POLY-TICALLY INCORRECT: WOMEN NEGOTIATING IDENTITY, STATUS, AND POWER IN POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS

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Poly-tically Incorrect: Women Negotiating Identity, Status, and Power in
Polyamorous Relationships

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the many rule breakers and innovators who have inspired me to be creative, radical, and most of all, hopeful.
Drawing from qualitative interviews with sixteen women, this thesis seeks to obtain insight into the ways that polyamory—the practice of maintaining consensual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously—affects women's lives in a variety of ways. Because existing research on polyamory has predominantly focused on white, middle-aged, and upwardly mobile men and women, this project instead emphasizes the importance of using intersectionality to analyze how race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation impact the specific experiences of polyamorous women. After providing a detailed history of polyamory and its resultant literature, I also utilize these interviews to explore whether or not polyamory can be conceptualized as a queer practice.

The results suggest that both the desirability and accessibility of a polyamorous identity is deeply affected by prescriptive categories of social location. Participants saw polyamory as empowering because it allowed them to maintain sexual autonomy and an identity separate from that of their relationships; for queer participants, it also gave them the ability to satisfy their diverse attractions to other genders and sexes. Despite this, participants rejected the notion of polyamory being queer in and of itself, mainly due to the presence of heterosexual men, though they did see the polyamorous and queer communities as being allied. Collectively, the participants reveal how polyamorous women must navigate complex negotiations of identity as they attempt to assert their romantic and sexual agency within a patriarchal society.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polyamory: Definitions and Developments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Standpoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polyamory vs. Swinging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predecessors to Polyamory: Early Perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Polyamory Relationship Guides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Insights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s Missing: Literature Gaps and Oversights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polyamory and Empirical Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 METHODOLOGY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local In-Person Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer-Mediated Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 RESULTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rewards and Challenges of Polyamory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency and Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding Polyamory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intersectionality and Polyamory .................................................................53
    Gender and Sexual Orientation.................................................................54
    Class ............................................................................................................57
    Race and White Invisibility .................................................................61
    Age ............................................................................................................64
    Polyamory and the Boundaries of Queerness ......................................68
    Research Challenges ..................................................................................72

5 CONCLUSIONS .............................................................................................75

REFERENCES .................................................................................................81
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Throughout the development of contemporary social thought and theory, inquisitive scholars have predominantly concerned themselves with the monumental task of making the unseen visible; one by one, the dominant paradigms that shape our social reality have been typified and deconstructed, their sheaths of invisibility traded in for new statistics and terminology. The hierarchical nature of race, gender, class, and sexuality has been extensively documented, allowing us to understand how these forces almost universally predetermine the choices available to us. Despite our ever-expanding perspectives, however, some institutions have largely escaped examination and insight, and thus their existence as functions of social organization remain unquestioned. The institution of monogamy exemplifies such an oversight; popularly explained as a biological (and thus inevitable) imperative that ensures the survival of the human species, few have thought to question its ascension as the primary structure for romantic, sexual and reproductive relationships.

Oddly, monogamy is habitually overlooked as a social construction despite being consistently and historically undermined by a variety of non-monogamous behaviors. Infidelity, or “cheating,” is perhaps the most obvious example; even as it is condemned as a moral violation in Western society, its representational ubiquity within popular culture suggests that it is a persistent and ever-present foil to the state of monogamy. Consensual non-monogamy\(^1\) receives far less attention in comparison, and it is not difficult to imagine why: it issues a fundamental challenge not only to the perceived naturalness of monogamy, but also acknowledges the possible validity of alternative relationship dynamics. Thus, on those rare occasions when the topic of consensual non-monogamy is addressed by the mass media, it is most often framed as a bizarre anomaly on which the monogamous majority can cast their voyeuristic gaze (Ritchie, 2010).

\(^1\) From this point on, I will be using the general term “non-monogamy” to refer only to non-monogamous practices that are consensual and intentional. Infidelity, which implies a lack of consent, will be not be included in this working definition.
Despite its current cultural invisibility, variants of non-monogamy have been present in the United States for quite some time. Beginning as early as the 1830s, non-monogamy became a contentious topic when polygamy\(^2\) was established as a doctrine of Mormonism. Although historical evidence suggests that only a small number of Mormons ever practiced polygyny, the continuous public outcry over this practice eventually led to the 1844 assassination of Joseph Smith, the founder and prophet of the Mormon religion, and later to the Congressional passing of the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act in 1862, which outlawed polygamy in all U.S. territories (Foster, 1991; Zeitzen, 2008). Under the threat of having the Church’s assets seized by the federal government, Mormon leaders issued “the Manifesto” in 1890, a document which formally rejected plural marriage as a tenet of the Mormon faith. Those who objected to this retraction soon disassociated themselves from the Church, splintering into small, isolated fundamentalist groups that relocated throughout the southwestern United States and Mexico (Zeitzen, 2008). These fundamentalist groups still exist today, and in spite of the Church’s attempts to distance themselves from polygyny, Mormonism and plural marriage are still closely linked in the popular imagination.

Non-monogamy also existed in other forms during the nineteenth century; most notably, the utopian Oneida Community, founded in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes, practiced a system called “complex marriage” (Foster, 1991; Noyes, 2001). Settling first in Putney, Vermont, and later in Oneida, New York, Noyes and his followers were similar to the Mormons in that their complex marriage system was embedded within a distinctly religious context; Noyes, after experiencing a religious epiphany in 1834, developed a theology centered around the notion of perfectionism, in which it was possible to be free from sin and therefore “perfect” in God’s eyes. As the core principle of his communities, perfectionism enabled Noyes to pursue several progressive social arrangements, including more egalitarian gender relations and communal living. Oneida’s complex marriage system

\(^2\) Although polygamy is often used as a catch-all term for marriages involving more than two partners, it can be broken down into three main types: polygyny, the practice of one man being married to multiple women; polyandry, the practice of one woman being married to multiple men; and group marriage, the practice of multiple men being married to multiple women (Zeitzen, 2008). From this point forward, I will be specifying the appropriate subcategory of polygamy, rather than relying on it as an umbrella term. However, it is also important to acknowledge the limits of such terminological distinctions, as: (1) there is no universal, agreed upon definition of marriage, particularly when examining it within a global context; (2) same-sex marriages are obscured by the heteronormativity of existing definitions; and (3) as non-binary sex and gender identities emerge, gender-based definitions of relationships become so inaccurate as to be useless.
essentially functioned as a group marriage, one that demanded “the subordination of individual self-interest to the interests of the community . . . . even individual sexual loyalties had to be given up, raised instead to the level of community” (Foster, 1991, p. 85). Relationships that resembled either romantic monogamy or nuclear family formations were actively discouraged by community members, who saw such behavior as disruptive to the overall harmony of the group (Foster, 1991). Considering its radical nature, the experimental group marriage of the Oneida Community was a resounding success, lasting from 1848 to 1879, after which it was dissolved as a practice due to increasing objection both within and outside of the community (Foster, 1991).

In many ways, the Oneida Community can be seen as a predecessor to the countercultural hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Though they occurred over a century apart, both were ideologically opposed to the individualism that has historically characterized the U.S.; economically and socially, both the hippies and Oneida Community members saw possessiveness as spiritually and socially counterproductive, instead ascribing to a notion that would become known as “free love.” Unlike Oneida, however, the free love and sexual liberation movements perpetuated by hippie culture did not originate from within a Christian or even a religious paradigm; if anything, hippie youth rejected the restrictive parameters of Western religion, often opting to combine elements from multiple Eastern and earth-based spiritualities in order to form their own eclectic belief systems (Miller, 2010; Wuthnow & Glock, 1973; “Youth: The Hippies,” 1967).

Despite their contextual differences, the hippie movement and the Oneida Community both approached non-monogamy as a way to subvert what they felt was the possessive nature of monogamy, and replace it instead with a higher valuation of meso-level interactions. Their prioritization of community-wide cooperation and connection may be interpreted as a response to the larger cultural upheavals each were immersed in during their respective periods of formation3; both were actively trying to construct more harmonious ways of living while surrounded by increasingly tumultuous politics. The social unrest that

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3 Notably, both populations evolved during periods of intense and changing racial discourse. The Oneida Community was formed during the abolitionist movement and survived the American Civil War before disbanding in 1880; similarly, the hippie subculture gained momentum as the civil rights movement was challenging segregation and racism. Such overlaps are ripe for potential explorations of how social unrest and a willingness to engage in non-monogamy may be connected.
characterized the 1960s seemed to invite people to interrogate societal norms on a far more massive scale than Noyes and his followers, however, perhaps because the concurrent struggles for women’s, minorities’, and gay and lesbian rights encouraged such critiques throughout the decade. This atmosphere of cultural revolution and innovation led many rebellious youth to question the validity of the institution of monogamy, though they were also undoubtedly influenced by changing sexual mores and increasing reproductive control in the form of the birth control pill.

In this case, however, the resurgence (or at least, rediscovery) of non-monogamous behavior did not have the same focused origins of either Mormonism or the Oneida Community. Instead, the rethinking of monogamy was dispersed across the country, manifesting in a much wider variety of arrangements. In addition to group marriage, there were now also “open” relationships and marriages. This development can largely be attributed to the adoption of new dating customs in the early 20th century, which normalized longer courtships before marriage and legitimated long-term relationships between unmarried people (Bailey, 2004). These new monogamy practices inadvertently created new ways for non-monogamous behavior to take place outside of a marital context. More importantly, the development of open relationships signifies a subtle but crucial shift for non-monogamists in the U.S. Previously, non-monogamy had been practiced and regulated only within closed religious groups; in its naming as a distinct practice, open relationships literally “opened” up the possibility of non-monogamy for everyone, religiously affiliated or not.

It comes as little surprise, then, that many people outside of the hippie subculture were also beginning to participate in non-monogamy. During this period of time, groups of radical lesbian-feminists began similar experiments with communal living and non-monogamous relationships. Motivated by their desire to create women-only utopias where they would be free from the confines of patriarchy, these lesbian-feminists saw monogamy as preventing women’s broader relationships with each other and their communities, as well as promoting capitalist ideals of possession, control, and power, especially over women

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4 Group marriages consist of three or more people who are usually all romantically and sexually involved with one another. Group marriages can be “open” (where some or all partners can form relationships outside of the group) or “closed” (where all partners are only involved with other group members). Likewise, open relationships and open marriages also allow at least one partner to have sexual and/or romantic relationships with others. The characteristics of and distinctions between these types of arrangements will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.
Those who were not at ease with changing [their relationships to be non-monogamous] became convinced that it was their own ‘hang-up,’ which they had to get over. As one woman confessed in the 1970s, ‘It’s hard for me to think of Sheila relating to other people, but that’s a distress born of my insecurities that I can counsel on to get rid of, and I do.’ Another woman now wrily [sic] remembers the pressure she felt to be nonmonogamous [sic] because monogamy was ‘part of the male power structure we didn’t want to buy into.’ (234)

Though non-monogamy was often referred to as “free love,” suggesting a sort of playful and carefree approach to love and relationships, the above quote demonstrates the utter seriousness in which such practices were undertaken. We can also see how the hierarchical valuing of monogamy over non-monogamy was at least temporarily reversed in some communities, with non-monogamy being viewed as the more egalitarian and socially acceptable option available to progressive lesbian-feminists at the time.

The acceptability of non-monogamy was not unique to lesbian-feminist circles, however. Gay men’s culture was also notable for its permissive attitude toward non-monogamous behavior, which may be a reflection of the frequency of casual sex within the community (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Klesse, 2007b; Sánchez, Bocklandt, & Vilain, 2009; Schmitt, 2006). It is difficult to specify how or even when such attitudes arose, however, due to pervasive stereotypes that have depicted gay men as irresponsibly and compulsively promiscuous. These stereotypes, which largely resulted from the Victorian tendency to associate hyper-sexuality with the lower classes, people of color, and sexual “deviants,” interfere with our ability to separate actual practices from historical hyperboles (Klesse, 2007b). Nonetheless, we can empirically conclude that variations of non-monogamy have been consistently present in gay male culture through at least the past fifty years (Bettinger, 2005; Bonello & Cross, 2010; Klesse, 2007a; LaSala, 2004; Shernoff, 2006).

The sexual revolution did not only affect politically aware youth, however; concurrently, a practice known as “swinging” (sometimes more salaciously referred to as “wife swapping”) also seemed to be taking hold in a number of suburban households. Rumored to have begun between military couples in the 1950s, the term “swinging” came to include a wide variety of sexual practices explored within the context of committed, heterosexual relationships, predominantly within married populations (Denfield & Gordon,
1974; Fang, 1976; Gould, 1999; Walshok, 1971). Unlike group and open marriages, which were seen as subcultural challenges that posed little threat to hegemonic monogamy, the suburban setting of swinging and its “swap clubs” indicated how even the most traditional of social customs were being transformed by changing sexual mores.

Such radical changes to traditional relationship formations did not go unnoticed by either the media or academia. Beginning in the mid-1960s, there was a flurry of popular interest and professional research in the topic of non-monogamy. Articles on free love and nonconventional marriage appeared in newspapers and magazines as well as scholarly journals, and books published on the subject ranged from relationship guides for “opening up” one’s relationship, to lengthy sociological anthologies.

Despite this quick rise to notoriety, by the end of the 1970s, the U.S.’s fascination with experimental relationships had dwindled to almost non-existence. The initial sensationalism of non-monogamy had lost its significance in the wake of the sexual revolution, and the spirit of protest and resistance that characterized the youth movements had seemed to burn itself out. Stories of group marriages and communes dropped from the headlines, and by 1974, Time magazine had declared that the sexual frivolity of the previous decade was over (“The Sexes,” 1974). Despite its revolutionary beginnings, non-monogamy seemed to be a temporary phenomenon, soon to become a mere relic of mid-century rebellion.

In spite of the waning attentions of popular culture, non-monogamous communities did persist; however, they didn’t remain static. The next section of this chapter will attempt to document the gradual evolution of non-religious, non-monogamies into what has become an increasingly recognizable movement of people who reject the seeming inevitability of monogamy under a new term: polyamory.

**POLYAMORY: DEFINITIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS**

In the early 1990s, many of the non-monogamy practices of the previous decades began to be subsumed under a new umbrella term “polyamory.” Said to be derived from the Greek translation for “many loves,” polyamory encompassed many variations of non-

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5 Though it popularly quoted as being Greek, the etymology of the word reveals that it is actually an amalgamation of the Greek prefix “poly-,” meaning many, and the Latin word “amor,” meaning love.
monogamy, while also providing a new position from which to frame their arguments for multiple sexual and romantic relationships. Rather than present non-monogamy as a form of resistance to the reigning social paradigm of monogamy, individuals who identified as polyamorous emphasized a desire (and sometimes, even an inherent compulsion) to seek as much love in their lives as was personally manageable and healthy. Unlike swinging, which was primarily about couples seeking extra-marital pleasure within the context of their romantically monogamous relationship, polyamorists championed an individual’s infinite capacity for love, as well as how this infinite capacity meant that one did not have to choose between love interests.

