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Polyamory as "ethical nonmonogamy" : a viable alternative to infidelity : a project based upon an independent investigation

Sarah Kay Woodruff-Diaz

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Sarah Woodruff-Diaz
Polyamory as "Ethical
Nonmonogamy": A Viable
Alternative to Infidelity

ABSTRACT

This research examined the practice of polyamory as "ethical nonmonogamy" within the United States. Long-term dyadic monogamy (usually between a man and woman, and sanctioned through marriage) is the hegemonic index for how most Americans continue to experience and authenticate relationships. However, patterns of frequent infidelity and frequent divorce undermine the rectitude of monogamy's core institution. This study sought to determine whether polyamory could provide a viable alternative to traditional models of long-term dyadic monogamy. It also sought to determine the capacity of polyamory to foster intrapsychic growth and development, and provide psychic repair in spite of (and because of) inimical societal conditions still hostile towards nonnormative practices and identities. The following questions guided the research: (a) Do polyamorous relationships fare differently than dyadic relationships in terms of overall satisfaction and longevity of emotional bondedness? (b) Are children in polyamorous families acquiring the security and attention needed for healthy psychosocial development? (c) Can engagement in polyamory be considered an adaptive coping response to shifting sociocultural frameworks, patterns of infidelity, and divorce? A theoretical research design employing attachment theory and Freudian concepts was utilized for this study; it anchored analysis of the phenomenon in discourses of similarity and difference for the purposes of comparison, and enabled the researcher to consider the breath of the phenomenon in greater detail.

POLYAMORY AS "ETHICAL NONMONOGAMY":
A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO INFIDELITY

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

Sarah Woodruff-Diaz

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Long-term dyadic monogamy (prototypically between a man and woman, and sanctioned through marriage) is the hegemonic index for how most Americans experience and authenticate relationships. Heteronormativity and two-parent households are still normative frameworks in the United States, and relational and sexual practices outside these traditional margins elicit strong opinions from people on all sides of the political spectrum. Efforts to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States, for example, exposed diverse subjectivities on the virtues of monogamy's core institution, and who should be included within it.

As cited by Fisher (2010), "Today between 85 percent and 90 percent of Americans marry by middle age - regardless of their economic conditions" (Brown, 2010). Clearly, being married is important to most Americans. Underscoring the ubiquity of marriage and/or long-term dyadic monogamy, however, are equally prolific patterns of frequent infidelity and frequent divorce in this country. According to the 2000 census, almost half of all first marriages in the United States end in divorce and 70 percent of those who divorce will remarry (as cited in Emens, 2004, p. 4). Regarding martial infidelity, Glass and Wright (1992) found that 44 percent of husbands and 25 percent of wives have engaged in a least one extramarital experience, falling into one of the following three possible categories: *primarily sexual*, *primarily emotional* or

combined-type involvement (as cited in Lusteran, p. 259). Alternate statistics on infidelity (albeit, reflective only of those persons willing to admit their transgressions) report 50 to 65 percent of husbands and 45 to 55 percent of wives have engaged in an extramarital affair by age 40 (Pesttrak, Martin, & Martin, 1985; Scarf, 1987b; Thompson, 1983; as cited in Penn, Hernandez & Bermudez, 1997, p.169).

These statistics draw attention to what Flanagan (2009) calls a "collective ambivalence" (p. 49) in our country towards the institution of marriage. On one hand, normative romantic ideals of mutuality and union inspire 85 to 90 percent of couples to marry. On the other hand, frequencies of infidelity and divorce undermine the rectitude of the institution. For many, the fantasy of monogamy is often different than its reality. Recall Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, John Edwards and Rielle Hunter, South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford and Maria Belen Chapur, as well as the multiple affairs of public personas like David Letterman and Tiger Woods. Arguably, these are esoteric examples and their personal accounts of infidelity are likely influenced by conflated factors of money, power, and celebrity. Alternatively, these examples point to a larger sociocultural problem of rampant infidelity and their visibility on the public stage dramatizes dalliances otherwise contained in the private sphere.

Adultery and infidelity are (by definition) transgressions of marriage -- a legally recognized paradigm of sexually exclusive monogamy. Discussion of infidelity for this project, however, also applies to long-term romantic commitments for which sexual exclusivity is the established norm. It should also be noted that there are many plausible reasons for high divorce and infidelity rates in the United States. However, exploring the subjectivities of these decisions exceeds the scope of this project. Instead, transgressions

of monogamy are viewed as reflections of social process rather than tangent events. Late writer Leonard Michaels suggested, "Adultery is not about sex or romance. Ultimately, it's about how little we mean to one another" (as cited in Flanagan, 2009, p.46).

Michaels' observations underscore the importance of considering both psychological and sociological explanations for problems with intimacy and relatedness - themes central to discussion of polyamory.

Changing sociocultural factors both inform and reflect changes in social mores. Some of the more recent examples of shifting normative frameworks include: (a) flux in family life and increased "blended families" resulting from adoptions, foster care, and inclusion of stepchildren/stepparents from patterns of divorce/remarriage; (b) increases in births to unmarried women which reached 39.7 percent in May of 2009 (as cited in Flanagan, 2009, p.47); and, (c) increases in cohabitating couples before (and in lieu of) marriage. These sociocultural trends may simply be subversive forms of resistance towards the hegemonic ideals of long-term dyadic monogamy. Jamieson argues that living as a couple maintains an ideal domestic state for most adults (n.d.). However, Jamieson further concludes "the monopoly of marriage as *the* way of being-in-a-couple has diminished both in expressions of morality and in how people conduct themselves" (Jamieson, p.35; as cited in Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden, 2004).

According to Harrison and Marsden (2004), "There is evidence of a significant dissonance between what individuals feel that relationship practices should be like and what they actually are like" (p. xiv). Underscoring this "dissonance" between normative romantic ideals and the behaviors/desires that counter them is a burgeoning intrapsychic and social conflict for many Americans. Experience and awareness of the fragility of

marriage is high, but social and legal pressures towards monogamy continue to pull Americans towards (or back into) marriage. Alternative relationship models, which are potentially more rewarding, are otherwise obscured from consciousness or possibility. Admittedly, "Tradition in the abstract is easier to disregard than it is in the form of constant social pressure" (O'Neill & O'Neill, 1972, p.19).

Polyamorists - polys for short- are often misunderstood (including by mainstream clinicians/therapists) and risk being marginalized as psychologically unhealthy or as displaying maladjusted behavior. However, Peabody (1982) points out, "In actuality, the [poly] client's behavior may be an unconventional variant of normal behavior in contemporary America" (p.433). In other words, ubiquitous infidelity and divorce/remarriage in this country normalize "many loves"; either secretly (adultery) or serially (divorce and remarriage), many Americans are already practicing alternatives to lifelong dyadic monogamy.

Some polys appear to practice nonmonogamy as part of an ethical practice that shares some of its aspirations with more mainstream models of romantic relationships. Emphasis on love and intimacy, for example, are central themes in polyamory discourse. Affirming the qualities of polyamory akin to traditional relational models could potentially build alliances between these target/agent populations. However, like others outside of normative heterosexuality, polys are positioned within inimical societal conditions that have a tendency to pathologize people who stray from heterosexual respectability. Because polyamory defies normative frameworks by the very nature of its relational formation, polys risk legal, social and familial prejudice and/or discrimination from those outside their relational paradigm. Frequently, discussion on morality, "family

values", and "healthy" psychological constitution is used to justify hegemonic ideals and further stigmatize nonnormative practices.

Some polys, particularly those with multiple nonnormative identities (bisexual and polyamorous, for example) express feeling "doubly stigmatized, since both bisexual and polyamorous people are misperceived as 'loose,' 'confused' and 'unable to choose' by the mainstream" (Weitzman, 2006, p. 147). Prejudice and discrimination is not only generated from mainstream culture; microaggressions from within the poly community -- horizontal hostility -- is also common (Easton, 2009). According to Weitzman (2006), a feeling of isolation is often created for polys due to the fact that "Some bi-poly people simultaneously encounter prejudice from their gay friends about their other-gender partners and prejudice from their straight friends about their same-gender partners (p.147).

To clarify, it is not monogamy in and of itself that is inherently problematic, but the compulsive and automatic promising of monogamy without first evaluating one's personal margins and capacities for love and commitment. Polyamory is explored in this project as an adaptive solution to "compulsive monogamy" (Emens, 2004, p.4) and pervasive infidelity. Anchored in polyamory literature, this project asserts that polyamorous relationships fare no worse than dyadic romances in terms of fostering emotional bondedness and perpetuating the longevity of intimate attachments between partners. Pending additional research, poly relationships may potentially prove to be more advantageous for optimal functioning and mental health than traditional relational formations.

One woman's reflexivity captures a common mainstream sentiment about polyamory: "I can *understand* polyamory; it makes sense, but it would never work for *me*" (M. Hines, personal communication, February 9, 2010). Understandably, the inclusion of additional lovers into a romantic dyad is counterintuitive for many -- we are most familiar with dyadic relationships from early parent-child dyads. Psychoanalytic theories and practices underpin the significance of dyadic relationships (including within the patient-analyst frame), but the conceptualization of healthy personality development is still applicable to polyamorous relationships, particularly in regards to poly formations with a "primary" partner.

This study will examine polyamory as an alternative to long-term dyadic monogamy. Polyamory as a practice of "ethical nonmonogamy" is presented as a reparative ad hoc solution for (a) rampant infidelity that is both empirically and experientially known; (b) the waning rectitude and respectability of the institution of marriage in the United States; (c) for individuals otherwise isolated and pathologized for being and/or choosing difference.

The implications of this project to the field of social work include its potential to reconceptualize intimate relationships as existing beyond the "numerosity requirement" (Emens, 2004, p.2) -- one man and one woman-- and broadening our understanding of sexuality identity beyond preference of gendered object choice (Klesse, 2007). The research findings underscore the fact that polyamorous individuals are misunderstood as hedonistic, greedy or pathological. The limited research available on the poly phenomena both amplifies its stigma and keeps polyamory underground to some extent. Like other nonnormative populations apropos to the field of social work, nodal points for

oppressed populations like members of polyamorous communities include: construction of identity in relation to dominant groups; negotiation of potentially conflicting discourses around difference and sameness; identity and behavior; nature and choice (Barker, 2005).

Methodology

This research project was catalyzed by a driving question: Is it possible to sustain love and sexual interests in another person long enough to honor the marital commitments of lifelong dyadic monogamy? This was less about assessing antiquities of the institution and more about my disillusionment with rampant infidelity. Polyamory, specifically as "ethical nonmonogamy," offers a reparative solution.

