpose of my study is to better understand the coming out experience of polyamorous people. The survey questions are designed to understand your perspective and in what ways your connection with your community may have shifted after your relationship style disclosure, or how you navigate nondisclosure. The data collected will be used in my Master's thesis and possible publication.

For many people, a "coming out" experience can be a difficult time. It is possible that during the survey, you may experience emotional discomfort. A list of referrals is provided if you would like additional support or information.

Your participation in this survey will provide you the opportunity to tell your story of coming out as polyamorous. If you have not come out about your polyamorous identity, this will give you an opportunity to discuss it. Your contribution will be helpful for clinicians who are working with polyamorous clients and to other individuals who are facing similar issues. There will be no compensation for participation.

Your survey responses and personal identity will remain anonymous as the survey site reports data anonymously. Neither I nor anyone else will know your identity as it is completely protected by the survey service. My thesis research advisor and I will be the only people who have access to the survey data, which will be stored in a locked file for a minimum of three years as required by Federal regulations. After the three years, data will be destroyed or will continue to be kept secure if needed, for an extended period. A general summary of the findings may be used for presentation among the Smith College School for Social Work community, for my MSW thesis dissemination and for publication.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can refuse to answer any question. If you would like to withdraw from the survey before you finish it, you may simply close your browser or sign on to a different website. Once click the “Submit” button at the end of the survey, you won’t be able to withdrawal because I won’t be able to identify which answers are yours. Should you have any questions or concerns about your rights or about an aspect of this study, please contact me at: [OpenlyRelate@gmail.com](mailto:OpenlyRelate@gmail.com) or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review committee at (413) 585 – 7974.

**BY CLICKING “I AGREE” INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,  
Andria Lavine  
[Openlyrelate@gmail.com](mailto:Openlyrelate@gmail.com)

Please print and keep a copy of the consent for your records.





Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. What is your age?

2. What is your self-identified gender?

3. What is your self-identified race/ethnicity?

4. What is your socioeconomic status? (multiple choice)

- Upper Class
- Upper Middle Class
- Middle Class
- Lower Middle Class
- Working Class

5. What is your self-identified sexual orientation?

6. Please describe your current relationship structure, or your desired relationship structure if you are not currently engaging in it.

Essay box

7. How long have you self-identified as polyamorous?

8. Who knows about your polyamorous identity? (Ex: work, family, children, friends)

Essay box

9. If you feel you have experienced a coming out process in reference to your polyamorous identity, please describe any significant narratives that accompany this experience.

Essay box

10. If you have not come out as polyamorous, please describe why you have not done so.

Essay box

11. How do you determine who to disclose this part of your identity to?

Essay box

12. Has anyone has a poor reaction to your coming out and if so please describe it.

Essay box

13. Did your coming out as polyamorous come before or after any other coming out experiences such as sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.? What was similar or different about this coming out experience?

Essay box

14. Do you have a support system that includes other polyamorous people?

Essay box

15. If you have connected with a polyamorous community how did you find it?

Essay box

16. What are some common responses from the non-polyamorous community upon disclosure of your polyamorous identity?

Essay box

17. If you have ever seen a therapist and disclosed your relationship style, please explain your perception of your therapist's reaction or response.

Essay box

Appendix C  
Recruitment Flyer

(posted on-line)

**RECRUITING**  
**People Who Self Identify as Polyamorous**  
**Study Examining the Coming Out Experiences of**  
**People who participate in Openly Nonexclusive**  
**Relationships**

Purpose: This thesis project will explore the coming out experiences of people who participate in Polyamorous relationships- or multiple emotional, affective or sexual relationships with the consent and agreed upon support of all partners. This study looks at how they navigate disclosure to friends, family and the community.

Participation Criteria

- Self Identify as Polyamorous
- Read, write and speak English
- Currently live in the United States
- 18 years or older
- Have access to internet survey

**To Learn More About Participation Sign on to:**

[www.surveymonkey.com/PolyamoryStudy](http://www.surveymonkey.com/PolyamoryStudy)

Contact [Openlyrelate@gmail.com](mailto:Openlyrelate@gmail.com)

For further questions  
about the  
survey

Appendix D  
Resource List

1. Poly-Friendly Professionals. <http://www.polychromatic.com/pfp/main.php>  
*Poly-Friendly Professionals is a national list of professionals who have been referred here, or who have identified themselves as being, open-minded about polyamory and polyamorous issues.*
  
2. San Francisco Sex Information. [http://sfsi.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://sfsi.org/wiki/Main_Page) **(415) 989-SFSI (7374)**  
*Free, confidential, accurate, non-judgmental information about sex. Switchboard operators answer questions and give referrals to callers of all ages, sexual orientations, and lifestyles. All calls are confidential. SFSI supports all consensual lifestyles and behaviors and believes that accurate information enables each person to make choices in their own life that are best for them. While this is a San Francisco based organization, they give referrals to callers all over the country.*
  
4. New Leaf Counseling Center. <http://www.newleafservices.org/> - **415-626-7000**  
*The nonprofit multi-purpose counseling center for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities of San Francisco and the surrounding Bay Area.*
  
5. Kink Aware Professionals <http://home.swipnet.se/~w-13968/psycho.html>  
*This page lists KAP psychotherapeutic professionals. These include psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed counselors, licensed social workers, and others who are licensed to provide psychotherapy services in their community. There are links for professionals in most states.*

## Appendix E

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

Qiskit™ and a  
TFF (decompressed) decompressor  
are needed to use the picture.