Polyamory is an interesting phenomenon in that it is its own distinct movement, yet has roots in myriad other subcultures; the result is a somewhat messy chronology of development that was not just influenced by the rising non-monogamies of the sixties and seventies, but by a jumble of other sources as well. Perhaps the earliest influence the polyamory community claims is from a 1961 science fiction book by Robert A. Heinlein, entitled *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The novel’s plot mainly revolves around a human man, named Valentine Michael Smith, who was raised by Martians after his astronaut parents crashed on an expedition to Mars. He eventually returns to Earth to enlighten its citizens by establishing the “Church of All Worlds” and teaching them superior, Martian methods of living peacefully (Heinlein, 1961). One such Martian tradition was a form of non-monogamy that resembles what we would now label as polyamory (Heinlein, 1961). Heinlein’s novel became widely popular, and not only for the relatively shocking progressive politics it seemed to espouse; many people were profoundly inspired by the utopian-like ways of existing demonstrated by the Martians, and in 1968, Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (née Tim Zell) founded a real-life version of the Church of All Worlds (Aviram, 2010). Incorporating many neopagan practices, the Church of All Worlds (CAW) also condoned the practice of polyamory, though it was referred to simply as open or multi-partnered relationships at the time (Anapol, 2010; Aviram, 2010; Taormino, 2008).

During roughly the same period, a separate religious tradition was being formed just outside of San Francisco. Founded by John “Brother Jud” Presmont and his two female lovers in 1971, the Kerista Commune was yet another utopian community that blended neopaganism and socialism in order to pursue a better, more egalitarian way of life. Often
compared to the Oneida Community of the previous century, Kerista is estimated to have involved about thirty core members throughout its lifespan, before its closure in 1992 (Anapol, 2010; Brumann, 2000; Sill, 1990). Unlike many other communes of that era, Kerista experienced an unusual degree of financial stability by establishing several profitable businesses, one of which (Abacus, Inc.) went on to become one of the first successful Macintosh computer vendors in northern California (Sill, 1990).

Throughout the 21 years it functioned, Keristans lived in a large group marriage composed of three smaller “best friend identity clusters” (Anapol, 2010; Ellis, 1974). While members were free to form romantic and sexual relationships with anyone in Kerista, their closed marriage prevented anyone from straying outside of the group. Even after its closure, many members still maintained versions of their group marriage clusters (Anapol, 2010).

Beyond simply demonstrating the potential of non-monogamous relationships, as many others were doing at the time, Kerista would make two major additional contributions to the future development of polyamory. Until this period, those in non-monogamous relationships were significantly limited by a lack of terminology that properly depicted the complex relationships and emotions involved in their lifestyle. Keristans invented two words that would not only outlive their own community, but address the great need for linguistic development in non-monogamous culture. The first of these, “polyfidelity,” was used as a self-description for the specific kind of closed group marriage that functioned within Kerista, though its definition was equally applicable to group relationships outside of the commune (Anapol, 2010; Taormino, 2008). The second word, “compersion,” was created to describe one’s positive feelings about a partner’s happiness with another lover; in other words, its usage functions as an antithesis to the negative feelings of jealousy that may appear to be inevitable for most non-monogamous relationships undertaken in a compulsory monogamous culture (Anapol, 2010; Taormino, 2008).

After the sexual and social revolutions that fueled the sixties had largely died out, many assumed that the non-monogamous ways of life set forth by communes and radical youth would likewise fade away. When examining this situation from the perspective of the popular media, this would seem to be true; however, those individuals drawn to non-monogamous ways of life were not about to let their fledgling subcultures end as a historical footnote. Instead, non-monogamist communities persisted in much the same fashion as they
came into being: through smaller, localized networks of people trying to find accepting others with similar views on the limitations of monogamy. As communes dissipated and important sites of subcultural congregation (like the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco) emptied out, these non-monogamous communities increasingly began to rely on long-distance communication networks and the exhaustive efforts of a few intrepid leaders. Most prominently, Ryam Nearing founded the newsletter *Loving More* in 1984, which quickly became the primary means for those involved in open and group relationships to connect with the like-minded across vast distances, while also enabling a continuous dialogue amongst this burgeoning community (Anapol, 2010; Taormino, 2008). Nearing was also responsible for developing a small company called Polyfidelitous Educational Productions (PEP), which was mainly responsible for organizing several conferences for non-monogamous couples throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Eventually, Ryam Nearing was joined by Deborah Anapol, and together they developed the newsletter into *Loving More* magazine, which survives in an online format today. Continuing to run the magazine and organize bicoastal conferences, both women cemented themselves as community luminaries when they separately published two of the first and most influential contemporary books on non-monogamy, *Loving More: The Polyfidelity Primer* (Nearing, 1992), and *Love Without Limits: The Quest for Sustainable Relationships* (Anapol, 1992).

Despite these steps towards community organization, it was not until the early nineties that this particular generation of non-monogamists finally found a name that accurately reflected their general ethos and diversity of practices. In 1990, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart (wife of Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, previously mentioned as the founder of CAW) first used the term “poly-amorous” in an article about multi-partner relationships published in *Green Egg*, a CAW periodical (Anapol, 2010; Aviram, 2010; Masterson, 2010; Taormino, 2008). Two years later, Jennifer Wesp created alt.polyamory, a Usenet newsgroup that quickly became a central site of online discussions about non-monogamy (Masterson, 2010).

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6 There are several conflicting dates regarding when this transition occurred. According to Anapol herself, it was in 1995 (Anapol, 2010); according to polyamory activist and sex educator Tristan Taormino, it was in 1991 (Taormino, 2008); and finally, the website for *Loving More* magazine gives the date of 1994 (Loving More Organization, n.d.). Despite this confusion, the first issue of *Loving More* magazine was published in Winter 1995 (Masterson, 2010).
The terms “polyamorous” and “polyamory” were quickly adopted by the community thereafter.

Although the word “polyamory” broadly encompasses the practice of having multiple, consensual relationships, there is such a great deal of variety among polyamorists that additional, clarifying terminology remains necessary. A majority of these terms refer to specific relationship formations; for example, polyamorists will often refer to having “primary” or “secondary” partners. Primary partners tend to be the person’s longest-running relationship, and usually one that involves co-habitation; secondary partners frequently live apart from the person, and are likely to be the most recent relationship embarked upon. However, these terms are also somewhat problematic for polyamorists, in that they not only suggest a chronology of relationship development (which may or may not be accurate), but also a hierarchy based on a partner’s importance or value. For polyamorists who seek more egalitarian ways of relating to multiple partners, this suggestion becomes a critical flaw that renders these terms irrelevant or simply inappropriate.

The frequency of bisexuality within polyamorous communities (particularly for women) also necessitates more detailed and creative descriptions for relationship configurations (Sheff, 2005). Triads, or groups of three people who may all be romantically or sexually involved with one another, must be distinguished from “V”s, in which one person has two separate partners who are not involved with one another. Likewise, polyfidelous “squares” (relationships involving four individuals) or “W”s (relationships involving five individuals) with both male and female partners may imply group members’ emotional commitment to one another, but may not necessarily indicate any same-sex sexual activity.

As a result of these wide-ranging practices, polyamory is still a culture and lifestyle very much under development. For practitioners, this means employing innovative strategies for relating and naming that consistently challenge mononormative society. For researchers like myself, this means an incomparable opportunity to investigate the diverse sexual and romantic practices that indicate a significant, long-term resistance to hegemonic monogamy.

**STUDY BACKGROUND**

I have taken care to develop a cursory history of non-monogamy and polyamory in the United States in order to contextualize these behaviors as existing within a wider nexus of
power and politics. Though polyamorists themselves often represent their lifestyle simply as a matter of choice or self-determination (in the tradition of neoliberal individualism), we can see by its own stuttered chronology that it has in fact evolved in direct relation to larger institutions of religion, politics, and the media. That women are systematically (and systemically) subordinated within these institutions suggests that their experiences of polyamory may be markedly different than men’s, due to both their inferior status in society and the always controversial issue of women’s autonomous sexuality.

The main goal of this project was to investigate the potential positionality of polyamory in relation to contemporary and dynamic understandings of queerness. However, this is hardly a straightforward task; given the purposeful evasiveness of the very definition of “queer” and “queerness,” it seems irresponsible to rely on abstract theory alone to understand whether polyamory is a practice (or internal orientation) that should be further considered for inclusion under this loose category of “queer,” either when we use it as an umbrella term for non-normative sexualities, or as an identifier of the radical subversion and even erosion of heteronormativity. To be clear, this project does not offer a definitive answer to this question, if indeed it were possible to answer it at all; in fact, this project might be better described as setting the abstractions of these lines of thought aside, in order to pragmatically inquire as to whether polyamorous individuals would locate themselves in these queer kinds of margins, and under what conditions they might do so.

As a complement to this larger question, I also strove to develop an analysis of polyamory that could better place it in relation to other complex, concurrent identities. To achieve this, I specifically asked my respondents to consider how forces like race, class, and gender may have affected their experiences with polyamorous relationships and communities. By emphasizing these other significant elements of identity, I hope to use intersectional theory (Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 2004; Lorde, 2003; Sandoval, 2000) to examine how polyamory—like all phenomena—is located within broader, interconnected axes of privilege and oppression, as well as how these power structures play out in terms of individual experiences. Because my sample deviated from the “typical” demographic of polyamorous women in terms of age, gender identity, and sexual orientation, the interviews explored here offer new insight into the ways that polyamory is perceived, performed, embraced, and challenged by those who claim it as a new way of relating to others.
In the chapters that follow, I will explore how women’s social locations and intersectional identities have affected their experiences with polyamory, as well as how their polyamorous identities have impacted other aspects of their lives. By analyzing a series of structured qualitative interviews conducted with sixteen women between the ages of 18 and 35 over e-mail, I hope to gain insight on the gendered aspects of polyamorous lifestyles, as well as the potential theoretical implications of polyamory in relation to queer identities. Chapter 2 will offer an in-depth exploration of the existing literature that addresses non-monogamy and polyamory, and spotlight the unavoidable oversights that occur when attempting to illuminate a recent and under-researched topic like polyamory. Chapter 3 will present the feminist methodologies I have utilized throughout the interviewing process, in addition to describing my own positionality and both the benefits and limitations of my approach. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to explicating the major resulting themes that arose within my interviews, as well as what the theoretical and sociological implications of those themes are. My closing chapter will determine potential areas for future research, as well as offering a summary of my overall findings.

**RESEARCHER STANDPOINT**

A feminist research methodology rightly requires the researcher to acknowledge his or her own standpoint in relation to their research, in order to better identify potential biases or “blind spots,” as well as to note any epistemological privilege that might exist (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2003). To that end, I would like to share my own relevant information. I identify as a white, queer female from a working class background.

My interest in polyamory first began several years ago when I read about the experimentation with non-monogamy that took place in 1970s lesbian communities, as quoted from Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991) in my introductory chapter. Intrigued, the revelation of this information sent me straight to a series of Internet searches, one of which must have yielded the specific term “polyamory,” which in turn led to me curiously and periodically combing through polyamory-related message boards for quite some time. While I have never identified as polyamorous or been in a polyamorous relationship, I have

7 Although I had originally planned to conduct both in-person and e-mail interviews, for reasons I will describe in Chapter 3, all of the data are derived from e-mail interviews.
relationship myself, I am drawn to its potential for disrupting heteronormative narratives and queering relationship structures. For now, I consider myself an ally to poly people, while also remaining open to the possibility of polyamory at a later point in my life (as a graduate student, I rarely have time for multiple meals, let alone multiple relationships). However, there are also aspects of polyamory that I remain somewhat critical of; for example, I dislike the sex-negative attitudes of some polyamorists who privilege love and long-term commitment over other types of relationships. As an outsider to these practices, I attempt to exercise a fair and open-minded perspective, while also prioritizing the epistemic insights offered to me by my participants.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

While conducting and analyzing my data, I used a series of research questions both to develop my interview questionnaire, and to direct my focus throughout the writing process. I cannot guarantee that my project will also be able to provide definitive answers to these questions, however, I do believe that significant process was made to that end.

1. How does polyamorous identity relate to and affect other sexual identities?
2. How do women view their polyamorous relationships in relation to queerness? Do they consider themselves queer because of their polyamory? Why or why not?
3. Does women’s participation in polyamory constitute a politicized identity? How, and why?
4. What unique challenges do women face by being polyamorous in conjunction with their other identities and social locations? Is it easier or harder to be polyamorous in certain communities, and why?
5. How do polyamorous women characterize the polyamorous community? Have their experiences within it been largely positive, or negative?
6. What observations have women made about the range of acceptable masculinities and femininities within the polyamory community? Does being polyamorous allow for greater gender expression and experimentation?
7. How and when do polyamorous women feel empowered/disempowered in their non-monogamous relationships? Why?
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As non-normative sexualities have become an increasingly acceptable topic for public discussion, both in the mainstream media and in academia, a great deal of research has been produced on a wide range of issues in a relatively brief amount of time. Though research on sexual behavior has a long history that can be traced back to the sexologists of the nineteenth century, the development of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and queer studies over the last 30 years has been primarily responsible for the documentation of specific sexual practices, practitioners, and the communities they create. Undoubtedly, this earnest wave of intellectual inquiry has yielded an impressive number of insights on sexuality, but in comparison to many other sexual subcultures, research on polyamory remains in its infancy.

While I will later explore the potential reasons why polyamory has not garnered more attention within the social sciences, it would be misleading to suggest that there is a total absence of literature on the topic. Though empirical studies have only begun to surface in roughly the past six years, polyamorist activists, speakers, and community organizers have been writing about polyamory since the term was first adopted. Prior to that, numerous sociologists, anthropologists, and proponents of open relationships wrote articles and book throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In order to best explore the wide range of perspectives that are represented in these relatively few sources, I will dedicate the remainder of this chapter to examining the existing bodies of knowledge on polyamory, and to a lesser extent, non-monogamies in general. The majority of this literature tends to fall within three relevant thematic categories, each of which I will define and discuss in depth: (1) early 1970s academic research on non-monogamy; (2) contemporary polyamory relationship guides; and (3) recent academic books and articles that seek to define and analyze polyamorists and the culture they are creating.
POLYAMORY VS. SWINGING

Before going into more detail about these sources, though, it is important to point out that a great many of the materials available on non-monogamy focus solely on the practice of swinging. Swinging, though certainly encompassed beneath the umbrella of consensual non-monogamy, differs considerably from polyamory, in that it is undertaken primarily by heterosexual married and/or committed couples who seek out extra-dyadic sex together, always with the intent of remaining in their otherwise monogamous relationship (Bartell, 1970; Breedlove & Breedlove, 1964; Denfield & Gordon, 1974; Fang, 1976; Gould, 1999; Walshok, 1971). The polyamorist writings that will be examined in this chapter are quick to distinguish this from their own practices, which they see as being more oriented toward both emotional and sexual relationships with multiple partners (Klesse, 2006; Noël, 2006; Sheff 2005, 2006; Wilkinson, 2010).

Though there are obviously overlaps and similarities between these two groups, I have chosen to respect the self-definitions cited by many members of the polyamorous community, and will consider swingers and polyamorists as two related but ideologically separate populations. Thus, essays, articles, and books that emphasize swingers and swinging practices have largely been excluded from this literature review, in favor of exploring perspectives on those open and group relationship models that would eventually be adopted as part of the nascent concept of polyamory.