The following questions will guide the research and analysis: Are the psychosocial benefits acquired through dyadic relationships compromised in relationships with multiple love objects? Do polyamorous relationships fare better than dyadic relationships in terms of overall relational satisfaction and longevity of emotional bondedness between love objects? Finally, can polyamory be considered an adaptive coping response to shifting sociocultural expectations, and phenomena with therapeutic value for fostering intrapsychic growth?

The purpose of this project is to examine the concept of polyamory through different theoretical frameworks as it relates to the aforementioned questions. Several major theories, including attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development, and Winnicott's (1965) ideas on good object introjects are all built on a similar premise: levels of trust in early relationships lay the psychological foundation for trusting and better-functioning relationships in adulthood (Simpson,

2007). As such, the relational content of this study, one that focuses on themes of intimacy and bondedness between polyamorous adults, is compatible with a theoretical research design. Attachment theory and object relations theory are thus utilized to explore poly phenomena.

Summary

In the current chapter I have explored the research questions informing this project and offered an initial look at literature on polyamory as a phenomenon occurring within the United States. In the following chapter, I will review the existing literature on polyamory, define key terms and concepts, and examine the historical and cultural contexts of the phenomenon. Additionally, I briefly introduce attachment theory and object relations theory as applied to the poly phenomena. In chapters three and four, I identify key components of the above theories and underscore their relevancy in shaping intimacy and healthy psychosocial development among poly adults and children within polyamorous families. To conclude, chapter five recapitulates this phenomenon, summarizes the research and analysis presented in previous chapters, and explores in greater detail its significance for the field of social work and clinical practice.

CHAPTER 2

POLY PHENOMENA AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature explores key components of polyamory as a phenomenon within the United States; it explores its drawbacks and psychosocial benefits for the partners and children involved; and how engaging in polyamory may be considered an adaptive coping response to patterns of frequent infidelity and frequent divorce. It will examine the therapeutic value of polyamory as a mechanism through which to foster intrapsychic growth and development in the ongoing process of self-construction. In order to trace this, the first section provides a brief overview of the literature on polyamory and examines poly phenomena within its historical and cultural contexts. The second section addresses certain characteristics of the complex challenges polyamorous individuals face and the capacity of these phenomena for psychic repair.

Polyamory is gaining momentum as a viable alternative to dyadic monogamy. “Researchers are just beginning to study the phenomenon [polyamory], but those who do estimate that openly polyamorous families in the United States number more than half a million, with thriving contingents in nearly every major city” (Bennett, 2009, para. 4). Accessibility provided by the Internet -- podcasts, poly blogs, and polyamorous websites like *Loving More that* maintains 15,000 regular readers (Bennett, 2009) -- contributed to the burgeoning visibility and expansion of poly communities in the United States.

Historical Context

Some polyamorists trace the foundation of their movement to the Oneida commune of upstate New York, founded in 1848 by Yale theologian John Humphrey Noyes (Bennett, 2009). While some 19th century religious groups practiced polyamory, "it wasn't until the late-1960s and 1970s 'free love' movement that polyamory truly came into vogue" (Bennett, 2009, para. 8). It should be noted that polyamory in this context refers to a practice of multiple sexual partners/loves, but the actual word "polyamory" (and related ideologies) were not subsumed into the cannon of relational jargon until 1990.

The cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s was more conducive to sexual liberation than previous years. It was a time in history when having sex with multiple partners posed little physical peril; sexually transmitted diseases were of less concern, as penicillin (which became widely available during World War II) quelled fears of syphilis. Also, the advent of the birth control pill staved off pregnancy scares (at least for middle-class married women who could quietly get a prescription from the family doctor, unlike their poor or unmarried counterparts) (Collins, 2009).

Feminism and literature from this time offered definitional and ideological guidance to shape a new ethos and significantly influenced the poly movement. The concept of open marriage, for example, was popularized through the best-selling book, Open Marriage (1972), which proposed the closed marriage contract as a kind of socially inflicted "bondage" that actually "limits, proscribes and sabotages the attainment of [traditional marital] objectives" (O'Neill & O'Neill, 1972, p.54 & p. 40).

Science fiction literature also influenced the poly movement in the United States. The publication of Robert Heinlein's (1961) Stranger in a Strange Land, for example,

described sexual possessiveness at the root of war and murder, and premised the possibility of simultaneously loving more than one person “openly, honestly, spiritually, and sexually” (White, 2004, p.19). This version of "responsible nonmonogamy" has since become bedrock for "ethical nonmonogamy" among polys today. Additionally, Robert Rimmer’s (1966) best-selling book, The Harrad Experiment, narrates a group of “wholesome college students brought together to learn how to experience sex in a completely honest, open atmosphere. By graduation, [they] have...taken ‘the long step away from primitive emotions of hate and jealousy’ and formed a six-person group marriage” (Collins, 2009, p.176). Now deceased, Rimmer is remembered by many polys as one of the founders of polyamory (White, 2004, p.19).

Definitions and Terms

Love is central to the discourse on polyamory, as reflected by the etymological roots of the term. Coined by Morning Glory Zell in 1990, the word *polyamory* literally means “many loves,” and is a hybrid of the Greek root meaning ‘many’ and the Latin root meaning ‘love’ (White, 2004, p.19). When considering the term, “Zell said she could have been consistently Latin or Greek and called it omniamory or polyphilia, but they sounded like diseases” (White, 2004, p.19). According to Klesse (2007), this is an important consideration: with an emphasis on love (not disease), polyamory “cannot easily be subsumed to a canon of pathologizing sexological terms” (p.103). An emphasis on love positions polyamory in a discourse of similarity - it acts as a "normalizing device, serving to present polyamorous people as 'just like anyone else' and therefore acceptable" (Jefferson, 1984; Barker, 2005, p.82-83).

"Love" is used loosely in this context, however, as polyamory is not a unified discourse. There are many definitions and models of polyamory, and "the primary definitional disputes about polyamory involve the delineation of its boundaries with regard to sex and love" (Emens, 2004, p. 9). Some polys consider *all* loving relationships (including those that are intimate but nonsexual) under the umbrella of polyamory; others assume the term must incorporate sexual nonexclusivity (Emens, 2004).

As some polys caution, a term denoting "many loves" may further stigmatize the poly community as constitutive of people incapable and uninterested in long-term intimate relationships or as having an "unreasonable" numbers of sexual partners (Klesse, 2007, p.577). Research findings point to additional negative assumptions of nonmonogamous people as "promiscuous, over-sexed, self-obsessed, irrational and pathological" (Seidman, 1992; see Levine, 1998; Klesse, 2005; as cited in Klesse, 2007, p.577). Given the cultural double standard of gendered norms on sexuality, women may face more criticism than men for living a polyamorous lifestyle. According to Sperling, for example, "[I]f a woman is out as having two or more boyfriends, people might label her oversexed, versus the 'boys will be boys' idea that kicks in when men have sex with lots of women. What a stud. What a slut" (as cited in Miller, 2010). Helping to mitigate further evocation of negative stereotypes, some polys prefer the term "ethical nonmonogamy" to describe their polyamorous lifestyle.

Common themes in poly literature point to a general relational ideology based on love, intimacy, honesty, and communication. According to Emens (2004), polyamory encompasses five main principles: "self-knowledge, radical honesty, consent, self-possession, and privileging love and sex over other emotions and activities such as

jealousy" (p.2). Klesse (2007) recapitulates similar characteristics: "negotiation, self-responsibility, emotionality...compersion, all of which are closely linked to the dominant themes of honesty" (p.572).

Compersion is defined as the "feeling of happiness in knowing that others you love share joy with each other, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another" (Emens, 2004, p.20). The term originates from the polyamorous Keristan Commune in San Francisco, California, which disbanded in the early 1990s (Retrieved from <http://www.lovemore.com>). Polys aim to develop and expand their compersion as a way to manage jealousy inherent in maintaining multiple loving relationships.

The subject of jealousy surfaces often in the literature as a plausible reason for inefficacy and unrealistic tenor of poly relationships. "By and large [polyamory] never seems to me to work out very well over the long haul, jealousy being not just a conventional, 'conservative' response, but one deeply rooted in early life experience" (Person, 1988, p.311). Polys recognize the likely evocation of jealousy in multi-partner relationships, but suggest with equal tenacity that monogamy is not a cure for jealousy. Instead, jealousy is manageable only through open communication, patience and honesty, and "should be overcome to make room for more sexual and loving possibilities" (Emens, 2004, p.20). Additionally, central to poly ethics of self-knowledge, jealousy is reframed as an opportunity for intrapersonal growth and development -- it can "lead you to the very places where you need the most healing" (Anapol, as cited in Easton & Hardy, 2009, p.108).

The tenets of polyamory mentioned above distinguish it from other nonnormative, nonmonogamous practices like *cheating*, *swinging*, and polygamy. To clarify: (1) polyamory is different than *cheating* in that “the point of polyamory is not secrecy but openness” (Retrieved from <http://www.lovemore.com>); (2) although *swinging* is, theoretically, negotiated and consensual nonmonogamy, many polys consider *swinging* more about recreational sex than connection or intimate relationship-building central to poly ethics (Retrieved from <http://www.lovemore.com>); (3) polyamory is often inaccurately conflated with polygamy -- polygamy has its foundations in institutionalized patriarchy and women are forbidden extramarital relationships like their male counterparts; polyamory, in contrast, pivots on the equality of men and women, and both have equal access to additional partners (Sheff, 2005).

Polyamory is a relational practice inclusive of all sexual identities. There are many variations of polyamory practice and ideology. Different poly arrangements include (but are not limited to): triads, quads, vee-structures, primary/secondary/tertiary partners, open marriage, and polyfidelity (Klesse, 2007). For the purposes of this project, further consideration of poly phenomena is limited to poly arrangements with a "primary" partner. This formation is most applicable to psychoanalytic frameworks that pivot on the significance of dyadic relationships. (Further discussion of polyamory through theoretical frameworks is discussed in Chapters Three and Four).

Three central ideologies of polyamory -- open polyamory, polyfidelity and single polyamorists -- are briefly described: (a) open polyamory, usually through a committed open relationship or open marriage, in which partners allow additional partners into their existing primary formation; (b) polyfidelity, where three or more people commit to

having a closed, exclusive relationship with each other; and (c) single polyamorists that may choose to maintain several lovers without a primary commitment to any one person, and possibly demonstrate ambivalent interest in long-term partnerships (Retrieved from <http://www.lovemore.com>).