PREDECESSORS TO POLYAMORY: EARLY PERSPECTIVES

As Chapter 1 demonstrated, public fascination with non-monogamy did not begin with polyamory, but instead originated from the multiple cultural revolutions that were taking place throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The work produced during this period attempted to explain what open relationships were like and how they functioned, as well as what such changing behavior might mean for society. Generally, sources from this era tended to rely on academic methodologies to guide their research and data collection, but the presentation of these findings varied. While some were strictly academic in their tone and approach, and assumed a professional audience, others discussed their findings in a more accessible format that incorporated the styles and structures of self-help books and relationship guides.
Early sociological scholarship mainly sought to theorize and provide empirical data about the ongoing wave of non-monogamous behavior throughout the United States. While a few of these early publications were concerned with establishing definitional parameters for the variations of non-monogamy, and then contrasting these variations against one another (Ellis, 1974; Knapp, 1975; Ramey, 1972), it was not long before several researchers arose as the authorities for each of these varieties. For examples, the O’Neills focused their research on open marriages and relationships (O’Neill & O’Neill, 1970, 1972a, 1972b, 1974); the Smiths predominantly looked at the co-marital sex\(^8\) taking place within swinging and sexual freedom communities (Smith & Smith, 1974a); and the Constantines researched what they termed “multilateral marriage,” or group marriages (Constantine & Constantine, 1973, 1974). In 1974, James R. and Lynn G. Smith edited an anthology that compiled these and many other authors together, entitled *Beyond Monogamy: Recent Studies of Sexual Alternatives in Marriage*. While many of the essays contained within the book focused largely on swinging, and thus fall outside of the scope of this review, this volume represented the first major collection of studies on contemporary non-monogamy practices.

The O’Neills conducted their research on non-monogamy from 1967 to 1971, interviewing approximately 400 middle-class individuals who were in “experimental” marriages in urban or suburban settings (O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972b). Within these open-ended interviews, the O’Neills were able to identify several problems that characterized many early non-monogamous marriage experiments. They noted that in many couples, both partners yearned for more opportunities to pursue individual development and growth, while still wishing to benefit from the emotional intimacy and support of stable relationships. Although these couples turned to non-monogamy as a way of fulfilling both of these needs, the O’Neills pointed out that “with the breakdown of many external supports for traditional marriage, the pressures on the interpersonal husband-and-wife relationship became intensified” (1972b, p. 404). Furthermore, the O’Neills observed that many couples in open relationships were still relying on monogamous social scripts that inhibited non-critical

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\(^8\) Psychologist Jacquelyn J. Knapp defines co-marital sex as “any type of extra-marital sex in which knowledge of outside relationships is shared with the spouse; co-marital sexual behavior can be found in several marriage styles, including swinging, group marriage, and sexually open marriage” (1975, p. 505).
communication skills, and reduced their ability to work through jealousies, skills that were considered essential to sustainable non-monogamy (1972b).

Unfortunately for scholars, in lieu of producing a comprehensive anthropological text based on these interviews, the O’Neills instead used their data to develop an informational model of open marriage that was directed at instructing couples. While their resulting book, *Open Marriage* (O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972a), fails to provide more information about their data or its emergent themes, it does lay out a detailed critique of traditional marriage, as well as solutions for retraining oneself to rely on methods of communication and interaction that are better suited for open relationship styles. They developed a set of eight guidelines for happy open marriages (which in many ways foreshadow the themes of future polyamory relationship guides):

1. living for “now” and maintaining realistic expectations about your relationships and partners;
2. allowing each partner privacy, as well as solitude if necessary;
3. maintaining open and honest communication;
4. developing flexibility with traditional husband/wife roles;
5. allowing each partner to pursue companionship with others;
6. maintaining equality in stature within the marriage relationship;
7. encouraging each partner to develop an identity that is independent from their roles of husband/father or wife/mother; and finally,
8. developing trust through honest communication.

These guidelines are the major organizational force of the book, with three chapters being dedicated to communication alone, and two chapters dedicated solely to role flexibility (O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972a).

Larry and Joan Constantine conducted similar long-term research on group marriages starting in 1969, a project they titled the Multilateral Relations Study Project. Over a three-year period, the Constantines crossed the country several times and used a variety of surveys, questionnaires, and open-ended interviews to find out more about these unique families (Constantine & Constantine, 1974). Given that much of their methodology was informal and constantly evolving, their 1973 book *Group Marriage: A Study of Contemporary Multilateral Marriage* offers a remarkably comprehensive look at many aspects of group marriages, including the raising of children (and children’s attitudes toward their parents’ relationships),
the management of household finances, attitudes toward sexuality and politics, marital satisfaction, relationship dissolution, jealousy management, and marital conflicts/resolutions.

While their data can be difficult to summarize quantitatively, since the number of participating groups and individuals fluctuates widely between research instruments, the Constantines found that the majority of their participants had entered into group marriages as couples (most had been previously, legally married) who were already highly committed to the idea of multi-partner marriage (Constantine & Constantine, 1974). Although these multilateral marriages typically lasted an average of only 19 months, many seemed to benefit from the lifestyle advantages of having multiple incomes, sharing household/childcare duties, and having multiple sexual partners. Though the Constantines were able to identify many motivations for seeking out a group marriage, the factors most frequently acknowledged by respondents were love, companionship, and the opportunity for personal growth (Constantine & Constantine, 1973, 1974). Both the men and women surveyed indicated that they held highly progressive attitudes toward gender equality, women’s sexuality, and even homosexuality (Constantine & Constantine, 1974).

Further analysis of these and other early studies reveals that the vast majority of those involved in non-monogamous lifestyles were white, middle- to upper-class, non-religious, college-educated, professional and semiprofessional men and women in their 20s and 30s (Bartell, 1970; Constantine & Constantine, 1973, 1974; Knapp, 1976; Ramey, 1974; Smith & Smith, 1974a). While their demographic data may have been similar across the board, researchers found disparate reasons for people’s participation, depending on what type of non-monogamy was being reviewed. In general, the motivations of the non-monogamous could be said to fall within two categories: the recreational and the utopian (Smith & Smith, 1974b, 1974a). Though both groups engaged in extradyadic sexual activity, the recreationally non-monogamous sought to preserve the emotional distances between themselves and others, often favoring anonymous sex or “no strings attached” encounters; in contrast, the utopian non-monogamous individual sought meaningful interpersonal connections, often with the goal of cohabitation and more communal forms of living (Smith & Smith, 1974a). The Smiths are quick to point out that while these groups differed significantly in their motivations and ultimate goals, they often co-existed within the same social circles (1974a). As expected, the two groups’ divergent motives and expectations produced tension within the
non-monogamous community (Smith & Smith, 1974a), the legacy of which seems to still be evident today in the express separation of the swinger community (the recreationally non-monogamous) from the polyamorous community (the utopian non-monogamous) (Klesse, 2006; Noël, 2006; Sheff, 2005, 2006; Wilkinson, 2010).

Though the majority of these studies sought to explore an emerging world of “deviant” sexualities, most were equally concerned with what these innovations reflected about the state of marriage (O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972a; Ramey, 1972; Smith & Smith, 1974b). Both sociologists and psychologists were quick to note that such a sudden and widespread move away from monogamy indicated that many individuals were dissatisfied with marriage and the sociosexual restraints it placed on couples, and reactions to this development included both concern and commendation. However, the majority of researchers saw these changes as positive ones that were innovating marriage, rather than destroying it; these attitudes set a precedent for investigations of non-monogamy that were based on intellectual curiosity, rather than moral outrage or a desire to “fix” marriage and reinforce it as a normalizing force.

Given that this research took place during the rise of feminist consciousness, it is perhaps unsurprising that gender was seen as being quite relevant to discussions about non-monogamy. Feminists and womanists critiqued marriage on multiple fronts, making strong arguments that it limited women’s opportunities, exploited their free labor and childbearing capabilities, and ensured their financial dependency on men (Ferree, 1990; Shaw & Lee, 2007; Stelboum, 1999). Sociologist James Ramey integrates these objections into his analysis of the forms of non-monogamous behavior, suggesting that because marriage is the byproduct and legitimizing force of patriarchy, it creates an inherent imbalance of power that inevitably leaves women dissatisfied and seeking other alternatives, though these solutions may be unlikely to achieve anything beyond a fringe status in a patriarchal society (Ramey, 1972). Anthropologists George and Nena O’Neill similarly suggested that open relationships and marriages offered far more opportunities for women to expand beyond their assigned gender roles, and establish identities for themselves outside those of wife and mother (1972a).

Notably, many of these early inquiries were performed by husband-wife sociological teams, such as Larry and Joan Constantine, George and Nena O’Neill, and James and Lynn
Smith. While the data and analysis they provided were ground-breaking, and in the case of the O’Neills’ *Open Marriage*, best-selling (Rubin, 2001), it is interesting that the majority of those willing to stake out non-monogamy as career territory exuded highly optimistic attitudes about the possibilities it offered, while still benefiting from the mononormative privileges that would accompany their shared public identity as a couple.

**CONTEMPORARY POLYAMORY RELATIONSHIP GUIDES**

When academic interest in non-monogamy waned during the 1980s, space was inadvertently created for non-monogamous individuals to begin speaking publicly about themselves. Specifically, as open relationships and group marriages transformed and transitioned into polyamory, there was a growing need for self-definitions that could clarify what this new kind of non-monogamy meant for its supporters and practitioners.

The majority of popular literature on polyamory has arrived in the form of self-help style relationship guides that offer information and advice about what polyamory is, and how it can be incorporated into existing relationships. However, because these guides are often self-published and difficult to find (particularly those from the early 1990s), it remains unknown exactly how these guides have contributed to the public’s growing awareness of polyamory, and how many individuals first encounter polyamory in the form of these books. Although there are about a dozen of these informational polyamory guides in existence, I have chosen to focus on the three that seem to be the most popular9, and that I feel are most representative of the genre: Deborah Anapol’s *Love Without Limits: The Quest for Sustainable Intimate Relationships*10 (1992), Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy’s *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures* (Easton &

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9 The popularity of these books was not statistically determined; rather, I relied on how often I saw each title mentioned on various online polyamory discussion boards that I observed, as well as how often each was cited in the academic literature on polyamory.

10 As mentioned in the previous chapter, the first two prominent books on contemporary non-monogamy were Deborah Anapol’s *Love Without Limits: The Quest for Sustainable Relationships* (1992) and Ryan Nearing’s *Loving More: The Polyfidelity Primer* (1992). While both of these books are currently out of print, they played an important role in the early spread of information about non-monogamy, and shared responsibility for shaping the polyamorous ethos and its ideals. While it is still possible to locate copies of Anapol’s *Love Without Limits* (1992) with relative ease, Nearing’s *Loving More* is rather difficult to obtain. Because no library copies (or affordable used copies) could be located at the time of this writing, I wish to make mention of its importance to the polyamorous community, but cannot provide a full explication or analysis of its themes.

All three books similarly present a sort of “roadmap” to pursuing long-term polyamorous relationships. Each begins by introducing the basic concept of polyamory as an alternative option to traditional monogamy, framing it as one that offers bountiful love and deeper emotional connections to others. Though the order of subsequent chapters varies, they almost universally explore the same few themes: how to “open up” an existing relationship or marriage; maintaining honesty and communication in one’s relationships; what personal traits and qualities are helpful (and perhaps even necessary) to have successful polyamorous relationships; establishing and periodically revisiting the “rules” of a relationship; and “coming out” as polyamorous to friends and family. Taormino’s book (2008), while it also addresses these issues, is somewhat different in that it is organized an exploration of the different types of non-monogamy, and how each type is suited to different needs.

Throughout all of these books, there are several recurrent topics and themes that can be read as construing a common philosophy that characterizes polyamory. At the crux of this philosophy is a shared perspective on love (and to some extent, lust) as an infinite and abundant thing; from the polyamorist perspective, maintaining multiple romantic and sexual relationships is akin to maintaining multiple friendships—a positive and enriching endeavor, one that should transcend constructed notions of loyalty through monogamy. A desire to form bonds with others is seen as a natural impulse that, when combined with respect for one’s partners and a willingness to communicate honestly, should be pursued as often as possible. All three books also make mention of love and sex as spiritual issues; given that there are many polyamorist Pagans and followers of tantra, this is an appropriate and important connection to acknowledge.

Self-knowledge and awareness are seen as being absolutely vital to any successful relationship, but especially a polyamorous one. As readers are encouraged to incorporate as much love as they can into their lives, they are first warned of the personal effort it takes to prepare and sustain healthy polyamorous relationships. Though the authors use different terms to name this process—learning to love one’s self, self-healing, etc.—they are universally clear that successful polyamory not only demands personal and emotional stability, but should be preceded by it. This commitment to self-exploration and continual
personal growth is as much a part of polyamory as is having multiple partners, and within the polyamory how-to literature, introspection and individual responsibility are often at the heart of all offered advice. Given that polyamory is predominantly focused on facilitating rewarding relationships with others, this emphasis on the individual is interesting in its pervasiveness.

Communication is another omnipresent theme, one that is repeatedly stressed as the most vital part of polyamorous relationships. While Taormino takes the most time to outline different styles and strategies for communication, all of the authors devote a significant number of pages to discussing communication in relation to jealousy. Jealousy is represented as an obstacle that can largely be assuaged, if not overcome, by honest, frequent communication between partners. If people are willing to be accountable and address jealousy issues in their relationship(s), as well as remain flexible and responsive to possible solutions, Anapol, Easton, Hardy and Taormino all agree that they are likely to find “success” at polyamory.

Finally, there is also an acknowledgement of a spectrum of relationship “styles,” ranging from monogamous to polyamorous. In this regard, polyamory is treated more as an internal orientation than a way of structuring relationships, adhering to a similar logic as sexual orientation. All of the authors of these guides stress that polyamory is not “for everyone,” just as monogamy was not for them. While they are careful not to overtly privilege polyamory over monogamy, their insistence that polyamory requires individuals to be more self-aware, emotionally developed, and reflective does suggest that they regard it as a superior approach to relationships. On the other hand, the marginalized positions of polyamorists in monocentric societies must not be disregarded, as this alienation undoubtedly motivates these authors to self-represent as positively as possible.

Having established several of the common themes of these books, I would like to turn attention now to their individual offerings and characteristics. To begin with Anapol (1992), it is quite important to note that she primarily relied on the term “polyfidelity” rather than “polyamory” (although polyamory is mentioned) in her book, and as such, the approach to non-monogamy she put forth was conceptually identical to that of the Keristans (Anapol, 2010; Ellis, 1974; Taormino, 2008). This is best reflected in Anapol’s own definition of a poly lifestyle, which she says “excludes people who are only interested in indiscriminate,
recreational sex” (1992, p. 80). Though Anapol later acknowledges her own discomfort with the monogamy/promiscuity dichotomy (as well as similar binaries), this distinction is pivotal for a number of reasons. First, it reinforces the perceived ideological differences between polyamorists and swingers, and exemplifies the desire of polyamorists to disassociate themselves from the maligned swinger group. Second, this statement implies a hierarchical system of values wherein sex-driven relationships are considered to be both inferior and less mature than those driven by romantic and emotional connection. Although it is impossible to know fully the extent of these books’ impact on polyamorous subculture, I believe it is fair to point to this statement as an example of the early privileging of certain kinds of non-monogamy over others—an attitude that still seems to exist in the polyamorous community today. Both of these points suggest that polyamory evolved directly from a polyfidelous perspective, which placed more importance on emotional intimacy and long-term relationships.

Later polyamory-oriented books did not necessarily mirror these same sentiments and biases, however. Like the books that came before it, Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy’s *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Adventures* (originally published under Hardy’s pseudonym, Catherine A. Liszt) attempted to synthesize the basic principles and structures of non-monogamous lifestyles (Easton & Hardy, 2009; Easton & Liszt, 1997). However, the authors’ intent and perspective were radically different than those of their predecessors; rather than seeing sustainable long-term relationships as the ultimate goal, Easton and Hardy engaged in a process of reclaiming both responsible promiscuity and the label of “slut” itself. Utilizing a sex-positive perspective throughout the course of the book, the authors develop strategies for seeking multiple romantic and/or sexual relationships in a safe, healthy, and empowering manner. *The Ethical Slut* was also notable in that it addressed a wider spectrum of genders, sexual orientations, and sexual proclivities, expanding the presumed audience of poly-curious people beyond heterosexual men and women.

Tristan Taormino followed in the footsteps of both Anapol and Easton and Hardy in her 2008 relationship guide *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*. Applying Easton and Hardy’s same sex positivity to her discussions on the varieties of non-monogamy, Taormino drew from both her own background as a sex educator
and a series of interviews and questionnaires she conducted with over 126 polyamorous individuals. Taormino used these interviews and responses to provide “real life” examples of various relationship arrangements and concerns throughout her book, a large number of them appearing in asides of couple profiles. Like the 2009 edition of The Ethical Slut, Taormino benefits from an additional twenty years’ worth of development in polyamorist culture, with increasingly specific definitions for variations of non-monogamy, as well as an expanded vocabulary for all manner of sexuality- and LGBT-related issues.

In spite of their roles in popularizing polyamory, these self-help books are far from perfect, and often fall short of developing an adequate political consciousness (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Noël, 2006). Haritaworn et al. were among the first to offer a critique of this genre, citing three central problems with these manuals:

First, the produced discourses are frequently unaware of their capacity for setting up their own regimes of normativity. Second, they tend to endorse an abstract individualism at the expense of critiquing the structural power relations around race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. Third, the posited universalistic model of affect ties in easily with an imperialist narrative of the West as sexually and emotionally advanced and superior. (2006, p. 519)

Haritaworn and colleagues (2006) go on to mount a detailed and accurate critique of how these and similar self-help guides promote the sort of upbeat, self-transformative individualism that ignores broader power structures of gender, race, class, and culture, as well as how those power structures affect one’s ability to pursue an ideal life, or resist hegemonic pressures to conform to monogamy (and other norms). The presumed universalism of this individualistic narrative demonstrates a relative blindness to the Eurocentric nature of seeing the self as primary and paramount. These Western-specific visions are further evidenced by the Orientalist treatment of “primitive” or “premodern” Eastern cultures that are interpreted as being poly positive in some way; although these foreign societies are framed as being allies to relationship diversity, they become othered in their reduction to racialized, non-Western spiritualities and perceived hypersexuality. Melita Noël (2006) echoes these sentiments, further stating that as this ignorance continues to proliferate, it prevents any meaningful intersectional analysis of or awareness within the polyamorist community.
INTERDISCIPLINARY INSIGHTS

By the end of the millennium, academic interest in non-monogamy had begun to resurface. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first indication of this interest arrived in the form of a groundbreaking polyamory-themed issue of the Journal of Lesbian Studies, later republished as The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-monogamy, and Casual Sex (Munson & Stelboum, 1999). This collection of poly-positive fiction, poetry, and essays not only demonstrated the LGBT community’s familiarity with polyamory, but specifically linked it to lesbian-feminist objections to heteronormative family and relationship structures promoted by patriarchal institutions. This idea is especially exemplified by Judith Stelboum’s essay “Patriarchal Monogamy,” which evidences the historical connections between monogamous marriage, the control of women’s autonomy, and their ultimate subordination as property (1999). Similarly, Martha McPheeters recognizes marriage as an institution that privileges couples above all others; she encourages gay and lesbian readers to reject marriage and compulsory pair-bonding altogether (1999).

Because the majority of the anthology’s essays are personal, rather than theoretical, they are able to elaborate on several themes that are otherwise absent in polyamory-related texts. Informed by their own experiences, multiple authors bring attention to how both relationship styles and relationships themselves evolve over the course of one’s lifetime. Amanda Kovattana’s “Seven Poems for Three” (1999) explores how she and her partner transitioned into a polyamorous triad, only for Kovattana to be later alienated when her two partners desire monogamy for themselves. Earlier in the anthology, Nanette Gartrell chronicles how her 24-year relationship with her partner Dee cycled through periods of monogamy, polyamory, and even cheating (1999). These and other essays (Dal Vera, 1999; Deer, 1999; Martin, 1999; Mushroom, 1999) offer first-person accounts of lesbian polyamory, contributing to an understanding of lesbian relationships that sees them as fluid, adaptive, and open to experimentations that defy the status quo.

The divide between lesbian friendships and romantic lesbian relationships is another major theme that emerges within the Reader. Although it is one that is interwoven throughout the book, as many authors describe how their intimate friendships often became something “more” (Dal Vera, 1999; Gartrell, 1999; Orleans, 1999), Esther Rothblum most poignantly writes about the similarities between polyamory and the much more accepted
practice of maintaining multiple, simultaneous friendships (1999). She says that many friendships are already a complicated mix of affection and attraction, and that using genital sex as the distinguishing difference between romance and friendship is a somewhat arbitrary practice; in stating this, she points out society’s tendencies to both value romantic relationships over friendships, and attach more gravitas to sexual behavior than other forms of intimacy. This comparison between polyamory (having multiple partners) and friendship (having multiple friends) is not uncommon within polyamory relationship guides; however, Rothblum is able to apply a valuable social science perspective that highlights exactly how friendships can be conceptualized as a model for polyamorous relationships.

Another reader, *Plural Loves: Designs for Bi and Poly Living*, was later republished from a similar special issue of the *Journal of Bisexuality*, which largely focused on the utopian possibilities of integrating bisexual and polyamorous lifestyles (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004a). However, author Pepper Mint (2004) is quick to point out how stereotypes about bisexuality in Western culture (particularly those that link it to compulsive promiscuity and “home wrecking”) are in many ways the result of cultural pressures to conform to monogamy and heteronormativity. Encouraging readers to *not* see the combination of bisexuality and polyamory as the fulfillment of such stereotypes, Mint (2004) maintains that polyamory and other forms of non-monogamy can aid the visibility of bisexuality, eventually promoting awareness of both communities.

Unlike *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader* (Munson & Stelboum, 1999), *Plural Loves* also contains several essays that perform readings of bisexual and polyamorous themes in a variety of media. Wayne Bryant (2004) traces the portrayal of polyamorous and bisexual relationships in independent and mainstream film, ultimately concluding that both are stereotypically represented as unstable, threatening to monogamy, and generally unsustainable. Hasan Al-Zubi (2004) and Sam See (2004) each perform their own focused readings for these same themes, this time looking into the sexual fantasies present within 19th century British novels, and into the queer ambiguities of 20th British plays, respectively.

*Plural Loves* also integrates spirituality into its content by featuring several essays that explore religious motivations for participating in polyamory. In separate essays, Konstanza (2004) and Numa Ray (2004) each describe their involvement in tantrism (or tantra), while also presenting the spiritual teachings of tantric leader Aba Aziz Makaja, who
recognized sex and sexuality to be sacred and enlightening. The volume’s editor, Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio, offers up her own fictional narrative about an affair that takes place between an African Catholic priest and a teacher of sacred sexuality (2004b). While there is little theoretical or sociological material in the collection as a whole, it certainly succeeds in addressing several aspects within poly culture that are often overlooked by researchers.

In 2006, a special thematic issue of the British-based academic journal *Sexualities* was also produced on polyamory. Unlike the previously mentioned essay collections, this polyamory issue was unique in that it was based less on experience and narrative, and instead grounded in sociological and ethnographic research. Issue editors Haritaworn and colleagues (2006) begin by framing polyamory as a social movement, one that is still immature in its self-analysis, despite arising out of the intersections of several other progressive movements; their subsequent critique of existing polyamorist literature was discussed in the previous section. Melita Noël (2006) furthers these critiques, however, by performing a detailed content analysis on a dozen polyamory relationships guides. In “Progressive Polyamory: Considering Issues of Diversity,” she finds that the authors of these books presume their audience to be homogenously white, educated, middle-class, able-bodied, and citizens of the U.S.; Noël then challenges polyamorists to adopt more inclusive, intersectional politics that would allow them to build coalitions with other groups (Noël, 2006).

Later in the issue, Christian Klesse (2006) illustrates how the basic ideologies of polyamory are contested within the community itself. Drawing from a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups he conducted with 20 British non-monogamous bisexual men and women, he proves that for many of his participants, polyamory can seem judgmental and sex-negative given its professed preference toward long-term, loving relationships as ideal; because of this, Klesse suggests, the practice of polyamory may not be as queer-oriented or queer-friendly as one might presume (2006).

Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker (2006) make excellent use of the many highly active polyamory message boards and websites online in order to analyze the role of language in polyamorist discourses. They find that much like the Keristans before them (Anapol, 2010; Ellis, 1974; Taormino, 2008), many polyamorists have invented words to describe the complex feelings that arise within their relationships; for example, the word “metamour” was coined to refer a partner’s partner, and the words “wibble/wibbly” used to describe one’s
feelings of insecurity in a relationship. Finally, Elizabeth Sheff (2006) writes about representations of masculinity among polyamorous men, an essay that will be explored in far greater depth shortly.

The most recent (and perhaps most exciting) development in the literature on polyamory is an anthology entitled *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). In this volume, polyamory is extensively examined within a variety of contexts. While the content of some sections, like parenting issues in poly families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Riggs, 2010; Sheff, 2010) and the counseling of non-monogamous relationships (Easton, 2010; Mint, 2010) may not be relevant to the focus of this work, it is important to acknowledge the impressively broad scope of the collection overall.

In many of the essays, one can see attempts to integrate a greater analysis of diversity into the topic of polyamory. Alessandra (Alex) Iantaffi (2010), for example, takes the opportunity to describe hir\textsuperscript{11} experiences as a genderqueer, disabled polyamorous person, ultimately bringing recognition to how these co-existing identities defy standard binaries. Kristin Scherrer (2010) asked 102 asexual-identified individuals about what they saw as the distinctions between friendships and romantic relationships; her results suggest that because asexual individuals often strongly associate monogamy with sexual/romantic interactions, they may be more willing to incorporate non-sexual variations of polyamory into their lives. This evidence echoes Rothblum’s (1999) earlier observation that friendships are conceptually similar to polyamory, the greatest difference being the exclusion of sexual activity. I examine several of the other queer- and gender-oriented essays within this collection in greater depth elsewhere in this chapter (Aviram, 2010; Richards, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010).

Despite the wide spectrum of issues presented in these recent works, I would like to specifically focus on the intersections between gender, queerness, and polyamory, as these topics are the most integral to my own project. While these concepts are certainly related to each other in multiple senses, they will be explored separately in order to reflect their common treatment within the literature itself.

\textsuperscript{11} To respect Iantaffi’s gender identity, I am employing gender neutral pronouns (sie/hir).
For the most part, qualitative studies on gender and polyamory have been led by the efforts of sociologist Elisabeth Sheff. From 1996 to 2003, she performed autoethnographic research on polyamorous communities throughout the Western United States. This project culminated in over forty semi-structured interviews (twenty men and twenty women) between 1998 and 2002, eventually resulting in several articles and a book (not yet published). The majority of her sample was white, middle to upper-middle class (many of them in the fields of computer science and counseling/therapy), and in their 30s to late 50s.

Her results, particularly those published in two complementary articles on hegemonic masculinities (Sheff, 2006) and women’s sexual subjectivity (Sheff, 2005), collectively explored polyamorists’ gendered experiences. Sheff found that both polyamorous men and women tended either to openly resist or push the boundaries of traditional gender norms and expectations (2005). Polyamorous women used their relationships to actively claim their own sense of sexual autonomy, as well as to justify balancing their relationship needs with those of their partners. Sheff’s respondents tended to see women as either having more or equal power, both within the polyamorous community and within their relationships to men. However, this feeling of having an increased access to interpersonal power was also tempered by other perceived losses, most commonly from relinquishing the privileges of monogamy and experiencing stigmatization. Numerous women also indicated that their initial encounters with polyamory were facilitated by somewhat pushy male partners; so although the majority of these women later felt empowered by the possibilities polyamory had to offer, their introduction to it was marked by power imbalances that favored the desires of male partners over their own.

Many polyamorous women also expressed interest in non-heteronormative sexual behaviors, including bisexuality and an attraction to gender fluidity; in fact, Sheff (2005) comments that the “nearly ubiquitous bisexuality among polyamorous women [is] so pervasive as to create an assumption of universal female bisexuality in polyamorous communities” (p. 268). The justification of this myth can be further evidenced by the fact

12 Autoethnographies are a type of research in which the principal investigator is also a participant or member of the ethnographic group being studied.

13 Her forty participants included two Asian Americans, three African Americans, one Latina, and one mixed race (Latina/white) woman.
that all but one of her female participants identified as bisexual or bi-questioning; in addition to this, her respondents mentioned their polyamorous lifestyles had provided them with more opportunities to socialize with and befriend other women. In spite of poly women’s expressed self-expansion, however, their perspectives often revealed the persistence of gender inequalities even within the polyamorous community. For example, many women were exasperated by the repeated attempts by polyamorous men to arrange threesomes, especially those in a couple who were looking for single bisexual women.

Similarly, Sheff observed that most poly men, despite benefiting from the type of hegemonic masculinity that granted them race, class, and gender privileges, were in some way attempting to resist traditional masculinity (2006). Poly men reportedly had more flexible attitudes toward heterosexuality, and worked to actively reject possessive or jealous attitudes toward their female partners. Because polyamory essentially requires men to be emotionally “available,” many articulated how they were committed to maintaining emotional intimacy with their partners by being expressive and communicative. However, she also noted that this “polyhegemonic masculinity” still sometimes included less progressive, and more stereotypically male attributes and behaviors, including an aversion to participating in the emotional work of relationships, hypersexuality (often demonstrated by a determination to fulfill the popular fantasy of having sex with multiple women at once), and homo- and biphobia directed at other men (despite accepting and even encouraging bisexuality among women).

Considerably less has been written about polyamorous individuals who do not identify as cisgendered (people whose biological sex mirror their internal gender identity). British psychologist Christina Richards was the first (and so far, only) author to focus solely on the intersections between trans14 and non-monogamies (2010). She argues that “polyamory opens up extra spaces within a trans person’s intimate relationships for the comfortable foregrounding of various genders at various times, which in turn opens up opportunities for further growth and exploration of gender and intimacy” (Richards, 2010, p. 132). Richards sees this as an adaptive practice that allows trans people to escape dyadic

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14 Like Richards (2010), I use the term “trans” to denote the entire spectrum of gender identities and their presentations, not just transgender and transsexual-identified individuals. Thus, this use of trans also includes people who are genderqueer, gender fluid, androgynous, etc. In my results section, however, this term will not be substituting my participants’ expressed gender identities, which will be specified when appropriate.
systems of gender and relational power, and like trans identities themselves, should not be regarded as either pathological or maladaptive. Interestingly, several of her participants also stated that they found acceptance in both the trans and polyamorous communities, although Richards does not comment on this further.

The current lack of research on trans polyamorists is also indicative of another, larger trend within the literature on polyamory, and that is the tendency to erase the presence and visibility of queer polyamorists. As earlier suggested, the LGBT community is not unfamiliar with the concept of open relationships, as it has been a unique aspect of queer culture since the first gay liberationists marched in the streets. However, when one looks to both the academic research on and popular media representations of polyamory, queer individuals are nearly absent. Though bisexuality is frequently acknowledged (especially women’s bisexuality), strictly same-sex relationships and gender variant polyamorists are nowhere to be seen.