Being polyamorous is both a relational/sexual orientation, but also a salient part of sociopolitical and 'self' identity for many polys. Research findings suggest that a substantial number of polyamorous individuals construct their poly identity in deliberate rejection of hegemonic romantic ideals. Given that "many people are attracted to more than one person," polyamory adopts a more "realistic" way of relating than dyadic monogamy (Barker, 2005, p.81). As one poly person rhetorically asks, for example, "Since so many people are already non-monogamous, why not develop a non-monogamy that is honest, responsible and socially acceptable?" (Echlin, 2003). Similar findings from Finn and Malson (2008) describe the process of constructing poly identity as a "'better' alternative to 'mono-normativity' and as an effective escape from it, whether for personal or political reasons" (p. 523). In other words, individuals eluded the oppressions of normative and unrealistic romantic ideals through a practice of polyamory as a "better" solution.

Common catalysts for choosing a polyamorous lifestyle "centered around denunciations of sexual monogamy as restricting personal, sexual, and relationship development; as fueling infidelity, dishonesty, and relationship breakdown; as being unnatural and unworkable..." (Finn & Malson, 2008, p. 523). One poly person indirectly affirms the psychosocial benefits of his polyamorous lifestyle as follows: "Without polyamory my choices would be: (1) cheat, lie, betray, deceive; (2) engage in agreed-

upon recreational sex, swapping with other couples; (3) eschew committed relationships; (4) embrace celibacy; (5) chafe in resentful frustration. I find all five of these alternatives unacceptable” (White, 2004, p.18). For him, polyamory provides an adaptive alternative to normative frameworks otherwise oppressive.

'Naturally' Polyamorous

Human nature is a compelling argument for polyamory. Poly individuals may be demonstrating an adaptive coping response to "unnatural" relational structures and sociocultural expectations of long-term monogamy. Dialectics on "natural" human experience have theoretical underpinnings in evolutionary psychology: "Lifelong monogamous devotion just isn't natural, and the modern environment makes it harder than ever" (Wright, 1995, para. 56). This sentiment is not evocation by evolutionary psychologists for moral and sexual abandon, but intended to inspire greater scrutiny to one's feelings before acting on them. People may be more 'naturally' inclined towards nonmonogamy, but "the moral life...consists largely of battling human nature" (George Williams, 1966; as cited in Wright, 1995, para. 64).

Addressing patterns of frequent infidelity and frequent divorce in the United States, Wright explores the intersection between natural "impulses of wanderlust" and our capacity for moralistic responses to counter them. Wright (1995) posits,

[M]en and women alike might bear in mind that impulses of wanderlust, or marital discontent, are not always a sign that you married the "wrong person."

They may just signify that you are a member of our species who married another member of our species. Nor, as evolutionary psychiatrist Randolph L. Nesse has noted, should we believe such impulses are a sign of psychopathology. Rather, he

writes, they are "expected impulses that must, for the most part, be inhibited for the sake of marriage." (para.61)

In other words, men and women inevitably -- and 'naturally' -- have impulses for "wanderlust" but these impulses are controllable in compliance with monogamous commitment. In actuality, however, many people do not inhibit these "impulses of wanderlust" and marriages/marriage-like relationships regularly dissolve over infidelity.

Darwin, arguably the most famous evolutionist, defined a moral being as "one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving them" (as cited in Wright, 1994, para.65). In this sense, we are moral animals with the "technical capacity to lead an examined life: self-awareness, memory, foresight and judgment" (Wright, 1994, para. 66). Polys might argue that an "examined-life," one with morality at the helm, is recognizing monogamy's frequent failure, and allegiance to an alternative solution that pivots on ethics of honesty, openness, and self-awareness.

Wright concludes, "[C]hronically subjecting ourselves to moral scrutiny and adjusting our behavior accordingly is hardly a reflex. We are potentially moral animals...but we are not naturally moral animals. The first step to being moral is to realize how thoroughly we aren't" (1995, para. 66). In the context of concepts from evolutionary psychology, poly individuals appear adaptive, moralistic and innovative in their solution to rampant infidelity as "ethical nonmonogamy."

Thus far in discussion, exploration of polyamory is presented as reaction and adaptation to circumstances and/or environment. It is important to note that many other polys consider themselves "naturally polyamorous" and speak of their identity in terms of

"being themselves." This draws on the culturally dominant notion of a 'real' or 'core self,' but polys also recognize the possibility of expressing different 'selves' in different relationships. Participants in one study, for example, felt that "they were 'being themselves' even in two relationships where they were expressing very different, or even contradictory, versions of themselves" (Barker, 2005, p. 85).

Additionally, Barker (2005) observes, "There was often a construction that people had not 'been themselves' when they were cheating, but had become 'true to themselves' when they became polyamorous" (p.85). Polyamory is presented here as naturally occurring -- not chosen -- and as moralistic alternative to the lies and deceit of cheating. According to Barker (2005), description of polyamory as a "natural" phenomenon is not surprising given present societal norms which privilege "things with biological origins as somehow more 'real' than products of socialization or cultural constructions" (p.83). Barker continues to explain that people often counter potential prejudice against themselves by "arguing that their difference is 'natural' and therefore something they 'can't help'" (2005, p.83).

Demonstrating this same phenomena, a 44 year-old mother of three and a polyamorist involved with three men, shares part of her coming out narrative as a poly adult:

I have always been non-monogamous, and when I was 24 years old....I realized that I would always be that way. I realized that I would never be monogamous....I didn't want to lie, and I didn't want to cheat, and I knew that if I kept trying to be monogamous, that's what I would end up doing....I felt very alone and it was

very challenging. But I knew I had to be true to who I was. (Retrieved from <http://www.momlogic.com>)

As witnessed in the example above, tendencies to talk in terms of "always" and "never" being monogamous, or of being "true" to oneself, all position polyamory as naturally occurring and more moralistic -- void of lying or cheating -- than normative alternatives. Barker explains the tendencies of poly individuals (as with other marginalized persons) to use hyperbole in self-description as "these...rhetorical devices...take something to an extreme to make it more persuasive" (2005, p.83). If polyamory is "naturally" occurring and indicative of ones "true self," it may prove less offensive and/or pathological to mainstream adversaries.

Polyamory and Heteronormativity

Bennett (2009) sardonically posits, "[Polyamory's] enough to make any monogamist's head spin. But the traditionalists had better get used to it" (para. 4). This sentiment speaks to the burgeoning visibility of polyamory, but also the resistance of mainstream -- "traditional"-- culture towards nonnormative lifestyles. Polyamory creates discomfort for traditionalists. One significant reason for this is that polyamory, through its promotion of multiple partnerships, challenges the hegemony of the 'core' couple as the only valid relationship formation.

Another reason for resistance is, paradoxically, the universality of nonmonogamy. Many people engage in nonmonogamous behavior (and many more have nonmonogamous fantasy lives), but the commonality of this experience likely engenders resistance rather than support (Emens, 2004). Emens explains, "Rather than empathizing with others who share one's traits, people often fear or shun the people they could

become, particularly when the common traits are stigmatized" (2004, p.25). Because of the commonality of nonmonogamy, polyamory hits a little too 'close to home' for most traditionalists and it "challenge[s] people to admit their own transgressions and violations of the law of monogamy" (Emens, 2004, p.25). Additionally, polyamory challenges our nations deep cultural commitment to the fantasy of monogamy and its equally trenchant resistance to recognizing alternatives for monogamy's frequent failure.

The social climate in the United States, ensconced in heteronormativity, remains hostile towards nonnormative lifestyles. Person (2007) expands on mainstream resistance to extricate hegemonic practices or consider nonnormative alternatives:

Many observers of love, out of an exaggerated respect for conformity and conventionality, literally do not allow themselves to see (by which I mean register) certain...forms of love. If they do see them they devalue them, because such loves violate too many presumptions about what love 'ought' to be. ...[W]e remain extremely judgmental of many of the less common variants of love, in deference to a hierarchy of values that pronounces love in its highest form to be that which occurs between a man and a woman... and expresses itself in holy matrimony. (p. 316)

These "hierarchy of values" are culturally inscribed by the pervasive heteronormativity in the United States.

As Klesse (2007) describes, "Heteronormativity is a pervasive form of power which extends to the control and regulation of both sexual *and* social identities and practices" (p.11). In other words, not only is heterosexuality privileged, but also couplehood, monogamy, and marriage. Rubin (1992) describes a sexual stratification of

culturally approved sex acts: "sexual acts are attributed differential status depending on which identities, genders, body parts, relationship status, styles of touch, numbers of partners and emotional undercurrents are involved" (as cited in Klesse, 2007, p.11). These are placed along a continuum ranging from good/condoned/natural to abnormal/perverse/unnatural. With constellations of multiple partners and sexual arrangements, it is not surprising that polyamory fares on the low end the continuum of culturally approved sex acts.

Additionally, "Heteronormativity stands for a complex regime of moral assumptions and cultural practices, which have the potential to instill a sense of rightness in some individuals and a devastating feeling of shame in others" (Klesse, 2007, p.10). Within this context, perhaps the hyperbolic rhetoric and assertions of being "naturally polyamorous" that were mentioned earlier can be understood as attempts by polys to reconcile objections from heteronormative culture. Through embracing poly identity as "natural" and "true," polys assert the legitimacy of their lifestyle and regain a sense of mastery otherwise diminished by inimical societal conditions intended to be shaming.

Constructing 'Specialness' Through Primary Partnerships

According to Person (1988), there are three common elements of love at any stage of personal development: "the choice of idealized love object (which of course is not a wide choice in infancy and early childhood), the longing to interact with that object in one way or another, and the consequent alteration of self" (p.70). This theoretical concept articulates the significance of a primary -- "special" -- love object and the capacity of these interactions to influence and modulate the 'self' accordingly. Central to many psychodynamic theories, a primary love object/primary relationship in our early

years has large bearing on our psychosexual development and our understanding of 'self' and 'other' in later years.

"Because our earliest sensual pleasures are so intertwined with the Other, our well-being and even our sense of self becomes bound up with the Other. Because we learn who we are in connection to some other person, our sense of self is always tied to our intimate relationships" (Person, 1988, p.54). It is not surprising, then, that the concept of a primary relationship -- a 'couple' -- continues to hold meaning and value for most adults in this country. Recall from Chapter One that 85 to 90 percent of people marry in this country regardless of their economic circumstances. Not only do most Americans experience coupledness, they mark their "specialness" through the legal and social sanctioning of marriage.