In “What’s Queer about Non-Monogamy Now?” Eleanor Wilkinson criticizes the inability of the polyamorist movement to fully embrace its queer possibilities (2010). Though it is a term that is still contested and loosely defined, “queer” is most often used as an umbrella term for the entire LGBTIQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning) community. However, it is also used to indicate a resistance to or subversion of heteronormativity, and when using it to refer specifically to queer politics, as Wilkinson does here, it also denotes a radically progressive political stance that is usually anti-capitalist and supportive of gender and sexual diversity, among other goals (Jagose, 1996; Turner, 2000; Warner, 1999). From Wilkinson’s perspective, the apolitical nature of the polyamorous community (Aviram, 2010) has meant a missed opportunity to reject monogamy as a normalized ideal; instead, she argues, polyamory has only reinforced the ways in which long-term, committed, romantic/sexual relationships are privileged over other kinds of bonds. Thus, despite seeming “queer,” polyamory is often more representative of conservative values that contribute to the obscuring of queer politics and practices.

**WHAT’S MISSING: LITERATURE GAPS AND OVERSIGHTS**

Despite the recent, rising interest in both non-monogamy and polyamory, distinct holes in the literature still exist today. In spite of the fact that much of this research has
considered gender roles within non-monogamous relationships, explicitly feminist and interdisciplinary studies remain few and far between. As authors like Noël (2006) and Wilkinson (2010) have suggested, more effort is needed to fully articulate polyamory as an interconnected dimension of identity, one that also requires consideration of how individuals occupy multiple social locations simultaneously. In other words, future analyses of polyamory should look to how race, ability, age, size, nationality, and ethnicity all may be relevant to discussions about non-monogamy.

Existing studies have especially failed at adequately integrating a diversity of races into both their demographic samples and analyses. No one has yet performed an in-depth study that focuses on polyamorous people of color, and as a result, we have a limited understanding of how polyamory, race, and racism are interrelated in different contexts. As other researchers have claimed, it can be difficult (though certainly not impossible) to find self-selected participants of color for qualitative research (Sheff, 2005, 2006), which leads to a host of other questions. How might attitudes toward either polyamory or monogamy be shaped by one’s ethnic and/or cultural background? How is monogamy privileged and valued by different communities? How does racial or class privilege affect one’s desire or ability to reject monogamy? How are the polyamorous relationships of people of color received by the racial and ethnic communities they identify with? In the United States, how might polyamory be seen as relating to the hypersexualization of people of color? How might racial hierarchies affect interracial polyamorous relationships?

More attention should also be paid to how generational factors may affect individuals’ perspectives on polyamory. Since even the earliest studies on Western non-monogamies in the 1960s, sociological samples have been predominated by professional, heterosexual or bisexual men and women in their 30s and 40s. How differently might polyamory be practiced among members of a younger generation, particularly those that came of age in the wake of radical queer politics? How might "friends with benefits" arrangements, which have become popular with contemporary college youth, affect the permissibility of polyamory among younger people? How might this permissibility change as young people age, and expectations around their romantic and sexual behavior evolve? Does polyamory mean something different to individuals who identify as pansexual, or queer? How might polyamory symbolize different possibilities for working class and poor people,
who may not be afforded the same time or resources as the more affluent individuals previously sampled? While my own study may not have the answers to all of these questions, the next chapter will describe my methods in attempting to increase the range of voices being heard by both the polyamorous and academic communities.

**POLYAMORY AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the difficulties that researchers may face when approaching polyamory as a topic of study. Rather than simply attributing the lack of empirical data to a wealth of other potential research areas, or to the fact that polyamory itself is a recent concept, I suggest that there are three barriers that prohibit extensive research on polyamory: (1) the dispersed nature of the polyamory community; (2) the complexity of polyamorous relationships themselves; and (3) the associative stigma involved in researching non-monogamy.

Both of the first two barriers stem from methodological dilemmas, in that the loose structure of the polyamorous community makes it difficult to plan and implement research strategies aimed at the summarization or quantification of data. With the exceptions of San Francisco and Seattle, both of which are colloquially known to have fairly significant polyamorous populations, the polyamorous “community” lacks the same sort of geographic or urban centrality that other subcultures seem to have. There are no clubs or bars that specifically target or address the social needs of polyamorous people; instead, there are small pockets of polyamorous individuals across the country that communicate largely through the Internet, and who may only ever meet other polyamorous individuals if they attend one of the annual conferences on polyamory.

In addition to this physical dispersion, Hadar Aviram (2010) has noted that the polyamorous community does not have the kinds of clear political intentions that often serve as the impetus for organization. In her study of 35 Bay Area polyamorists, Aviram questioned her participants about their views on the legalization of multi-partner marriages, and whether or not it was a cause they would actively support and sustain. She found that her participants expressed little desire to pursue any routes toward legalization, an indifference that stands in direct contrast to the mainstream LGBT movement, which has focused the vast majority of its resources on obtaining legalized same-sex marriage. She attributed this
disinterest to her participants’ critical attitudes toward the governmental and legal regulation of relationships, as well as the reluctance of polyamorists to commit to any sort of fixed identity politics. Aviram describes why the polyamorous community averts such structure:

First, the polyamorous community’s. . . . desire for a world of nonpossessive, egalitarian, creative relationships propels them to ‘think outside the box’, and to create personal structures for ‘living the dream’. However, it does not provide a practical platform for action in an imperfect world. . . . Enforcing ‘correct’ patterns of polyamorous relationships becomes, therefore, unthinkable. While this mindset encourages personal freedom, it does not easily allow tighter definitions of objectives, which are perceived as required for legal mobilization. . . . their perception of law as a rigid and confining system makes it inapplicable to the world they wish to create (Aviram, 2010, p. 93).

Thus, while polyamorist activists may strive to create awareness and acceptance of their lifestyles, their activism lacks the articulated political and legal goals that are prominent features of other social movements. In fact, these goals seem to be directly at odds with most polyamorist visions of an ideal future. While I do not wish to be dismissive of current polyamorist activist efforts--after all, education is certainly a form of advocation--I do maintain that this lack of articulated political goals results in a much more casual participation within the community. As a result, polyamorous networks tend to have a very loose and informal structure, which demands that a researcher must either find “insider” access to what existing, local communities there are (that is, if they wish to perform participant-observation) or accept the limitations of internet-based research.

This distaste for both politicization and formal organization is also reflected in the very definitions of polyamorous relationships themselves. As my research will indicate in later chapters, there is a vast range of relationship complexity among polyamorists, and varying degrees of both willingness and ability to apply labels to the forms those relationships take. For individuals who engage multiple partners that are also involved with one another, it sometimes seems easier to chart these relationship webs rather than envision them. This presents researchers with the challenging task of both appropriately situating and analyzing polyamorous relationships within these highly-specific contexts, as well as accurately communicating these complexities to readers. Again, this doesn’t make research on polyamory impossible; however, it should suggest the need for caution when attempting to draw broad conclusions about polyamorous lifestyles. Such complications for both
research design and analysis may further account for the relative scarcity of scholarly investigations into polyamory.

Finally, as pioneers within the fields of LGBT and queer studies can attest, there exists a significant amount of stigma around matters of sexuality in academia, particularly those that are labeled as “deviant” or “perverse” in popular heteronormative rhetoric. Though such stigmas date back to when early nineteenth-century sexologists began their own taboo questioning about heterosexual sex, those who have tenaciously fought for the legitimization of sex-related research still face marginalization today. To subvert norms further still by researching non-monogamy only compounds the professional stigmas that may be faced. Given that non-monogamy in general, and polyamory specifically, may also be (mis)read as embracing promiscuity in an age of intense concern about public policies on sexually transmitted disease and HIV/AIDS, one can begin to understand how the expression of interest in these topics further alienates potential researchers.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Having introduced the history and literature of polyamory, the focus can now turn to my own attempts at applying a feminist research praxis to the study of non-monogamous practices. The pages that follow will describe how participants were recruited and interviewed, the benefits and limitations of Internet-based research, and the demographic characteristics of my sample. A discussion of the specific research challenges I faced can be found at the end of Chapter 4.

LOCAL IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

In my original project proposal, I had hoped to obtain in-person interviews with 15-25 individual women, as well as perform an additional 15-25 interviews with women via e-mail (see the next section for recruitment details). However, this intent was complicated by both a lack of response from local polyamorous women, and my own lack of comfort in reaching out to the local polyamorous community. In San Diego, the polyamorous community is one that is largely spiritual in its focus, due in no small part to the efforts of Kamala Devi, a sex educator and instructor of tantra who organizes a number of ongoing polyamory events through MeetUp.com. Nearly all of these are explicitly advertised as being for “spiritually-minded” poly and poly-curious people; monthly meetings in the past have included a variety of potlucks, “sacred snuggle parties,” and tantra-themed theater and film screenings. I chose not to reach out to this specific community, due to my own discomfort with the atmosphere of these meetings, and my concern about having a sample so strongly oriented toward tantric polyamorists. I certainly did not set out to conduct a study on secular polyamorists, either, nor did I ever refuse any participants based on their spiritual or religious identities; however, I did not feel I could properly analyze the relationship between tantric spirituality and polyamory to the degree that a local sample recruited from these gatherings would likely require. Having realized this fairly early on in the recruitment process, I chose to adjust my
strategy to focus on the collection of e-mail interviews instead, a decision that has strengthened my data by reducing it to a single (and thus a more easily comparable) format.

**E-MAIL INTERVIEWS**

After having previously obtained approval for my project from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in July 2010, my first round of recruitment began in October, with a second, online-only recruitment period taking place from January to February 2011. Advertisements for my study were posted to polyamory-related listservs, message boards, and community blogs, as well as to the personal ads sections for a variety of U.S. cities on Craigslist.org. Community message boards on websites like Yahoo! Groups and Livejournal.com seemed to have many active users, in particular, and proved to be highly effective for recruiting. My online recruitment ads were titled "Looking for Interviews with Polyamorous Women," and contained the following text:

Have you been or are you currently in a consensual relationship with more than one partner, where all partners know about each other? Would you describe yourself or your relationship as polyamorous?

I am looking to interview women between the ages of 18-35 about their experiences in polyamorous relationships. I am especially interested in women from diverse race/ethnicities, social class backgrounds, and sexual identities. Participants must be currently living in the U.S. Interviews can be conducted in-person (if local to San Diego, California) or via e-mail.

All in-person interviewees will receive a $15 gift certificate to either Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble. E-mail participants will be entered into a lottery to win one of five $15 gift certificates to either Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble.

This is a research study being conducted as part of a Master’s thesis through San Diego State University. Your participation would be voluntary. You will be asked questions about your experiences with polyamory and its role in your life.

If interested, please contact Sarah Wheeler at swheeler@rohan.sdsu.edu with a short description about yourself (age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) and your current or most recent polyamorous relationship. Please also indicate whether you would like to participate via e-mail or in-person interview. Thank you for your interest!

Flyers were placed locally at coffeehouses in gay-friendly San Diego neighborhoods (Hillcrest and North Park), student centers at the University of California at San Diego campus, and local lesbian/gay bars. These were headlined "DO YOU PRACTICE
POLYAMORY," had a small graphic sometimes used to represent the polyamorous community (a heart with an infinity symbol laid over it), and contained the following text:

Have you been or are you currently in a consensual relationship with more than one partner? Would you describe yourself or your relationship as polyamorous?

I am looking to interview women between the ages of 18-35 about their experiences in polyamorous relationships. I am especially interested in women across race/ethnicities, social class backgrounds, and sexual identities. In-person interviewees will be given a $15 gift certificate to either Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble. Participants who do not live in or near San Diego and/or who would prefer to answer questions via email are also invited to participate. E-mail participants will be entered into a lottery to win one of five $15 gift certificates to either Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble.

This is a research study, and your participation would be voluntary. You will be asked questions about your experiences with polyamory and its role in your life.

If interested, please contact Sarah Wheeler at swheeler@rohan.sdsu.edu with a short description about yourself (age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) and your current or most recent polyamorous relationship. Please also indicate whether you would like to participate via e-mail or in-person interview. Thank you for your interest!

Once an eligible respondent had contacted me, I would e-mail them a copy of the consent form, along with information about their options for returning it. Throughout the entirety of the process, I encouraged the respondents to contact me if they had any questions or concerns. After I received a mailed or scanned copy of the consent form, I asked them to choose a pseudonym, then sent them my list of interview questions. I advised them to write their responses in a secure and comfortable place, to save their answers in the document as they went along, and to take their time in completing it. If my respondents indicated that they would like to be contacted with follow-up questions on their consent form, I sent them a follow-up questionnaire (mostly pertaining to demographic information) in February 2011.

During the first round of recruitment, 33 women contacted me about participating in the study; only four were excluded (three because they were above the age limit, and one because she was only willing to do a phone interview). Of the rest, twelve returned both consent forms and interviews, while the remaining seventeen women did not return their consent forms (in this total, I also include the only two women who contacted me about local, in-person interviews, both of whom fell out of communication with me). During the second round of recruitment, 21 women contacted me about participating in the study; only one woman was excluded, due to being above the age limit. Four women returned both consent
forms and interviews; five women returned consent forms, but not interviews; and eleven women did not return consent forms.

In both rounds of recruitment, participants were offered the opportunity to be enrolled in a prize lottery that awarded five $15 gift certificates to either Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble, provided that they answered at least half of the interview questions and returned them to me by the prize lottery deadline. My prize lotteries were funded by an Oliva Espín Endowed Scholarship, awarded to graduate Women’s Studies students whose thesis projects emphasize women of color and/or queer women.

It should be noted here that while I advertised specifically for women in my study, the participants did not always identify their gender as being strictly female/feminine. Thus, while reading this work, it is important to keep in mind that my uses of the words "woman" and "women" are highly flexible. They are not meant to specify any one embodiment of femininity, but rather, to indicate that my participants identified with this label enough (or often enough) to feel that my recruitment ads were applicable to them. Therefore, when I refer to the participants as "women," I mean for this term to function as a spectrum that includes femininity, but does not eclipse the actual diversity of gender identities in this study.

**MEASURES**

Upon receiving a participant's consent form, I sent them the following list of interview questions:

1. What is your name, age, race/ethnicity, and nationality?
2. What is your gender identity? What word do you use to describe your sexual orientation, and what does that mean to you?
3. Do consider yourself queer? How and why?
4. Do you identify as polyamorous?
5. When and how did you first hear about polyamory? What was your initial reaction after learning about it?
6. Have you been in a polyamorous relationship before?
7. When did you first begin practicing polyamory? Please describe that relationship, and your experiences in it.
8. Please describe your current or most recent relationship arrangement (how many partners involved, what partners' relationships are to each other [primary couples, casual sex partners, etc.], any core rules).
9. Have your experiences with polyamory in your current and past relationships been positive? In what ways?

10. Do you currently participate in any groups, organizations, or social circles that are polyamory-focused? What ones?

11. Would you consider yourself a member of the polyamorous community? Why or why not?

12. What other communities do you consider yourself a participant in or member of?

13. Do you feel that your gender or sex identities have ever affected you in a polyamorous relationship? Can you give an example of this?

14. Do you feel that your race, ethnicity, or class have ever affected your experiences with polyamory? How so?

15. How have your family and friends reacted to your polyamorous identity?

16. Are there certain communities where you find polyamory to be more accepted or acceptable? What ones?

17. Do you think polyamory is a queer practice? Do you think your participation in polyamory makes you queer?

18. Would you consider your polyamorous identity to be political? Do you believe your participation in polyamory to be motivated by any political or social beliefs?

19. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

20. How does polyamory make you feel empowered? How does it make you feel disempowered? Please give any specific examples you can.

21. Is there anything else you would like to say that I did not ask about?

For the second round of recruitment, I replaced the first two questions with several more in-depth demographic questions. Later, when I sent out a follow-up questionnaire to all participants, I made sure to send these same questions to the participants from the first round of recruitment, to ensure that the same data was collected for all. The new questions read:

1. What is your name and age?

2. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?

3. How would you describe your class and/or income level?

4. Please describe your highest level of education (high school diploma, some college, bachelor’s degree, etc.).

5. Please describe what state or region of the U.S. you currently reside in.

6. What is your gender identity? What word do you use to describe your sexual orientation, and what does that mean to you?
SAMPLE

All data were collected from a non-random convenience sample of sixteen self-identified polyamorous women, ranging in age from 20 to 34 (with a mean age of 26.31 years). While I strove to include as diverse a sample as possible in terms of race, and specifically reached out to online communities for polyamorous people of color, thirteen (81.25%) of my respondents were white, one (6.25%) Latina, and two (12.5%) biracial or of mixed race (Eastern Indian/white, and white/Native American, respectively). Several of the participants who identified as white or Caucasian further noted their ethnic heritage; of these, one was French-Caribbean, one Polish, one Jewish, one half-Croatian.

Eleven (68.75%) participants described their gender identity as female, two (12.5%) as genderqueer, one (6.25%) as alternatively genderqueer and agender, and one (6.25%) as soft butch.

Five (31.25%) identified as bisexual, three (18.75%) as pansexual,15 three (18.75%) as queer, and one (6.25%) as heterosexual. The remaining four participants specified that they shifted between several labels of sexual orientation, often depending on who they were speaking to; of these, one identified as alternatively bisexual, pansexual, and queer; one as pansexual or queer; one as dyke, queer, or bisexual; and one as bisexual, queer or asexual. All of these four women tended to use "bisexual" or "pansexual" when speaking with acquaintances or heterosexual people, even if they did not feel as though those terms adequately described their sexuality. Instead, they reserved the most specific or accurate terms, like "queer" or "dyke," for their use in queer-friendly spaces.

Fifteen of the participants provided a description of their class location (this data was missing for Justine, who did not respond to the follow-up questionnaire). Of these fifteen participants, the vast majority claimed middle class backgrounds, though many were currently experiencing a fluctuation in class. Seven (46.67%) described themselves as having low income; five of these were currently students, and two were underemployed. Three (20%) categorized themselves as upper middle class, one (6.67%) as upper class, and the remaining four (26.67%) as either middle or lower middle class.

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15 Pansexuals are individuals who feel romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of varying genders and biological sexes, similar to (but not interchangeable with) those who identify as "queer."
All sixteen participants described their highest level of education. One (6.25%) participant held a high school diploma, and eleven (68.75%) had or were currently obtaining a bachelor's degree. Two (12.5%) had received or were pursuing a Master's degree; one (6.25%) had pursued but had not completed her Master's degree. One participant was currently pursuing her Ph.D.

Participants were located across the U.S. and its territories. Six (37.5%) participants were located throughout the West Coast in California, Oregon, and Washington; and five (31.25%) throughout the East Coast in Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, and Washington D.C. Three (18.75%) resided in the Midwest, in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Iowa, respectively. One (6.25%) participant lived in Georgia, and the final participant split her time between California and a U.S. territory.

All but one participant were either currently in a polyamorous relationship, or in an open relationship with a long-term partner and seeking additional partners. While only eight (50%) participants were involved with two or more partners at the time of their interviews, fifteen (93.75%) out of sixteen participants were currently in a relationship with at least one partner. Five (33.3%) of these fifteen participants were married.

**CODING**

Once I received all sixteen interviews from my participants, all were printed and assembled into a folder. The average interview was approximately four to five pages in length, single-spaced. My initial reading of the interviews specifically sought to collect all of the various pieces of demographic data from my respondents' answers (age, race, geographic location, etc.), so that I could effectively contextualize different answers in relation to different life experiences and social locations.

My second, more in-depth reading of the interviews marked the start of the coding process. As I read, I wrote a preliminary list of the major and topical themes I saw emerging (represented by capital letters), while also breaking them down further into specific subthemes (represented by numbers). In my third reading, I continued to add to my list of subthemes, and during my fourth reading, I finally began to code the interviews. I did this by writing the letter/number combination of the corresponding theme/subtheme in the margins of the interviews, beside the lines where they occurred. Because the responses frequently had
overlapping themes, many quotes were annotated with multiple codes. Quotes that I found particularly interesting or articulate were highlighted so that they could later be located with relative ease. Once this was done, I read through them again and continued to code where needed.

By this time, the major themes and subthemes of the interviews were quite apparent. While this marked the end of the my formal coding efforts, each response was read many more times over as I outlined and wrote my results chapter. For several of the more complicated questions I asked (such question 17—whether or not they thought polyamory was a queer practice), I also copied and pasted each person's response into a "master list" that provided every answer given for the question. This helped me a great deal when it came time to compare and contrast various perspectives, or when I needed help accurately summarizing or visualizing the responses as a whole.

**COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

Because my research was largely conducted online, most of my methodology centered around my written interactions with my participants. In their review of ethnographic techniques for computer-mediated communication (CMC), Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Cui (2009) point out that this virtual setting requires researchers to develop their ability to interpret interactions that take place solely through text and visuals, as well as to perform identity and impression management of oneself in various online contexts. Although there are a number of ways to accomplish these goals, my strategies for interacting with participants (both potential and confirmed) largely centered around my ability to respond to their e-mails and inquiries in a polite and timely fashion, as well as to be friendly without assuming familiarity. I also strove to be transparent about my research goals by clearly and honestly explaining the general focus of my thesis project whenever asked.

Although these strategies were highly effective when it came to establishing a positive channel of communication between myself and my participants, the validity of online data collection must take into account numerous other factors. While a distinctively feminist approach to Internet research has not yet been articulated, scholars from a variety of disciplines have weighed in on both the benefits and drawbacks of using the Internet as a research tool. One key concern is the researcher’s inability to verify basic, self-reported
demographic information that is collected through online surveys and interviews; another is the fact that Internet users tend to be wealthier and more educated than the actual U.S. population, which may contribute to the erasure of those who are economically disadvantaged or less educated (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). Critics have also noted that interviews performed through e-mail (as mine were) suffer from the inability of the researcher to note and interpret non-verbal cues, expound upon questions in more detail, and recreate the spontaneity of in-person conversations (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

Although it is nearly impossible for a researcher to address all of these problems, there is evidence to suggest that these issues do not impede the collection of meaningful data to the degree previously assumed, especially when they are consciously managed by the researcher. For example, while I could not verify my participants’ identities with my own eyes, their willingness to engage in the ongoing process of sending consent forms, e-mailing back and forth with me, and providing detailed answers to a long questionnaire suggests their own commitment to publicizing their unique perspectives and concerns as polyamorous women. In one case, a participant even voluntarily shared her anonymous blog with me, and another her wedding photos. Many of my participants also used e-mail addresses that contained portions of their legal names, or that reinforced the demographic information they provided elsewhere (for example, addresses that included the word “girl” or specified an ethnic affiliation); such consistency suggests a higher likelihood that my participants were honest about their backgrounds. And while I could not fully account for the fact that my sample was not representative of U.S. women in terms of overall wealth and education, a prize lottery was used to encourage the participation of lower income individuals.

Conducting interviews via e-mail also proved to have several advantages over in-person interviews. Multiple qualitative researchers have maintained that the anonymity of e-mail interviews encourages honesty and more in-depth responses (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Shields, 2003) and as my results will show, it is not unusual for individuals to use this anonymous format to share frank and personal details about their lives. Moreover, most participants had at least several weeks to answer the questionnaire. This allowed them to think about the interview questions over a longer period of time, as well as gave them an opportunity to revisit and revise their answers. This format not only generates more
thoughtful responses, but increases how confident and comfortable they feel about those answers.

In sum, I strove to maximize the beneficial aspects of Internet research, while also realistically grappling with its limitations. As a result, my sample is non-random, and intentionally represents a diverse cross-section of young polyamorous women from a variety of backgrounds and identifications.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

A list of preliminary themes and subthemes was developed during the initial, collective reading of all interviews; these interview responses were then coded accordingly in subsequent readings. As noted in the previous chapter, interviews conducted through e-mail do not allow social researchers the opportunity to note non-verbal and visual cues that normally provide additional information about the respondent’s feelings and attitudes at different points in the interviewing process. However, as Markham (2004) and Campbell (2006) both note, computer-mediated communication has led to the development of alternate techniques for self-presentation through text, including the selective use of emoticons, punctuation, spacing, and capitalization. I have sought to preserve these self-representations by keeping my participants’ original answers intact and unedited by me; the exception to this was two interviews in which respondents bolded or italicized all of their answers to distinguish them from my questions. In those two cases, I have de-bolded and de-italicized their answers to fit with the formatting of this thesis, as reliance on the differentiation between interview questions and respondents’ answers is no longer necessary. Although I have not quoted all participants in equal amount, each person’s answers made valuable contributions to this project. As I introduce each participant, I will be referring to the specific terms they used to describe their racial, gender, class, and sexual identities.

The results of my e-mail interviews have been thematically organized into three main sections, each of which is divided into subthemes. In “The Rewards and Challenges of Polyamory,” I begin by introducing my participants’ attitudes toward their polyamorous relationships, and examine the specific struggles and benefits of polyamory. After establishing what role polyamory plays in their lives, the second section, “Intersectionality and Polyamory,” reviews how their participation in polyamory may be determined by other factors, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and age. The final section, “Polyamory and the Boundaries of Queerness,” looks at how queerness is negotiated in consideration of polyamory.
THE REWARDS AND CHALLENGES OF POLYAMORY

When discussing their polyamorous relationships, the participants’ answers generally fell into one of the three subthemes, all of which revealed the specific challenges and rewards that they associated with polyamory: Agency and Empowerment, Communication, or Hiding Polyamory.

Agency and Empowerment

All sixteen participants were able to cite multiple reasons for why polyamory was a positive and empowering aspect of their lives. Although many of these explanations revolved around how their relationships with their partners had benefited from polyamory (as will be discussed in the next section), most women also referenced specific instances where their participation in polyamory had allowed them an increased sense of individual agency, and had given them new opportunities to generate self-knowledge. Interestingly, this was often described in terms of being able to maintain an identity separate from that of their relationships. Mary, a 26-year old white woman who typically identifies as queer, stated:

Ideally, polyamory helps reinforce my sense of self. It helps me remember to maintain strong relationships outside of a single romantic relationship, whether those other relationships are sexual or not.

Alex, a heterosexual, white 24-year old echoed this sentiment:

Polyamory empowers me by giving me ownership over my own time and priorities, I don’t feel a need to center my whole life around my boyfriend.

Sam, a white, agender/genderqueer, pansexual 20-year old agreed:

Polyamory makes me feel empowered because I always feel like a free person, like my own person, not only when I’m single. I feel free to express my affection toward any consenting person and not feel like I’m constrained by the rules of someone who may not be present and may have nothing to do with the situation.

All three individuals seem to be referencing the same unspoken cultural paradigm, in which women are traditionally expected to subsume their identities beneath their male partners’, or at the very least, redefine themselves as part of a couple. However, the women in my study resisted this imperative, at times specifically mentioning the self-efficacy they experienced by actively rejecting monogamy. For example, Keira, a 23-year old white/Native American bisexual woman, said:

Polyamory makes me feel empowered because it allows me freedom to make my choices about relationships, irrespective of what our culture has to say about how
relationships are supposed to go (i.e. lifelong heterosexual marriage). After becoming poly, I’ve felt more empowered to communicate in my relationship, if only because I feel more confident that this (our relationship) is my choice and not something that I have to do.

Likewise, Abby, a white 22-year old asexual/pansexual, pointed out that,

There seem to be so many assumption [sic] as to what a monogamous relationship is, that it is easy for people to assume that by agreeing to be with someone, you automatically agree to all of these unwritten rules for what the relationship is and should be, and you don’t need to talk about them. Polyamory doesn’t seem to have such rigid constructs [. . .]

Justine, a biracial, intergender\(^{16}\) 25-year old pansexual, also associated monogamy with a lack of choice and self-determination:

Polyamory makes me feel empowered in the sense that monogamy has often felt very limiting to me. Within polyamory, I am able to explore more sides of myself that I am not able to when I am dating only one person [. . .]

Isabelle, a white 26-year old bisexual, also acknowledged how polyamory allowed her the opportunity to resist compulsory monogamy:

I choose to opt-out of a cultural narrative, just knowing I have that choice is empowering, that I see as silly at best [. . .] and harmful at worst (waiting for my prince to come). I am able to think critically about family formation, and create the family I want.

Several participants specifically mentioned that polyamory also allowed them to relinquish their concerns about upsetting a partner by engaging in extradyadic relationships. Carina, a queer, white 26-year old, admitted that polyamory gave her the freedom to stop policing her desire out of consideration for her partner:

I feel empowered by being poly because I have the freedom to talk to people how it comes naturally to me, I don't have to be paranoid that someone's getting too close to me and my future husband will get jealous or something.

Ana, a 32-year old, white genderqueer and pansexual, agreed:

It’s empowering to be able to approach my spouse and speak freely of feelings for someone else without worrying about mistrust and anger being a reaction.

In addition to characterizing polyamory as a route toward maintaining an identity independent of their attachment to partners, the respondents also linked it to their ability to

\(^{16}\) Justine defined "intergender" for herself by describing, "My body is female, but my mind feels like a mixture between male and female, and sometimes even gender neutral."
assert their sexual agency and satisfy their libidos without feeling guilty about betraying a partner. Jennifer, a white, 32-year old married bisexual, said:

> It’s very sexually empowering. I’m able to have sex with three people, openly and honestly and don’t have to feel any guilt associated with it.

Likewise, Anne, a white, 34-year old pansexual, connected polyamory to sexual empowerment:

> In our society women are not usually encouraged to be sexually assertive, open or connected to their sexuality and to be involved in a poly relationship one must be assertive, open and connected to their sexuality.

Mary also cited sexual fulfillment as one of the benefits of polyamory:

> I can get jealous of emotional energy spent on other people, but I tend not to feel jealous about sex; I tend to be pretty interested in sex, and my relationship arrangement helps fuel that.

Raffaella, a 30-year old queer Latina, similarly emphasized that polyamory was not about a quantity of lovers, but about naturalized desire and attraction:

> I have never felt that I would have just one lover for the rest of my life, I possibly couldn’t. There hasn’t been a woman that has been able to suffice me sexually. I find that multiple lovers suffice my libido. But that’s not what it’s all about, multiple lovers. Sometimes you just met amazing people when you are in committed relationships. You can’t fight attraction; it’s a chemical reaction in your body. Why deny that?