Through personal communications and findings in the literature, some concerns about polyamory regard the absence of a primary love object; does maintaining multiple loving relationships forgo the intrapsychic benefits and stability afforded by a primary relationship with a significant -- "special" -- love object? Enshrined in heteronormativity, this reasoning assumes that "sexual fidelity is symbolic of trust and...sexual exclusivity is symbolic of 'specialness' in couple relationships" (Reibstein & Richards, 1992 as cited in Jamieson, p.36; as cited in Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden, 2004, p.36).

Akin to their counterparts in normative relationship frameworks, polys maintain the desire to feel "special" to at least one other person of significance (Jamieson, p.54). However, in many poly relationships, fidelity is frequently seen in terms of emotional commitment and not sexual behavior. Monogamy is the prototypical marker of

"specialness" but, consistent with its other adaptive features, polyamory replaces monogamy with other markers of being special (Jamieson, p.55). "Arguably, the most common pattern among nonsecretly nonmonogamous couples is to declare 'other relationships' as secondary to their primary relationship and to adopt rules that assert certain privileges as exclusive to the primary relationship" (Jamieson, p.44).

Interestingly, Person (1988) observes that "specialness" is also derived from the very act of being in a nonnormative relationship, different from mainstream options. Person recalls one example of a polyamorous couple that took pride in being "pioneers of a sort; they proselytized a new freedom from within the boundaries of a committed relationship, thereby establishing their specialness and celebrating their spiritual bonding as something transcending any need for strictures on the flesh" (Person, p. 311). As with the couple in this example, polys are sometimes able to construct feelings of 'specialness' through the very nature of their assumption-challenging partnerships, and the reconceptualization of intimacy required to sustain them.

Extended Family Networks and Childrearing

In addition to challenging normative ideals of dyadic monogamy, polyamory also challenges the hegemonic construction of mutually exclusive categories of 'friend' and 'lover'. In heteronormative culture, people are expected to have one lover and everyone else is 'friend'. This distinction is demarcated with cultural rules around what behavior is appropriate in friendship (Barker, 2005). Polyamorous relationships may have more than one lover and distinctions between friends and lovers may become blurred.

Easton and Hardy (2009) explain that lovers in poly relationships often remain friends after the sexual aspect of their relationship ends. Many of these once-sexual

relationships develop into family-like constellations of close relationships (Easton & Hardy, 2009). As per one poly's disclosure, "complex and deep relationships through extended networks of multiple lovers and extended families" is reparative for the disintegrated "nuclear family" and a cultural climate lacking in interconnectedness and intimacy (Oberon, as cited in Echlin, 2003).

As Plummer (1995) has argued, family discourse in the United States has shifted from "'traditional nuclear values' to the 'postmodern family' where family members are chosen rather than biologically given" (as cited in Barker, 2005, p.82). Adoptions, foster care placements, and acquisition of stepparents/stepchildren are common in today's mainstream families. Like earlier discussion on discourses of similarity, Barker notes that polys appear to be "drawing on this discourse, and perhaps focusing on the notion of 'family' ties rather than 'sexual' ones, since these might be more acceptable to those outside polyamory" (2005, p.82). Playing with these discourses of similarity and difference, one poly individual shares that the once-sexual lovers of poly relationships are "our family, often more permanent in our lives than marriages" (Easton & Hardy, 2009, p.48).

It is worth noting Emens' (2004) poignant observation of blended families from the perspective of the children involved. Through divorce and remarriage, children may experience the acquisition of adults in their lives as cumulative relationship-building. That is, "While the parents are creating horizontal relationships of only two at a time, the children may be acquiring horizontal parenting structures of more than two" (Emens, 2004, p.7). It's a kind of "parental nonmonogamy" -- not just parent(s) of origin, but

many-- and it "creates this sort of structural and psychological deviation from the fantasy of traditional monogamous marriage" (Emens, 2004, p.7).

This becomes an important observation when discussing childrearing in polyamorous families. There are concerns, for example, that a polyamorous family is inadequately structured to appropriately care for a child. The child's wellbeing, development, and psychological conditions for 'generalized trust' in others and ontological security would be jeopardized by a polyamorous configuration of multiple loves and multiple attachments. However, as Emens' observes of children in blended families, children are *already* accustomed to multiple adults and attachments in their family systems. Additionally, there are concerns of inadequate time, energy and mental vigilance required to maintain multiple loves in polyamorous relationships when children are involved because "young children radically diminish parents', and particularly mothers', time for leisure pursuit" (Jamieson, p.53).

Additionally, the literature explored concerns for consistency and security in children's lives with an influx of adults in and out of the family system. In response, Easton and Hardy normalize the experience in the context of parents who have divorced and remarried: "Questions about how to help [children] relate to the new people who arrive and depart in their lives can be challenging for any mom or dad" (Easton & Hardy, 2007, p.102). While traditionalists might assume that children in a "sexually interconnected extended family....might generate massive inconsistency, our experience [as poly parents] is just the opposite. Our connections tend to form sprawling extended families that have plenty of energy to welcome all the children" (Easton & Hardy, 2009, p.101).

Affirming the psychosocial benefits for children raised in polyamorous families, Easton and Hardy (2009) share, "...an abundance of relationships can be highly beneficial to family life...children gain in role models, attention, and support in the polyamorous extended family" (p. 102). Children raised in polyamorous families have access to many resources, such as help with homework, rides when needed, and the additional emotional support and attention that comes from having other, nonparental adults in their lives (Miller, 2010).

There are still many places in this country where living a nontraditional sexual lifestyle is considered justification for legal discrimination regarding family and child custody laws (Easton & Hardy, 2009). Custody battles among poly parents are not uncommon. The most public of them was a 1999 case in which a 22-year-old Tennessee woman lost custody of her daughter after outing herself on an MTV documentary (Bennett, 2009). She later got her child back. However, because of the poly stigma and nascent familiarity with the nonnormative practice among the general population, poly parents are advised to be selective and careful about coming out as polyamorous. "Today, the nonprofit Polyamory Society posts a warning to parents on its Web site: If your PolyFamily has children, please do not put your children and family at risk by coming out to the public or by being interviewed [by] the press!" (Bennett, 2009, para. 7).

Another example, Opeyemi Parham kept her poly lifestyle closeted for the 20 years she worked as a physician in Boston, fearing "both the professional consequences and the possibility that she could lose custody of her two children" (Miller, 2010). Parham has since left conventional medicine to work as a health educator, and explains, "My agenda is a society where people can choose how they relate with other humans

sexually without legal penalties, professional penalties, and the emotional penalty of shame and blame" (Miller, 2010). Not only does this example speak to the oppressive forces of discrimination and fear facing polys today, but also to Parham's resiliency and ego strength evidenced in adaptive coping. Certainly researchers must account for the subjectivities of polyamorous individuals (not all polys are the same); conversely, not all polyamorous people (as evidenced by Parham) are pathological or demonstrative of maladaptive behavior.

Possibly because polyamory is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States, there is limited research available on the topic, and even less research on children of polyamorous families. Conducted by assistant professor of sociology at Georgia State University, Elisabeth Sheff, the first longitudinal study, which began in 1996, is still ongoing. In its nascent stages, substantive conclusions cannot be drawn from the research; however, initial impressions are shared: "Anecdotally, research shows that children can do well in poly families - as long as they're in a stable home with loving parents" (Sheff, as cited in Bennett, 2009, para. 7). Additionally, Sheff reflects that children in polyamorous families can experience loss and upset if their parents' partners permanently leave, but this is true for all blended families that contend with children and divorce. Sheff also adds, "Poly families often pass as mundane, blended families from divorce and remarriage and therefore easily fly below the radar" (Miller, 2010). This buffers children from obvious demarcation as different, and insulates them --at least for now-- from overt discrimination for being raised in a polyamorous family.

Summary

This review of the literature considered poly phenomena within the United States as an alternative relational formation to dyadic monogamy, as demonstrative of adaptive coping to rampant infidelity and patterns of frequent divorce and remarriage, and as reparative for individuals otherwise unable to "be themselves" in normative relational frameworks. Questions regarding the healthiness of polyamorous families for children, and the significance of the phenomenon for social work practice were reviewed. Chapters Three and Four continue this exploration of the phenomenon through application of Freudian concepts and an attachment theory framework.

CHAPTER 3

FOUNDATIONAL THEORIES

As observed in chapter two, polyamory is not a unified phenomenon in as much as there are variances in ideologies and/or practices regarding boundaries appurtenant to love and sex. Ultimately, however, polyamory is a discourse on love, even if 'love' is loosely defined in its various contexts. Therefore, theoretical discussion on love is used to underscore the phenomenon. Foundational theories are applied to poly phenomenon in the sociocultural context of love as dichotomously split between 'rational' and 'romantic' traditions. Specifically, Freudian concepts and Oedipal ideas are used as a framework to illustrate 'rivalrous' and 'split-object' triangles in extra-dyadic romantic relationships as derivatives of original Oedipal triangles experienced in latency-aged children.

First, it should be noted that theoretical discourse on love is minimal in the literature. Certainly, psychoanalytic theories have much to say on love: love and its relationship to sex, psychological development, bonding and attachment, identification and ego ideal, and so forth. However, love in these contexts is 'rational,' familial, filial - discourse on love as phenomenological 'romantic' experience is "notoriously absent from the psychoanalytic literature" (Person, 1988, p.xxi). Freud nods to love in his conceptualization of mental health as the ability to love and work but love in this context refers to 'rational' love, not passionate love. Oedipal triangles in their original configuration as mother-father-child pivot on similar conceptualization of love. It is important to note that normative sociocultural frameworks on love, parenting and family

have shifted incredibly since Freud's original postulations in the nineteenth century. However, for purposes of this project, human propensities toward triangulation remain an occurring phenomenon in relationships, even if the variables of intimacy or bondedness have changed accordingly.

To clarify, 'rational' love is understood as an intellectual experience: "Duty and responsibility are valued above emotional pleasure and sexual passion" (Person, 1988, p.xvii). In contrast, 'romantic' love constitutes passion, unrestrained subjectivity, and is capable of evoking "the most intense of human emotions" (Bowlby, 1979, p.106; Person, 1988). Generally, mainstream culture approves of romantic love as the province of poetry, fiction, music and film. However, "[t]he rationalist mode of thinking about romantic love prevails in professional literature, whether of psychology, sociology, or philosophy" (Person, 1988, p.xvi). Incidentally, this is likely an additional source of resistance to polyamory, as the poly phenomenon is based on the valuation of subjectivities and the vagaries of love; polyamory prioritizes passion and emotionality over the ubiquitous sociocultural (heteronormative) 'duties and responsibilities' of 'rational' love. Therefore, polyamory is oppositionally positioned among normative cultural hegemony.

Historical Context

The paucity of psychoanalytic studies on romantic love has its origins in the early stages of psychoanalysis when 'objective' (credible) science trumped the ambiguities of subjectivity. At a time when efforts were still being made to establish psychoanalysis as a reputable science, Freud presented many of his early theories as 'objective' science in order to render them acceptable and palatable (Person, 1988). Freud envisioned love, for

example, as a schematized formulation of libidinal energy, and focused on innate biological drives rather than feelings as mediators of behavior. As such, "In classical psychoanalytic formulations, libido rather than passion is viewed as the central force in personality formation" (as cited in Person, 1988, p.xxii).

Person (1988) suggests other plausible reasons for cultural resistance to romantic love: (a) "philosophy -- the last great sanctuary of questions relating to the 'soul' and the one discipline where love was addressed seriously -- has itself largely been transformed and now addresses analytic and linguistic questions rather than metaphysical and transcendental concerns" (p.xvii); (b) the twenty-first century is a secular age, when "many of the great discourses on love belong to religious literature" (p.xvii); and, (c) enormous prestige of science in contemporary culture esteems that which it can explain, and "tends to discredit the immense importance of all passions and feelings in our lives" (p.xix). Additionally, Person (1988) posits,

Too easily, in the name of the good, or the rational, or the moral, or the Christian, or the democratic, or even the merely socially acceptable, we blink away the actualities of our condition -- the feelings, drives, dreams, and desires that express...the depths at which we really live. Not where we think or imagine we should live, or where society advises us to live, but where our lives are fueled and out deepest satisfactions experienced -- this is what we disregard. (p.xiv)

This description reads like a precondition of the human spirit, as fundamental human tendencies to avoid intrapsychic exploration of personal 'truth' in acquiescence (consciously or unconsciously) to a socialized, normative 'truth.' Person's theorizing on these fundamental tenets of humanness may or may not have credence, but Person

eloquently identifies the powerful pull of cultural normativity -- the 'outside'-- to authenticate 'internal' experiences. Polys, however, resist these cultural pulls through rejection of hegemonic ideals for loving and relating, and through commitment to the poly ethics of self-knowledge and honesty. In this way, polys reassert agency both personally and collectively as part of a poly community, and mitigate the power of inimical societal conditions -- the 'outside'-- to inscribe the 'inside' subjectivities of its members.

Theoretical Application to Poly Phenomenon

In this section, Freudian ideas are applied to poly phenomenon to illustrate two main points: (1) past relationships between child/caregiver influence future romantic relationships; and, (2) poly formations involving at least one triadic relationship resemble original Oedipal triangles. Additionally, Person (1988) expands on Freud's concept of Oedipal triangles to include two subtypes of triangles, each different in their psychological motivation: "rivalrous" and "split-object" triangles. 'Rivalrous' triangles are often the kind perpetuated by infidelity, and split-object triangles are more akin to polyamory. Theoretical discussion on triangulation underscores the phenomenon as it applies to triadic poly formations. In doing so, polys appear more moralistic than their counterparts who are engaged in infidelity.

According to Person (1988), individuals are pulled towards triangulation in relationships for a multitude of reasons throughout the cycle of love. Triangles may be invoked as a defensive posture, defending against the intensity of love or "the threat of self-obliteration implicit in a desire to surrender to the beloved" (Person, 1988, p. 195). In other words, a triadic relationship is 'safer' than dyadic intimacy that requires full

exposure of the 'self.' This is akin to Ehrenberg's speculation observed in chapter two that alternative relational formations may, in actuality, be a means of "glossing over psychological conflicts and fears about intimacy" (1975, para. 2).

As mentioned, Person (1988) describes two kinds of relational triangles: 'rivalrous' and 'split-object' triangles, each with a different psychological motivation. "In the rivalrous triangle, the protagonist is competing for the love of the beloved. In the split-object triangle, the protagonist has split his attention between two objects" (Person, 1988, p. 195). Although the subjective valuation of each triangle differs, depending on the psychological needs of the individual, all triangles bear some relationship to the Oedipal complex (Person, 1988).

A 'rivalrous' triangle is most akin to the original Oedipal triangle of early life (mother-father-child), and the major emotions accompanying it are jealousy and sometimes anger. To illustrate this concept as it applies to adult romantic relationships (polyamorous or traditional), a husband-wife-other triangle is used in which the man involved is engaged in an extramarital affair. Dormant feelings of exclusion from the parental dyad and feelings of betrayal in early Oedipal stages are likely triggered for the woman betrayed by her husband's affair, as she is once again excluded from a dyad of significance.

From the husband's perspective, the meaning assigned to this triangle is quite different than that of his wife, and is not emblematic of early Oedipal triangle. For him, the triangle is not 'rivalrous' but a 'split-object' triangle in which he feels split affections between two women. These emotions are not competitive and anger and jealousy are not elicited as they are in a 'rivalrous' triangle; rather, the principle emotion experienced is

guilt. As Person (1988) states, "Sometimes triangulation is a late derivative of the child's propensity to play his parents off against each other; from this perspective, the split-object triangle is a power maneuver" (p.196).

The husband's split-object triangle above may be more akin to what Person (1988) labels as a "reverse" triangle, and has an alternative meaning (p.196). "The reverse triangle is a split-object triangle that has a particular motive behind it. It is invoked as an attempt to undo the humiliation of once having engaged in (and lost) a rivalrous struggle (whether Oedipal or more recent)" (Person, 1988, p.196). The 'reverse' triangle has an unconscious motivation, which seeks to ameliorate lingering resentment from an earlier Oedipal 'rivalrous' triangle experience in which the husband internalized feeling of being the 'loser' in the dyad he sought with his mother. "The reverse triangle actually *reverses* the configuration of the Oedipal triangle: One is no longer in competition with a rival but is the object of a rivalry" (Person, 1988, p. 197). In other words, the motivation of the 'reverse' triangle is an attempt to vindicate the feelings of resentment and loss from the original Oedipal 'rivalrous' triangle.

Unlike the traditional dyadic relationship addressed above, poly relationships can be perceived as a series of 'split-object' triangles. They may also be a kind of reciprocal 'reverse' triangle; that is, all partners in the reverse triangle have similar unconscious motivations and seek similar reparative measures. Split-object triangles in polyamory may also serve to relieve the monotony and ennui of long-term relationships. Split-object triangles may be, in and of themselves, split affection between love objects with no underlying motivation other than sexual and/or loving desires for multiple partners.

Summary

In sum, “Freud demonstrated not only the continuity in the series of love objects, but also the fact that specific unconscious memories and experiences pertaining to the earliest love objects have a decisive role in the adult lover’s experience of love, shaping and sometimes limiting it” (Person, 1988, p. 183). Whether engaged in a polyamorous or traditional relational formation, the ability to sustain a loving relationship, requires the following: (a) a capacity to hold the ambivalence of good and bad object representations; (b) "the ability to achieve union without compromising autonomy" (Person, 1998, p.305); and, (c) the capacity to mitigate tension between feelings of aloneness and union with another. These individuals, as Person observes, are "often those with a strong sense of self” (Person, 1988, p. 305). The ego strength, self-knowledge and adaptability that polys demonstrate in their relationships makes polyamory an ideal relational formation in which they may experience the intimacy and attunement needed for a non-rivalous loving relationship.

CHAPTER 4

ATTACHMENT THEORY

In the preceding chapters, patterns of frequent infidelity and frequent divorce in the United States are postulated as problems with both sociological and psychological explanations. Polyamory as "ethical nonmonogamy" is presented as a viable alternative. Chapters three and four examine the psychological implications of poly phenomenon more extensively through an attachment framework and Freudian concepts. In this chapter, attachment theory is understood as an attempt to explain the human propensity to make intimate emotional bonds with other individuals, and the impact of these bonds on relationships throughout the lifecycle. The first section of the chapter presents a brief history and overview of attachment theory. The second section applies attachment theory to poly phenomenon and focuses on the intimate bonds between adult poly partners and children raised in polyamorous families.

History and Overview of Attachment Theory

According to John Bowlby (1988), attachment theorist and pioneer, the propensity for "affectional bonding" is a basic component of human nature (p.121); human beings have an essential need to form attachments to other human beings. While Bowlby's theoretical position was both informed and influenced by preexisting frameworks, it also broke from traditional clinical theory. Until the mid nineteen fifties, common psychoanalytic theory postulated two kinds of drives, primary and secondary, with food

and sex categorized as primary, and 'dependency' and other personal relationships as secondary (Bowlby, 1979). Accordingly, the ontogeny of attachment behaviors were commonly thought of in terms of reducing primary drives for food in infancy and sex in adulthood: a child bonds with his mother because she feeds him; an adult bonds with another adult for purposes of sex and/or procreation.

Bowlby recognized the limitations of conceiving attachment through this traditional psychoanalytic formulation: "Young become attached to mother-objects despite not being fed...and...by no means all affectional bonding between adults is accompanied by sexual relations; whereas, conversely, sexual relations often occur independently of any persisting affectional bonds" (1979, p.70). As a result of this observation, Bowlby envisioned attachment as neither subordinate to nor derivative of food and sex, but existing in its own right distinct from feeding and sexual behaviors. He viewed the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds as intrinsic parts of human nature, essential for survival, and continuing throughout the lifecycle (Bowlby, 1988).

This is akin to object relations theory, which pivots on the principle that humans are born *object seeking*. "Attachment theory was developed as a variant of object relations theory" (Bowlby, 1988, p.29), and therefore includes several similar overlapping concepts such as like Fairbairn's (1952) concept of mature dependency and Winnicott's (1965) concept of the facilitating environment (as cited in Bowlby, 1979, p.106). Additional parallels between object relations and attachment theories are *introjects* both good and bad, and primary attachment figures: "What in [object relations] theory is termed a 'good object' can be reformulated within [attachment] framework" as a secure and accessible attachment figure (Bowlby, 1979, p.118). "What in [object relations]

theory is termed a 'bad object' can be reformulated" as an insecure attachment figure, inaccessible, and possibly responding hostilely (Bowlby, 1979, p.118). Both theories conceptualized human beings as innately relational beings; however, attachment theory emphasized the quality of attachments on personality development rather than the quality of internalized introjects as in object relations theory.