However, in Alex’s case, polyamory played a particularly pivotal role in her ability to exercise sexual agency, when she needed to reclaim her sexuality following her rape by an acquaintance:

> I also hated the feeling of being owned that came with monogamy. I was sexually assaulted near the end of my last relationship, and I was telling my therapist that I felt like everyone had control over my body but me, including my attacker who was a houseguest and friend and felt he didn’t need permission to invade my body, my boyfriend whom I had to ask if I wanted to sleep with anyone else [. . .] it seemed like everyone had something to say about who got to be in my vagina but me. My therapist said that perhaps I should have an affair, a brief one, since it seemed like something my then boyfriend would be ok with if we discussed it beforehand and he understood it was not any statement about him but rather a reclaiming of my own consent and body. I brought it up with him and he said it would be fine and that he hoped it would help, and I went off and had a 3 night fling with a friend. Lo and behold it helped, I felt better and more in control of my life and mind immediately, and didn’t feel a need to continue the affair.
As a whole, these sixteen participants seemed to agree that polyamory allowed them more independence as women, both in exercising their sexuality, and in maintaining an identity outside of their relationships alone.

**Communication**

Because all of the participants had some previous experience being in a polyamorous relationship, all were readily able to cite ways that polyamory had not only benefited them personally, but enhanced the quality of their relationships, including those partnerships that were initially monogamous before becoming polyamorous. While participants suggested a variety of benefits, communication was one of the strongest recurring themes. Whether establishing the terms and boundaries of a new relationship, or asking for more of a partner’s time and attention, communication was referenced as a challenging, but ultimately rewarding aspect of polyamorous life. Several participants mentioned how their engagement in multiple relationships resulted in an overall improvement in their ability to effectively communicate with their partners, and vice versa. Anne spoke to this:

> Communication is so very important in a poly relationship and this openness has had a positive effect on how I communicate with everyone in my life.

Keira also noted how polyamory facilitated communication in her relationships:

> After becoming poly, I’ve felt more empowered to communicate in my relationship, if only because I feel more confident that this (our relationship) is my choice and not something that I have to do.

And finally, Jennifer acknowledged how polyamory presented her with an opportunity to improve her communication skills:

> It’s empowering by teaching me things about myself and my communication styles. I have had to learn that I may not communicate as well as I thought I did.

Perhaps even more importantly, polyamory extended more opportunities for the participants to negotiate the terms of their relationship, something that would likely be seen as either unusual or unnecessary in most monogamous relationships. Instead, the need for these periodic “check-ins” and renegotiations of relationship rules provided my participants with opportunities to reassess the quality of their relationships, and voice their concerns if necessary. Alex explained how this process works for her and her partner, Robert:

> Ultimately we realize that we are responsible for our own feelings, and when we feel that way we communicate to one another about it, with the understanding the ultimatums don’t work, we don’t expect the other the stop doing something
because it upsets us. […] But ultimately we talk about these things and come up with compromises, which is possibly the most empowering thing about the relationship, we both love each other and respect each other to honor one another’s boundaries.

Abby spoke at length about the great role communication played in her life:

I’ve been fortunate to be in relationships with people who value communication, communication, communication, and it works; I’m not sure whether polyamory attracts people who are more into the idea of explicit verbal communication, or whether the added dimension of additional relationships forces this level of communication, but it’s been like nothing I have experienced in my monogamous relationships (not for lack of trying on my part). […] It feels strange to isolate communication as an element of polyamory, but I have found my polyamorous partners to be far more self-aware and aware, hyper-aware even, of their partners’ comfort levels, than my monogamous partners.

Later in her interview, she again focused on how poly-driven communication resulted in a much more conscious understanding of one’s relationships:

Polyamory doesn’t seem to have such rigid constructs, such that negotiations are necessary - sometimes repeatedly; it keeps everyone talking, and constantly reassessing their wants, needs, and general level of happiness in the relationship. Perhaps it’s just because I am young that my needs and wants are constantly changing, but it is nice to have a forum to articulate this (and receive partners’ feedback), and not just have it assumed that the next logical step after dating will be engagement, and then marriage, just because that’s what couples do.

Although participants rarely specified what exact communication techniques or strategies were employed, it is clear from their responses that polyamory, as a relationship construct, seemed to offer them more forums and opportunities where all partners could express their needs. Whether this is a subcultural phenomenon within the polyamorous community, or simply the byproduct of necessity (warranted by the logistics of balancing the needs of multiple romantic and/or sexual partners), the increased importance of communication struck the women in my study as an especially enriching aspect of polyamorous life.

**Hiding Polyamory**

Twelve out of sixteen participants (75%) admitted that they occasionally felt disempowered as polyamorous people; however, these feelings were not attributed to non-monogamy itself, but to the pressures of being hiding their polyamorous relationships. For multiple women, the lack of acceptance for non-monogamous relationships resulted in
feelings of worry and insecurity in other aspects of their lives. Justine summarized several common causes for concern:

If, at the time we plan to adopt, my partner or I are dating a woman, I fear we will have to keep this ‘extramarital’ relationship a secret or we might be barred from adoption. My partner and I might have to lie about being polyamorous if either of us plan to run for public office or hold another position within a company or institution that frowns upon such relationships.

For several women, concerns about judgment and discrimination resulted in careful self-monitoring by, for example, avoiding discussion about their personal lives or partner(s). Ana stated,

The only way I would say it makes me feel disempowered is in the fact that we are not fully ‘out’. I sometimes have to catch myself from gushing about my two wonderful partners to coworkers who are discussing their more traditional relationships.

Lydia, a 26-year old white bisexual, also wrote about her self-consciousness in the face of discrimination:

In terms of being disempowered, I suddenly feel as though I cannot be honest with others about how I love people. The irony is that I chose poly so I wouldn’t have to lie or hide. Somehow it seems as though my friends and family would understand if I wanted to have an affair, but not if I actually conducted extra romantic relationships in a way that is agreed upon by my boyfriend AND my extra lover(s).

Concerns about the reactions of their families of origin were often mentioned in connection to participants’ statuses as being either "out" as polyamorous, or discreet about their polyamory. In fact, nine (56.25%) participants had not yet come out as polyamorous to any family members; of the remaining seven (43.75%), only three were out to both parents. Several participants had avoided coming out because they had not yet established long-term relationships with more than one partner, and therefore saw little need for disclosure. Others, however, avoided telling their family because it clashed with their parents’ conservative or religious values. The fear of disapproval and judgment from one’s family, in addition to factors like discrimination in employment or adoption, clearly indicated that polyphobia negatively impacted my participants’ lives.

In contrast, thirteen (81.25%) women mentioned being out as polyamorous to at least some friends, even if only to fellow polyamorists. Although most of these women said that
their friends were supportive overall, it was not always without some education or convincing. Sam described such an interaction:

I just met up with some folks the other day who I hadn’t seen in quite a while, though we were best friends back in middle school. When I mentioned that I had two partners, they all stared at me and asked lots of questions: ‘Do they know about each other?’ ‘Like actual partners, not just people you’re fucking?’ ‘How does that work?’ ‘Do you actually like them?’ ‘So you started dating both of them and they found out later?’ ‘DOES NOT COMPUTE!’ One of them just took a class on marriage and relationships, and they had read about polyamory in a textbook. They were so excited to meet a real-life example of someone in a polyamorous relationship!

Carina similarly sensed an attitude of both disbelief and wonder from her friends:

Some friends or acquaintances have been fairly accepting, because they honestly don't care what I do. Some have been fairly accepting because they want to be perceived as not caring about it, but I can tell they think it's unusual or exotic. Some overtly see it as unusual or unattractive, but few express that to me directly.

The two preceding quotes both suggest that while friends may ultimately be supportive, or at least open to learning about polyamory, the act of coming out as a polyamorous woman may result in their “othering” or alienation to some degree, even in it comes in the form of flattering exoticization.

However, almost every participant was also aware of communities where polyamory tended to be more accepted, or at the very least, better understood by its members. Geek culture, including sci-fi fans, comic book enthusiasts, costume roleplayers (including historical recreation societies, such as the Society for Creative Anachronism, which organizes Renaissance faires), video gamers, and fan cultures in general were seen as groups that were collectively poly-friendly. Unsurprisingly, the neo-pagan/Wiccan, LGBTQ and BDSM (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism) communities were all viewed as also being significantly more supportive and tolerant than mainstream society.

**Intersectionality and Polyamory**

Given that intersectionality itself demands that we acknowledge the interlocking nature of oppression, it may seem counterintuitive to divide this theme any further. However, by individually examining each element of oppression, we gain a clarified understanding of how each is intricately related to all others. Each of the following subthemes—Gender and
Sexual Orientation, Class, Race and White Invisibility, and Age—contributes a variety of insights into the ways that polyamory is shaped by other aspects of identity.

**Gender and Sexual Orientation**

Gender and sexual orientation affected participants’ experiences with polyamory in a vast variety of ways. On the one hand, gender diversity in partners was often cited as one of its perks, particularly for my sample, in which only one person (6.25%) identified as heterosexual; overall, participants also felt that women had an easier time finding other partners than polyamorous men did. On the other hand, my respondents also described their concern about being viewed as promiscuous or sex-obsessed, and faced a range of challenges related to both their same-sex relationships and sexual identities.

Because fifteen (93.75%) participants actively identified as bisexual, queer, or pansexual (notably, none identified as lesbian), polyamory was frequently seen as way to explore romantic and sexual relationships with people from a wide range of genders and sexes without sacrificing their long-term partnerships. Justine explained:

> I don't think I'd be as interested in polyamory if I was only attracted to male-bodied people. Because I enjoy being sexual with women and people of other gender identities, polyamory suits me because I can get all of these needs met. I am perfectly content with my primary partner and haven't been interested in seeing other male-bodied people, for instance. But when I was previously dating a girl in a longterm [sic], monogamous relationship, I craved being with men. I did cheat on her a few times, and it was with men. I don't ever want to cheat on anyone ever again, and I see polyamory as an honest and more compassionate (if challenging) solution.

Keira also saw polyamory as a way to express her sexual identity:

> My bisexuality is one big part of making polyamory available for me in my current relationship. [. . . ] It’s also part of the reason I’m interested in polyamory – I’m mostly very happy with Dylan, but I am very curious about what 'lesbian' sex or a threesome would be like, and I want to be able to explore that without losing or cheating on Dylan.

Mary reported seeing similar situations within the poly community:

> [. . .] it seems that a lot of poly people are poly because they're bisexual to some degree, and interested in having partners of different genders simultaneously.

However, fulfilling one’s fluid attractions was not without its complications; when asked if her sexual identity had ever affected her poly experiences, Ryba, a white 25-year old queer woman, reflected on how such choices are fraught with stereotypical associations:
The only thing that comes to mind is the issue I have with being poly and ‘bisexual.’ I feel that when I have a girlfriend and a boyfriend, that I am perpetuating the myth that bisexual means having relationships with both genders at the same time, which is not the case. This has never actually affected my actions, but it’s possible that part of the reason I don’t like identifying as bisexual is due to this misconception.

Even when they did not discuss bisexual stereotypes specifically, the women in my study seemed to understand that exercising their sexual agency with multiple people of any gender would subject them to accusations of promiscuity or greediness. Jennifer described the double standard that existed between herself and her two male partners:

I also feel that people are judgmental of me having multiple sexual partners and being a woman. I am never above being labeled a ‘slut’ or a ‘whore’ because I am a sexual woman who enjoys sexual variety. J and A, however, get a pat on the back when they tell someone they have a wife and a girlfriend. As much as I abhor the double standard, it still makes me hesitant to tell people about my relationships, out of fear that I will be judged.

Raffaella has confronted similar judgments from her friends about being poly:

My friends however, understand but don’t really. I continually get comments about my promiscuity and ho [sic] maybe I’m just a slut. In that case, I explain to them that I have never felt that I have only wanted one lover. Maybe one main one and a few on the side.

Crystal, who currently has two long-term male partners, recounted how such negative assumptions caused her to question her choices:

I once posted anonymously in an online literature community about my situation, asking what the members would say if they found out that this was the relationship status of one of their fellow members, or if they found out their daughter/sister/niece was posting it. [. . . .] Some of the community members had some strong opinions about what would cause a woman to want to manipulate two men into being okay with the situation, and what kind of woman she would have to be, and how ‘weak,’ ‘brainwashed,’ or other unflattering things the men must be. [. . . .] I questioned whether Josh and Ben were weak men, and whether I was vindictive, and whether I was selfish, had commitment issues, or was just wrong for doing what I was doing. It took a while for me to answer these questions for myself and come out of my self-doubt.

Sam, who described eirself17 as an activist for multiple causes, spoke the most politically about this conundrum:

17 In respect of Sam’s agender/genderqueer identity, I am employing the gender neutral pronouns ey/eir.
Many people think that polyamorous people sleep around, are prone to STIs, are sluts, are afraid of commitment, are hippies (‘free love’), or are addicted to drama. The implication is that poly women are sluts, poly men are ‘scoring’, and that polyamory is either a lack of commitment or an excuse to ‘cheat’. This slut-shaming and stud-congratulating is blatantly sexist and sex-negative (women who enjoy sex should be degraded?).

As Sam observes so astutely, the omnipresence of sexism in U.S. society continues to create gendered experiences of sexuality, the majority of which discourage women from exercising the very agency that my participants felt was empowering.

At the same time, several participants felt that polyamorous men were also subject to stereotyping. Carina pointed out how her male partner had more difficulty finding casual sex partners than she did:

For example, it is easier for me to find random sex partners than it is for my partner, because he's a guy and women assume he's a just like any other horny guy out there and they're just not out for a random hook-up, most of the time. I, on the other hand, don't particularly need another relationship right now, but it is fun to play with other folks, and I have no problem finding them because there are many guys out there who live up to the stereotype of being horn-dogs just out for play.

Isabelle came to a similar conjecture:

I think it was easier to find males who wanted to date females who wouldn't run away at the request that I want an open relationship, or the knowledge I already have a partner then [sic] if I were male trying to date females.

Notably, while these participants mentioned how men were disadvantaged in trying to find female partners, the converse—women’s comparative ease when it came to finding prospective partners—was generally not framed or emphasized as one of the larger benefits or advantages of polyamory.

Although polyamory did allow participants to pursue relationships with people of varying genders and sexes, their sexual orientations also served to complicate some aspects of their lives. Although fifteen (93.75%) out of sixteen respondents did not identify as heterosexual, twelve (75%) of them were in a long-term relationship with one or more cismale, male-identified partners (two additional participants, or 12.5%, had biomale partners who identified as trans in some fashion). For several of these women, their seemingly heterosexual relationships sometimes seemed to eclipse their identities as queer women.

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18 “STIs” stands for sexually transmitted infections.
Justine, whose partner is also genderqueer, elaborated about how she and her partner tried to challenge others’ heteronormative perceptions of them:

> I think most people assume my primary partner and I are a straight couple, because his body is masculine and mine is feminine. We do go out crossdressed together from time to time. When we were handfasted\(^{19}\) in July, he wore a gown and I wore a suit, to emphasize the gender fluidity within both of us. I think sometimes because most people assume I am straight, some women might be hesitant to hit on me that would be interested in me otherwise.

Sam felt that ey experienced a similar conundrum:

> People outside of sex-positive/queer spaces pretty much always assume I am a heterosexual woman. It is very easy for me to take on a feminine role in conversations and seduce heterosexual cismen, if I want to. It is much more difficult for me to make connections on a romantic level with women, trans people, or genderqueer people, because they tend to assume that I wouldn’t be interested.

Ryba, whose boyfriend was already married to another woman when she met him, did not speak in terms of invisibility, but did admit that her relationship made it difficult to make connections with other queer women:

> I am currently looking for a girlfriend, but my resolve to not date any more people in long-term relationships is making my search very difficult, since it’s not easy to find a single queer woman open to dating somebody in my situation.