Additionally, the concept of *object constancy* in object relations parlance is recognizable in Bowlby's description of attachment behavior and the function it serves. Despite differences in rhetoric, both *object constancy* and the goals of attachment behavior describe a child's cognitive capacity to keep their mother/primary caregiver in mind when this figure is not present; the internalized representation is comforting, palliating when the child is frightened, and promotes an overall sense of security. As Bowlby (1988) describes further,

[F]or a person to know that an attachment figure is available and responsive gives him a strong and pervasive feeling of security....To remain within easy access of a familiar individual known to be ready and willing to come to our aid in an emergency is clearly a good insurance policy - whatever our age. (p. 27)

Of key importance in attachment theory, Bowlby postulates that while attachment behaviors are most obvious in early childhood, they are also observable throughout the lifecycle (1988). More traditional models of psychoanalysis focused on the early years of life as the most formative for healthy intrapsychic and psychosexual development. Bowlby (1979) asserted, however, that attachments were crucial for healthy functioning *throughout* the life cycle, not only in the early years. In other words, the availability of a responsive attachment figure - a *secure base* - remains a primary source of security for an

individual throughout the lifecycle and throughout all stages of development (Bowlby, 1979).

Bowlby observed that infants demonstrate early responses of what will later become attachment behavior, but the categorical and organized pattern of attachment develops later, in the in the second half of the infant's first year (1988). These categories of organized attachment originated with Ainsworth and colleagues' research on the attachment and separation patterns of mother-infant interactions in Uganda (1967). As first described by Ainsworth, three principle patterns of attachment are identified: secure, anxious resistant, and anxious avoidant attachment. Paramount to each attachment style is the child's capacity for exploration of their environment. For clarity, each of these attachment patterns, and the family/parent conditions that promote them, are described.

Children demonstrating secure attachment readily explore their environment, which is largely pivotal on the child's trust that the parent will be accessible and lovingly responsive when called upon for protection and/or comfort (Bowlby, 1988). The child has confidence in the parent's ability to comfort and/or mitigate adverse or frightening situations that may arise, and therefore feels bold in exploring the world. These explorations are at first limited in both time and space, but increase appropriately as the individual grows older. Empirically researched in children, adolescents and mature adults (in other words, throughout all stages of development), "a secure home base remains indispensable...for optimal functioning and mental health" (Bowlby, 1988, p.122).

Conversely, both patterns of insecure attachment--anxious resistant and anxious avoidant--are assumed to jeopardize healthy psychosocial development. Anxious

resistant attachment is promoted by inconsistencies in parenting--parents are available and helpful on some occasions but not on others. Because of the parent's unpredictability, the child feels uncertain whether his parent will be available, responsive, or helpful when called upon. Bowlby (1988) posits that it is “[b]ecause of this uncertainty [the child] is always prone to separation anxiety, tends to be clinging, and is anxious about exploring the world” (p.124). Children classified as anxious avoidant may be at the greatest disadvantage for optimal functioning and mental health - they have no confidence in the parent’s responsiveness, attunement, or ability to provide comfort and/or care when it is sought (Bowlby, 1988). Worse, the child expects to be rebuffed by the parent; the parent-child relationship is experienced as punitive and rejecting rather than safe and secure. Bowlby posits children with patterns of anxious avoidant attachment are likely to adjust maladaptively to their environments. The child “attempts to live his life without the love and support of others, he tries to become emotionally self-sufficient and may later be diagnosed as narcissistic or as having a false self of the type described by Winnicott (1960)” (Bowlby, 1988, p.125).

Thus far, description of attachment theory has focused on parent/child attachments, and their impact on child development persisting throughout the lifecycle. Closely paralleling these principle patterns of attachment - secure, avoidant, ambivalent- Mary Main and colleagues (1985) explored adult attachment patterns and classified them similarly: Secure, Dismissive, Preoccupied, Unresolved (as cited in Davies, 2004). These research findings found that their adult research participants demonstrated tremendous diversity in early experiences and relationships with parents. Thus, what distinguished 'secure' adults from their 'insecure' counterparts were not so much their

actual experiences, but rather how well they remembered, understood, and integrated their early experience (Davies, 2004). 'Secure' adults tended to match Ainsworth's findings of securely attached infants in as much as both were "able to openly express a full range of emotions" (Davies, 2004, p.26). In contrast, 'insecure' adults were described as "hard to follow," and "self-contradictory" (as cited in Davies, 2004, p.27). They further demonstrated "defensive idealization of the parent(s) that was not integrated with the specific realities of the relationship (Hesse, 1999)" (as cited in Davies, 2004, p.27).

In sum, attachment theory is a way of conceptualizing the emotional bonds that infants and children form with their primary caregivers. Different types of affectional bonds are promoted by the caregiver's behaviors towards the child, and result in a characteristic pattern of child perceptions and behaviors. The influence of these primary attachment styles persists throughout the lifecycle, influencing people's relationships throughout life. Research has demonstrated that attachment styles identified in early caregiver relationships tend to parallel the behaviors and attachment styles of adults in romantic relationships (Stephan & Bachman, 1999). For example, "Secure lovers show high levels of relationship trust, commitment, acceptance, and relationship longevity; anxious/ambivalent lovers experience more jealousy and preoccupation with their partners than the secure lovers; and avoidant lovers show a fear of intimacy and commitment" (Stephan & Bachman, 1999, p.112).

Theoretical Evaluation of Polyamory

In addition to the tenets of attachment theory discussed this far, the theory also provides a way to conceptualize many forms of emotional distress and "personality disturbance" including: "anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment" (Bowlby,

1979, p.70). Attachment theory made a significant contribution to the field regarding the constituency of mental health in this way. Bowlby (1979) expanded on the Freudian conceptualization of healthiness as the ability to love and work through incorporating the impact of attachments on mental stability. It is because of attachment theory that many forms of psychiatric disturbance can now be attributed either to deviations in the development of attachment behavior or, more rarely, failure of its development (Bowlby, 1979).

Bowlby (1979) explains attachment theory as it relates to personality functioning: [H]ealthy personality functioning at every age reflects, first, an individual's ability to recognize suitable figures willing and able to provide him with a secure base and, second, his ability to collaborate with such figures in mutually rewarding relationships. By contrast, many forms of disturbed personality functioning reflect an individual's impaired ability to recognize suitable and willing figures and/or an impaired ability to collaborate in rewarding relationships with any such figure when found. (p.105)

Some examples of "disturbed personality functioning," which vary in form and degrees of severity, include: "anxious clinging, demands excessive or over-intense for age and situation, aloof and non-committal, and defiant independence" (Bowlby, 1979, p.105).

These descriptors are used to underpin analysis of polyamory as a relational practice that both demonstrates and fosters "healthy" and/or "disturbed" personality functioning. It should also be noted, however, that consideration of personality functioning as "healthy" or "disturbed" is interpretative, and potentially colludes with the

biases and/or subjectivities of the researcher. This is, perhaps, one of the drawbacks of attachment theory, as Bowlby articulates for clarity of exposition.

Although...theory is often best formulated in non-feeling terms, it must be borne constantly in mind that many of the most intense human emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of those relationships in which one partner is providing a secure base for the other, or in which they alternate roles. (1979, p.106)

Theorizing about intimate attachments is in some ways counter to the actual experience of relational intimacy, and is therefore imperfect in its theoretical application. That is, to be intimately attached with another person, at least regarding adult love relationships, is to "surrender" cerebral posturing and open oneself to "the most intense human emotions" (Person, 1988, p.123; Bowlby, 1979, p.106).

Chapter two introduced Person's (1988) three stages of love occurring throughout all stages of development (like attachment patterns throughout the lifecycle): "the choice of idealized love object...the longing to interact with that object in one way or another, and the consequent alteration of self" (Person, 1988, p.70). These stages of love are similar to Bowlby's (1979) description of healthy personality functioning previously mentioned. Both theories emphasize individual agency in one's choice of object, and the ability to engage in mutual relationship with the object once chosen.

Therefore, the ability to choose/recognize appropriate objects is a significant indicator of healthy functioning. Viewing polyamory within an attachment framework, it appears that a "primary relationship" is akin to the "secure base" provided by a significant attachment figure. The choice of primary partner (and the choice of structural poly

formation/arrangement which permits it) can be considered an adaptive stratagem for creating a secure base needed for optimal functioning and overall security.

Recall Bowlby's observation mentioned earlier: "For a person to know that an attachment figure is available and responsive gives him a strong and pervasive feeling of security...whatever our age" (1988, p.27). It is because of the security fostered by a primary relationship that many polys feel able to engage in nonmonogamous practices. As O'Neill and O'Neill (1972) posit, for example, "Where extra-dyadic relationships were entered into it was 'precisely because a [couple's] bond is so deep, secure and so central to their lives that they can afford to open it up and let others in" (as cited in Finn & Malson, 2008, p.520). Similar sentiment is expressed in the following disclosure on the benefits of a primary relationship: "If you've got the strength in your relationship no matter what comes along...you will come back to your principle relationship for your home values, your comfort factors" ("Interview"; as cited in Finn & Malson, 2008, p.524).

Revisiting observations made in Chapter Two, polys demonstrate a diversity of ways to maintain nonmonogamous relationships, but despite the various options, most polys still maintain the desire to feel special to at least one person of significance (Jamieson, n.d., p.54, as cited in Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden, 2004). In attachment parlance, this 'specialness' echoes the desire for a secure attachment figure to maximize individual security, functionality and well being. This is indicated in the relationship acumen articulated by Bowlby:

Evidence is accumulating that human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid

should difficulties arise. The person trusted, also known as the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969), can be considered as providing his (or her) companion with a secure base from which to operate. (Bowlby, 1979, p.103)

Also described in chapter two, many polys engage in polyamory as a rejection of oppressive and hegemonic romantic ideals and/or as affirmation of their "naturally polyamorous" identity. There is consistent suggestion of personal agency in poly practices, both in choosing to engage in a poly lifestyle/identity, and the contour of the poly formation/arrangement selected. These characteristics appear in line with the principles of self-knowledge and mutual engagement in relationships indicative of healthy personality functioning.

In contrast, Ehrenberg (1975) offers an alternative interpretation of poly phenomenon suggestive of "disturbed personality functioning." Polys demonstrate "aloof and non-committal" behaviors through a practice of "many loves," and/or "defiantly independent" behaviors through a rejection of ubiquitous, normative ideals for long-term monogamy in favor of nonnormative, nonmonogamy. Ehrenberg (1975) warns that "simply rejecting traditional marriage....may be a way of glossing over profound psychological conflicts and fears about intimacy" (para. 2). Continuing to point to confliction about intimacy, Ehrenberg (1975) posits, "Even for those...who...blamed their problems on external constraints of such [marital] unions, the experience of the new external freedom will not eliminate an internal inability to feel or to be touched by their involvements with others, sexual or otherwise" (para. 2). If one considers poly phenomenon as demonstrative of psychological confliction, not merely repudiation of sociological factors, then consistent with attachment theory these "fears about intimacy"

are likely traceable to injurious, insecure patterns of attachment in early years of psychosocial development" (Bowlby, 1988).

This reasoning runs the risk of collusion with heteronormative practices that tend to pathologize those outside the margins of traditional, hegemonic culture as "disturbed." However, it is also true that polys maintain a diversity of subjectivities, and while many polys demonstrate healthy personality functioning, Ehrenberg's (1975) posturing may resonate with others in the poly community. Through an attachment theory framework, an individual's "profound psychological conflicts and fears about intimacy" (Ehrenberg, 1975, para. 2) are likely traceable to insecure or injurious patterns of attachment in early years of psychosocial development (Bowlby, 1988).

Childrearing in Polyamorous Families

In a *Time* cover story entitled, *Why Marriage Matters*, Flanagan (2009) describes shifts in sociological factors impacting the institution of marriage and asks, "What's the purpose of marriage?" (p.49)

There probably aren't many people whose idea of a 24-hour-a-day good times consist of being yoked to the same romantic partner, through bouts of stomach flu and depression, financial setbacks and emotional upsets, until after many a long decade, one of the other eventually dies in harness. (Flanagan, 2009, p.49)

Ultimately, in spite of shifting perceptions and sociocultural trends undermining the rectitude of the institution, Flanagan purports a rationale for marriage braced by family values rhetoric and the "betterment of the children" (2009, p.49). Much to the chagrin of many polys and other alternative lifestyles/identities, Flanagan (2009) posits, "Who is left to ensure that these kids grow up into estimable people once the...marital frauds and

casual sadists have jumped ship? The good among us, the ones who are willing to sacrifice the thrill of a love letter for the betterment of their children" (p. 49). In other words, monogamy's core institution is buttressed by the "good among us;" and, conversely, the "bad among us" are all those not included in the marital paradigm - nonnormative practices, relationships with alternative markers for 'specialness' than marital union, same-sex couples legally excluded from the institution of marriage altogether. Because of inimical societal conditions still hostile towards difference, normative heterosexual practices are privileged and those outside of these margins are pathologized as "frauds" and "sadists," incapable of raising "estimable" children outside the marital arrangement.

The wellbeing of children is an evocative topic for most Americans. It appears that mainstream culture exploits the universality of this concern, however, and rhetoric about "the betterment of children" frontlines as justification for other heteronormative agendas. Salient issues that are uncomfortable or less palatable for mainstream culture are more easily displaced into discourses on "the children." In the context of polyamory, for example, focusing on the universality of nonmonogamous tendencies and monogamy's frequent failure hits to 'close to home' for majority culture. Resistance to polyamory is couched in terms of healthiness for children with poly parents, rather than draw further attention to the obvious clash between our nations monogamous creed and Americans nonmonogamous behaviors. It is this idea, perhaps, that is alluded to by Emens (2004): "Since many people never have children and discussions of polyamory typically do not center on children...possible effects on possible children are not

foremost in most people's minds when they react negatively to the idea of polyamory" (p.22).

Because research on poly phenomenon is in its nascent stages and there is scant literature available, arguments about the healthiness of raising children in a poly family are speculative, and can be made either way. For instance, some people express concern that polys may be too engaged with one another to care adequately for the children. On the other hand, "more hearts and hands might contribute positively to the care of children" (Emens, 2004, p. 22). There appears to be concern about whether polyamory could have negative psychological effects on its participants, including children of poly families. Additional concerns about polyamorous relationships are that that they are less stable or structured than monogamous relationships, and would therefore cause harm to any children the participants may have (Emens, 2004). More research is needed on this topic; moreover, it is hard to know the effects of living in a polyamorous relationship and polyamorous family in the context of a culture that frowns upon such relationships.

Attachment theory can offer ways to evaluate childcare practices and stability of poly families for the children involved. As Bowlby (1979) posits, for example, "[A] principle criterion for judging the value of different methods of child care lies in the effect, beneficial or adverse, which they have on a child's developing capacity to regulate his conflict of love and hate, and through this, his capacity to experience in a healthy way his anxiety and guilt" (p.3). In an attachment framework, infants and children may learn to develop these developmental tasks through having attentive and attuned primary caregivers as secure attachment figures. To clarify, the primary caregiver is ideally "attuned to her child's actions and signals...responds to them more less appropriately,

and...is then able to monitor the effects her behavior has on her child and to modify it accordingly" (1988, p.13). Bowlby (1988) acknowledges the impact of sociocultural constraints on parents' parenting styles:

It is clear that in order for a parent to behave [sensitively attuned], adequate time and a relaxed atmosphere are necessary. This is where a parent, especially the mother who usually bears the brunt of parenting during the early months or years, needs all the help she can get - not in looking after her baby, which is her job, but in all the household chores. (p.13)

Because theories are both informed and reflective of the cultural norms from which they come, Bowlby's observation is ensconced in the normative gender expectations of the theory's conception. However, even antiquated on issues related to domesticity and motherhood, the theoretical principles remain applicable. Bowlby (1979) ultimately envisioned changes in sociocultural gender norms that could maximize potential for attuned, secure affectional bonds between mother and child. He recognized the demands and external stressors on women, and noted, "One major influence on a [primary caregiver's] parenting and attachment style is the amount of emotional support, or lack of it, she herself is receiving at the time" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 126). Bowlby puts forth his vision of "evolved" sociocultural traditions within the domestic sphere:

Let us hope that as time goes on our society, still largely organized to suit men and fathers, will adjust itself to the needs of women and mothers, and that social traditions will be evolved which will guide individuals into a wise course of action (1988, p.9).

Polyamory is not the likely "evolution" of parenting and familial support that Bowlby had in mind. However, poly families appear to be demonstrating adaptive characteristics that foster healthy development in children and within themselves. Marny Hall describes a "resource-intensiveness" of poly relationships (as cited in Emens, 2004, p.20), which span sexual, emotional, and financial possibilities of assistance to the primary caregiver. Additional examples of "resource-intensiveness" are as follows: "If someone was short on cash that week, someone else pitched in to cover household expenses. Ditto for emotional support, sexual energy, childcare help, even companionship" (Emens, 2004, p. 20).

Continuing to evaluate poly phenomenon through an attachment framework, Bowlby's conception of the "merits or demerits" of childcare practices is applied to children in poly families.

What matters about the external environment is the extent to which the frustrations and other influences it imposes lead to the development of *intra*-psychic conflict of a form and intensity such that the immature psychic apparatus of the infant and young child cannot satisfactorily regulate it. It is by this criterion that we should assess the merits or demerits of childcare practices. (p.22)

As discussed, children need a secure primary attachment figure, one conceived of by the child as responsive, accessible, and reliable for love and comfort in times of danger or fear. Additionally, parents will recognize that "one of the commonest sources of a child's anger is the frustration of his desire for love and care, and that his anxiety commonly reflects uncertainty whether parents will continue to be available" (Bowlby, 1979, p.136). Secure parents are expected to recognize and respect a child's desire and need for a secure

base, and shape the child's behavior accordingly (Bowlby, 1979). Optimally, the primary caregiver demonstrates sensitivity and attunement to the child's needs, which helps the child mitigate frustrations and fosters the child's burgeoning sense of mastery in their exploration of environments. As the child continues to mature, the affectional bonds with an attachment figure are attenuated, but never broken.

Parents that are attuned to the child's developmental and emotional needs, as well as their attachment style, typically raise children that are secure, trusting, and helpful towards others (Bowlby, 1979). In psychoanalytic parlance, such a person is said to have a strong ego; described as "showing 'basic trust', 'mature dependence', or as having 'introjected a good object'" (Erikson, 1950; Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1948; as cited in Bowlby, 1979, p.136). In terms of attachment theory, the child is described as having "built up a representational model of himself as being both able to help himself and as worthy of being helped should difficulties arise" (Bowlby, 1979, p.136)

Research findings suggest that both "self-reliance and the capacity to rely on others are alike products of a family that provides strong support for its offspring combined with respect for their personal aspirations, their sense of responsibility, and their ability to deal with the world" (Bowlby, 1979, p.109). External stressors and lacking resources likely obscure the sensitivity and attunement needed for optimal parenting from the primary caregiver. A lack of familial support, particularly in the early years of childrearing when the need is most acute, impacts the caregiver's optimal functionality and a secure attachment figure.

In poly families, however, because there are "many hands and many hearts," children do not appear to be lacking in attention or security. Easton and Hardy (2009)

consider poly families as sites of love, communication, and active processing of feelings for all involved. The poly ethic of honesty encourages an honest interrogation of feelings and cultivation of self-knowledge (Emens, 2004; Easton & Hardy, 2009). Children are raised in an environment where expressions of emotions are encouraged. According to Bowlby (1979),

Nothing helps a child more than being able to express hostile and jealous feelings candidly, directly, and spontaneously, and there is no parental task more valuable, I believe, than....show[ing] our children that we are not afraid of hatred and that we are confident that it can be controlled; moreover, we provide for the child the tolerant atmosphere in which self-control can grow. (p.12)

This dovetails into tasks of attachment and healthy psychosocial development where self-reliance and the capacity to rely on others are encouraged within the child. Children in poly families have the benefit of regular mirroring of this development task-- poly parents balancing multiple loves are involved in a regular negotiation of self-reliance and reliance on others when needed.

In conclusion, Easton and Hardy (2009) briefly describe their experiences as poly parents, and address the topics previously discussed and understood through an attachment framework.

We have never had problems creating consistency and security for our children in a sexually interconnected extended family....Our connections tend to form sprawling extended families that have plenty of energy to welcome all children, and the children readily learn their way around the tribe. (p. 101)

Summary

In this chapter, attachment theory was defined and explored in greater breadth as afforded by the research design. Attachment theory was then applied to poly phenomenon and focus was given to the affectional bonds between poly adults and the children of poly families. Recapitulation of attachment's four main functions are as follows: (1) providing a sense of security; (2) regulation of affect and arousal; (3) promoting the expression of feelings and communication; (4) and serving as a base for exploration" (Davies, 2004, p.8). Additionally, the chapter aimed to demonstrate a strong causal relationship between children's experiences with their parents and their later capacity to make affectional bonds. Romantic attachment patterns and behaviors tend to parallel attachment patterns from early childhood. "The base from which an adult operates is likely to be either his family of origin or else a new base which he has created himself. Anyone who has no such base is rootless and intensely lonely" (Bowlby, 1979, p.50). Polyamorous families, and poly relationships with "primary partnerships" have adaptively created the secure base needed for optimal functioning and overall security.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, a brief recapitulation of poly phenomena is offered within the sociocultural and psychological contexts described in the preceding chapters. To further illustrate aspects of poly phenomena within the theoretical frameworks utilized in this study, excerpts from interviews in the poly literature are shared and discussed accordingly. To conclude, the chapter reviews the limitations of this study, significance of poly phenomenon to the field of social work, and recommendations for future research.

Phenomenon in Context

Amidst shifting normative frameworks and changes in social conditions, Giddens (1992) posits, "*Where large areas of a person's life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obligated to negotiate life-style options'*....Personal relationships are the key site in which men and women find 'forms of self exploration and moral construction'" (as cited in Jamieson, 1999, p.478 & p.479). This is a particularly tenuous social climate for moral fortitude and self-construction considering the patterns of frequent infidelity and frequent divorce in our country. However, *polys demonstrate adaptive malleability to societal norms, and created a new framework of 'rules' for intimacy and relatedness.* Polyamory can be viewed as an adaptive solution to these shifting sociocultural conditions, and to monogamy's consistent failures.

Although polyamory challenges hegemonic ideals of long-term dyadic relationships, in actuality, many Americans are already practicing alternatives to long-term dyadic monogamy either secretly (adultery) or serially (divorce and remarriage). "Ultimately, the clash between our nonmonogamous nature and our monogamous traditions must begin to be a legitimate reason to develop new forms of relationships" (Emens, 2004, p. 25). Polyamory, specifically as a practice of "ethical nonmonogamy," bears serious consideration as an alternative relational formation.

Application of Theoretical Frameworks to Poly Phenomena

This section uses excerpts from interviews with various poly individuals as a means of further illustrating attachment theory in Example One with Jeremy, and a split-object triangle, derivative of an Oedipal triangle, in Example Two with Barry, Andrew and Michael.

Excerpt One: Jeremy (Finn & Malson, 2008)

Jeremy is a gay man in an emotionally exclusive but sexually nonmonogamous relationship (Finn & Malson, 2008).

Jeremy: In my schooling and everything, what we're doing is not monogamy, you know? The pure definition of the word it just doesn't fit so I can't really use that word. We have an intimate bond that is not shared with everyone else and no-one else can get into that, that field sort of thing. (p.526)

According to Person (1988), "Aside from the brief moments in infancy and childhood... we hardly ever come first. But love restores that blissful state to us. Being the most important person in someone else's life is one of the defining premises of passionate love" (p.4). This longing for priority is perhaps one of the principle

motivations of having a "primary partner" as it recreates the kind of dyadic importance familiar to us from childhood. According to attachment theory, Jeremy describes how his emotionally exclusive partner provides the security and functionality of a secure attachment figure. Their "intimate bond" is a marker of 'specialness,' setting the dyadic relationship apart from the others. Although the relationship is sexually 'open,' Jeremy's emotionally secure base is, in and of itself, what allows him to explore his multiple sexual relationships.

Excerpt Two: Barry, Andrew and Michael (Finn & Malson, 2008)

Barry and Andrew were engaged in a ten-year emotionally exclusive relationship until seventeen months ago when they mutually agreed to introduce Michael into their primary dyad. Barry reflects on the impact of becoming a triadic poly relationship:

Barry: [W]e've always stated that in the early phase of Michael, if anything happened that would prove that this expansion of the relationship, if you like, wasn't working the fall back position is Andrew and I are not threatened and we would continue. And unfortunately that would mean the dissolving of the third party from that relationship. So the reason we gave permission, if you like, for the three to come together was under the clear understanding that we, I think, inwardly knew that even if a third person came into the relationship that what Andrew and I have, in the emotional sense, was so rock solid and still is rock solid to the core....We were very sure that our relationship would not be put under threat as a result of that growth. (p.527)

Similar to the example of Jeremy, the 'specialness' and priority gained through his primary partnership not only provides security but also a burgeoning sense of

intrapsychic mastery and 'healthy' narcissism for ego development. As discussed in chapter four, it is the sense of security within the primary relationship (Barry/Andrew) that allows for engagement in nonmonogamous practices, like a triad with Michael. Barry describes his primary relationship as a kind of bedrock foundation -- "rock solid" -- and this intimate bondedness affords him the privileged position of allowing permission or rescindment of Michael into his existing dyad with Andrew.

Michael's observations of the intimate bondedness between Barry and Andrew are also included (Finn & Malson, 2008).

Michael: I realized at the beginning that they have something very special.

They've something to me that is indestructible. Ah, if there was a danger of me destroying it by going into it, I would have literally forced myself out of it. Um, but they have something that maybe to a point has played on my insecurities....There is a bond thereBut what they have I don't think anyone can touch. I want to add to it and be up there with it. (p.528)

Michael is both on the 'inside' of this intimate relational space, but he is also on the 'outside' of the primary partnership. His position in the triad is only as secure as the primary partners allow. Additionally, Michael's description bears some Oedipal-like forms. Michael's desire to be "up there" with the primary dyad is suggestive of a hierarchal quality between Barry and Andrew, perhaps akin to old Oedipal longings and experiences of being left out of the primary parental dyad. Within this frame, Barry can be viewed as the Oedipal father, and Michael as the Oedipal child. If Michael establishes primacy in the triad, on equal footing with the dyadic relationship between Barry and

Andrew, then in Oedipal language Michael has achieved a kind of Oedipal victory and possibly assuages his wounded narcissism from residual childhood issues.

Significance For The Field Of Social Work

According to Jamieson, "[T]he monopoly of marriage as *the* way of being in a couple has diminished both in expressions of morality and in how people conduct themselves" (as cited in Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden, 2004, p.35). These shifts in cultural frameworks require those in the helping professions to rethink the socialization and privileging of monogamous couples, the vagaries of love, and the adaptive qualities of alternative relationship formations. Because monogamy is often upheld as a relationship standard in the therapy field, clinical social workers must work towards the negation of tendencies to automatically assume polyamory is demonstrative of psychologically unhealthy, antisocial or maladjusted behavior. Clinical practitioners may benefit from considering polyamory as an adaptive attempt to "cope with the perceived inadequacies of the monogamous marriage lifestyle...and to establish and nurture the needed intimacy in relationships" (Peabody, 1982, p.433).

Weitzman (2006) posits, "Despite the demographic prevalence of polyamory, therapists are under-educated about the lives and needs of polyamorous people. Most graduate psychology textbooks, curricula, and internships do not include mention of it" (p.142). Additionally, 27 percent of polyamorous people who had pursued therapy found that their therapists were not supportive of their lifestyles (Weitzman, 2006). Research findings point to biases from clinical professionals regarding poly people, which impede holistic, ethical treatment of poly clients, and reinforce the importance of self-reflexivity among helping professionals. "Knapp (1975) found that 33% of the

therapists in his sample thought that people in open relationships had personality disorders or neurotic tendencies....Knapp's respondents were more likely to pathologize clients who were in open relationships than clients who had secret extramarital affairs" (as cited in Weitzman, 2006, p. 142). For more ethical practice, clinicians can be cautious of subjectivities informing the work, and refrain from colluding with mainstream norms, many of which oppress the poly population, in their approach to treatment.

Regarding the implications of future social work practice, polyamory has the potential for revealing the constructed nature of identity. As mentioned, more appropriate metaphors for identity and self-construction are needed, rather than perpetuation of a 'core' self that can alienate polys with equally salient parts of identity. It appears that polyamory has the capacity to inform new ways of conceptualizing selfhood, and through encouraging others to explore the different facets of themselves, they too might come to an alternative understanding of self identity.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

A theoretical research design using Freudian Oedipal ideas and key concepts from attachment theory were utilized to analyze poly phenomena. To manage the breadth of the phenomenon, and in consideration of feasibility constraints for this project, the scope of analysis was limited to poly relationships with a "primary partner." The focus on "primary partners" was selected because these relationships closely resemble dyadic relationships postulated in most current psychoanalytic theories, enabling the researcher to use discourses of similarity and difference for the purposes of comparison.

However, it should also be noted that the focus on "primary partners" colluded with heteronormative practices. The Oedipal complex, of which theories on triangulation

were postulated, is based on childhood identification with the same-sex parent. It is unclear whether the same theories are applicable to non-heterosexual children. Further research on Oedipal concepts as applied to nontraditional sexual identities is needed.

Additionally, Oedipal triangles were chosen as a theoretical concept for this study primarily because it is one of the few theories that conceptualizes beyond dyadic relationships. Currently, dyadic relationships remain privileged and naturalized sites for 'healthy' psychosocial development, self-invention, and negotiation of 'self' and 'other.' Therefore, polys are currently excluded from psychoanalytic discourse due to their multiple-partner relationships. Similarly, as previously mentioned, current psychoanalytic theory pivots on the idea of one, coherent and integrated 'self.' However, polys with multiple salient identities (like bisexuality and polyamorous) likely feel confusion over which one of their identities is most prominent in a framework of 'integrated' selfhood. As mentioned in chapter two, further development of theories that conceptualize a 'plurality of selves' or 'multiple selves' is needed instead of continued perpetuation of the idea of one 'healthy' and 'core' self.

As previously mentioned in chapter three, theoretical discourse on love is minimal in the psychoanalytic literature. This is a confounding reality considering "the abundance (possibly overabundance) of work on issues of sexuality -- inhibited, aberrant, or driven" (Person, 1988, p.xxi); and the frequency of love-related discussions in therapeutic dialogues. Many clients come into counseling, for example, with problems related to love: waning passion, fears of intimacy, mourning and depression following a split or divorce, and so forth. Because discussions of love comprise a large portion of the

therapeutic (psychoanalytic) discussion, more research and theoretical discourse on love is warranted in the mental health and counseling professions.

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