To be clear, I am not implying that polyamory is the cause of such conundrums; in fact, I would argue the opposite, that polyamory may offer queer women added opportunities to negotiate their heterosexual privilege and maintain connections with the LGBTQ community. However, in these quotes it is apparent that heterosexuality, in its dominant status as the “default” sexuality, tends to overshadow the presence of queer desire when not being obviously challenged in some way.

### Class

When asked if class (their own or their partners’) had ever affected their experiences with polyamory, several participants strongly agreed that it was a significant factor in their relationships. Some reflected that their middle class status was what allowed them to pursue

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\(^{19}\) "Handfasting" is a neopagan marriage ceremony. Unlike traditional marriage rituals, handfasting vows can be temporary or permanent, and may or may not be legally binding. Because the neopagan community is overwhelmingly supportive of alternative lifestyles, handfastings are performed for both same-sex couples and polyamorous families.
polyamory in the first place. Mary specifically acknowledged the relationship between class privilege and polyamory:

Having the free time to explore multiple relationships is probably something of a privilege. I don't have a family to support, I'm not working 60 hours a week, I have a college degree. I can't say whether poly people I meet are of a similar economic strata, but I tend to meet people with a similar level of education to my own, or higher.

Likewise, Irene saw her class status as a boon to her relationships:

Being upper class means I have more money to spend on my partners and more leisure time to share with them. That makes it easier to maintain multiple relationships. Having a white collar job also means I'm available throughout the day for little bits of e-mail contact, which is also helpful.

Carina recounted how the limited resources available to single mothers kept her from prioritizing her own romantic relationships:

I was a single mother for three years before meeting my current partner. Even when I was in a serious relationship with a married couple, I was still a single mother. I still saw the world through the eyes of someone in a lower economic class (I couldn't afford to date, I had more important things to spend my money on.)

Participants also noted the practical benefits of multipartner relationships in which housework and childcare were shared between several partners. In describing the polyfidelous relationship between herself, her husband, and another married couple, Jennifer stated:

Also, the sheer logistics of having four adults is awesomely efficient. Chores are much easier because they are split four ways instead of two. For example, usually we have a big breakfast Saturday and/or Sunday morning. One person usually cooks with the help of another. Then, the other two clean up afterwards—dishes, etc. Or, two of us are able to watch the kids and the other two are free to go to the movies or do something else fun that we normally wouldn’t get to do.

Anne also noted the practical convenience of polyamory:

I also find poly relationships to be much more balanced than monogamous relationships in that there are more people to spread the household chores, sexual needs being met, childcare being shared etc.

However, Ryba pointed out that polyamorous relationships between people of differing classes may replicate the power imbalances that already result from class on the macro level:

When I began being poly, I was very poor, and benefited from having four partners to buy me food and offer me car rides. On the flip side, since I was
already the secondary in all of these relationships, it seemed that being poor and
being “provided for” by these people gave them a certain amount of power over
me. In one case, I stayed in a relationship longer than I normally would have
because I needed the extra groceries, and in another, I was probably more
attached than I would have been if the person hadn’t bought me necessities.

Ryba continued, stating that when she was in a period of financial stability, her class allowed
her to "treat" her partners with gifts in a similar way, with a similar outcome:

For a period of time, I was earning decent wages, and this was when I had a
girlfriend for a brief period of time. She was unemployed through the entirety of
our relationship, and I would frequently buy her presents, including plane tickets
to see her boyfriend in Boston. I think the gifts did not sit well with her, and she
may have seen them as a display of superiority or power.

One participant also described how the connections between class and polyamory
extended to the topic of health care. Alex said:

I feel like it’s easier to be polyam because now I’m middle class with access to
healthcare. When I was with Michael we were largely monogamous out of
necessity, we could not get to a doctor to get checked out if something happened.
If I didn’t have access to doctors I would not feel comfortable having more than
one partner or sharing a partner.

Having reliable access to healthcare is especially important to polyamorous women, who
tend to already be well-aware of the increased potential risk of STIs when having sexual
contact with multiple partners.

For example, when asked about the “rules” of their relationships, several of my
participants volunteered information about the precautions they used to prevent contracting
STIs, as well as to protect their other partners. Because most polyamorists are highly
conscious of such health risks, the term "fluid bonded" has been developed within the
community to specifically describe partners who exchange body fluids without contraceptive
or protective barriers between them. When describing the structure of her relationship,
Justine provided an example of how this term is often used:

Our rules are few, but we do need to meet the other people we plan to date, and
we give each other 24 hour notice if we plan to sleep over with another person.
Safe sex is also a must, and condoms and dental dams need to be used when
having sex outside our primary relationship. My partner and I are fluid bonded,
and do not used [sic] contraceptives (outside of birth control pills) when we have
sex. We both get tested for STDs and are both negative for any diseases.

Lydia exhibited a similar attentiveness to her and her partner Daryl's health:
Any contact of any genitalia (manual, oral, or penetrative) with another person first requires consent of all parties involved, including Daryl, myself, the person/people involved in the sexual activity, AND all their partners, plus a medical papers for the new sexual partner(s) showing clean test results for a series of STDs.

Polyamorous women have obvious motivations for taking an active role in addressing their health and safety concerns. Unfortunately, such vigilance requires the cooperation of the U.S. health care system, which they must turn to in order to receive information, birth control, STI testing services, and STI test result verification (i.e., the paperwork that can be shared with potential partners). When poly women have limited access to health care due to a low income and/or a lack of adequate health insurance, they are less able to seek out and benefit from these services. Their class status may then prevent them from exercising their own ideal level of precaution. Poly women may also be at risk if their partners do not have regular access to health care, and thus fall behind on their own check-ups and testing as result.

However, even when a woman is able to afford health insurance or regular access to health care, her quest for aid or information may be disrupted by discriminatory attitudes. Both Alex and Isabelle mentioned that in the past, discussion about their sexual behavior had been met with disapproval and a lack of support from health care providers. Previous research has shown that women in general receive a lower quality of health care due to damaging gender stereotypes, which result in women having their concerns dismissed or misdiagnosed by their doctors (Watkins & Whaley, 2007). Discrimination or judgment against women perceived as "promiscuous" may further decrease the quality of care they receive, or discourage them from seeking out such services in the future. While the topic of health care was not a strong theme within the majority of interviews, I feel that it’s important to emphasize how socioeconomic status and access to quality health care is an essential concern in the lives of polyamorous women.

In sum, the majority of participants felt that the ability to pursue polyamory as a lifestyle was greatly influenced by having a higher socio-economic class, if only due to the free time that developing multiple relationships demanded. They also recognized how having multiple partners could accrue both short-term and long-term logistical and financial benefits.
Race and White Invisibility

As stated previously, my sample consisted predominantly of women who self-identified as white. Thirteen (81.25%) of respondents were white, though four of them also claimed specific ethnic backgrounds of French-Caribbean, Polish, Jewish, and half-Croatian. One (6.25%) participant identified as Latina, and two (12.5%) as mixed race (one as Eastern Indian/white, and one as white/Native American).

Each participant was asked whether she thought that her race or ethnicity had ever significantly impacted her experiences with polyamory. Seven (43.75%) of the respondents—all either white or mixed race—did not believe that race had affected their experiences in any meaningful way. Those respondents' answers were usually quite brief and left little room for performing a detailed analysis of why they felt race was irrelevant to their experiences. Justine offered a response that was typical for this group:

I don't believe it has in any significant way.

Lydia's answer was also representative:

I have not had an experience in polyamory that was affected [sic] my race or ethnicity.

These brief answers are not particularly surprising; given how whiteness operates as an invisible, default race in the U.S., many white individuals (or those who are white-appearing) are conditioned to believe that race is a concept that only affects and applies to people of color. As a result, they claim to be unaffected by race, despite benefiting from systemic privileges and advantages. Without the additional, in-depth information needed to fully contextualize each person's specific experiences and interactions with race, however, it is not possible to fully account for how white invisibility and other racial politics have affected their perspectives, or vice versa.

Interestingly, five (31.25%) participants suspected that they may have experienced some privilege due to their race, but weren’t quite sure how, or how it may have related to their experiences with polyamory. An additional four (25%) participants readily acknowledged that race had significantly impacted their lives in some way; three of these women (Sam, Isabelle, and Jennifer) were white, but all were highly politically conscious, and Sam and Isabelle both identified as activists. From these nine participants, two strong themes emerged: first, they seemed to agree with previous research that characterized the
polyamorous community as being mostly racially homogenous; and second, they demonstrated an understanding of whiteness as resulting in increased personal autonomy.

Regardless of whether or not they felt that race had impacted them personally, many of the participants found it easy to evaluate what races were most reflected in both the polyamorous community, and in their general dating pools. Overall, participants seemed to concur with claims that the polyamorous community is predominantly white (as discussed earlier, in Chapters 1 and 2). Raffaella, a Latina, gave the best example of this when describing how her first encounters with polyamory left her feeling alienated:

I met a woman who swept me off my feet. After a few dates, I was really into her. She exclaimed the same, but that she had been dating other people as well. At first, I was a little hurt, but she explained to me that she was Poly and suggested I read a book called, ‘The Ethical Slut’ and that would give me perspective. So, I went out and bought this book, read it. I found it interesting, but I couldn’t identify with the people in the book because they were of non-latino decent [sic]. At the time, I was having a difficult time identifying with the book because it didn’t take into consideration the value-set that come with being Latino.

The other eight participants who mentioned race, who were all white, did not experience this same alienation; instead, they most often described their partners and other polyamorists as “looking like me.” The following statement by Ryba neatly summarizes the spirit of many of these participants’ responses:

Since I’m white, and since most of the poly community is as well, my race/ethnicity have not had an effect on my experiences with polyamory.

Mary, like a few others, actually did recognize her whiteness as an advantage, but also echoed Ryba’s answer:

As a relatively white-looking white person I have the privilege of not thinking about my race/ethnicity all that much. My friends/dating pool tends to look similar to me too [. . .]

In these quotes, the respondents acknowledge how their whiteness is reflected back at them when they interact with the rest of the polyamorous community. Although I do not claim that this sample is representative, the testimony of the participants certainly supports conclusions drawn in previous studies, which assert that the polyamorous community is one that is primarily homogeneous in terms of race (Sheff, 2005).

Several participants went beyond acknowledging the lack of diversity in the polyamorous community, and suggested that their whiteness gave them more freedom in making choices about their romantic and sexual lives. Jennifer alluded to this:
I think that in general, people would not look at me after learning about my poly lifestyle and think, ‘Well, she’s just out of control and what do you expect from ‘those’ people?’ If I were black and/or poor though? I bet that would run through many people’s mind.

Isabelle put this advantage in frank terms:

I'm relatively privileged, so I came into all of this with the attitude that of course I could make my relationship the way I want, and the world will deal with it.

[...] I don't get a huge amount of scrutiny from the world being small white and female, and I use that to do what I like.

Abby agreed that racial hierarchies had enabled her to avoid the consequences of others’ criticism:

Indirectly, in that I am privileged in this regard, and can probably get away with doing more radical things without really suffering the consequences of other people’s judgement[.]

Though not all participants were so self-aware about the relevance of race to their lives, those who were seemed ready to acknowledge how whiteness had allowed them to make decisions about polyamory without worrying about how it would reflect on their racial group as a whole.

My data also suggested strong but separate answers as to why polyamory might hold less appeal for people of color. Raffaella described how her cultural background conflicted with both her sexuality and participation in polyamory:

I feel that being Latina has affected my experiences because culturally I have been conditioned to not enjoy sex, that it’s sacred and that it should only be between man and woman and used for procreation, but a lot of culture is embedded with religion. I have found that I often struggle internally with that value set beset upon me by my family and culture. I often time find myself reassuring myself that the lifestyle I live doesn’t necessarily coincide with the way I was raised, but I think any queer person can empathize with that feeling.

While all individuals encounter similar pressures to embrace monogamy and form long-term romantic partnerships in the West, Raffaella exemplifies why we must still take the care to apply an intersectional analysis to polyamory; once we contextualize it within varying ethnocultural practices, we can see how compulsory monogamy may not be equally affected by other important institutions, like religion and family, which exert their influence in varying degrees from culture to culture.
On the other hand, a quote from Crystal suggested something quite different. Though she is white, one of her two heterosexual cismale partners is black. She described his perspective on polyamory:

Ben, who is black, kind of rolls his eyes when I mention polyamory. He doesn’t see the need to put a name to it, and has called it a ‘white person’ thing to do. When I asked what he meant by that, he said that white people felt the need to name and study everything, whereas people in the black community have been acknowledging their significant others’ auxiliary relationships for years without ever having to put a name to it.

Although we must account for the fact that these are not Ben’s own words, and that their ultimate meaning is being filtered through Crystal, this quote opens up several potential lines of interpretation. While Raffaella earlier indicated that her ethnic background was at serious odds with her polyamorous identity, Ben does not seem to feel that a polyamorous identity is a necessary thing. His justification for this perspective is not completely clear, however. It may be that he is avoiding stigma of polyamorous behavior by rejecting the label outright; the quote might also indicate that non-monogamous behavior carries different degrees of stigma within different cultures and ethnicities. At the very least, his comments seem to imply that an adherence to fixed labels of identity is not always deemed necessary or valuable within different communities. Given the vague context of this quote, it does not seem appropriate to make any definitive conclusions. However, it is reasonable to assume that much more research will be necessary to fully unpack how various racial and ethnic communities interpret and evaluate polyamorous and/or non-monogamous behavior.

My intent is not to draw any conclusions from just these two short quotes alone, as they have limited inferential power; instead, I hope to emphasize just how important it is to locate polyamorous practices within a more complicated network of racial and cultural interactions. Overall, my results suggest that while the polyamorous community does not seem to suffer from much internal racial conflict (likely due its white majority), there is reason to believe that racial politics do influence the likelihood of the participation of people of color, though the reasons why are not yet clear.

**Age**

One of the most interesting aspects of my findings related to age, and the resulting generational differences within the polyamorous community. Participants had a mean age of
26.31 years old, which is much lower than the typical age demographic of other polyamory-related studies. In a follow-up questionnaire, I asked participants if they thought that their age had ever affected either their polyamorous experiences, or their interactions with other poly people; fourteen (87.5%) women responded to the question. Four (28.57%) of these participants felt that their age had not affected their polyamorous identities in any significant way. From the other ten (71.43%) respondents, a variety of themes emerged.

Participants characterized their age group in several positive ways. A few saw both themselves and their peers as being more open-minded than older generations, especially when it came to issues of love and sexuality. Keira said,

[. . .] I think the younger generation is more open to a less traditional version of sexuality. For instance, both myself and the woman I was involved with openly identified as bisexual among friends and same-age acquaintances, but neither of us would communicate that to older family members or older acquaintances; most older people that I know are either blatantly anti-homosexual or at least uncomfortable with openly discussing non-heterosexuality. This isn't to say that there aren't exceptions, but that is the trend that I have seen.

Jennifer expressed this in a similar way:

I think that being younger (early 30s) has made me more open to alternative lifestyles in general. I grew up watching the LGBT community fight for rights and have always supported this.

Rather than try to characterize their age group as a whole, other participants focused on how their age made it easier for people to accept their polyamorous identities. Abby eloquently described the temporary benefits of youth:

On the other hand, I think because I am young, people are more willing to accept that I have multiple partners, because I have not yet reached a point where I am expected to be getting married, buying a house, having kids, and all those traditionally coupley sorts of things. The lack of judgement makes the whole poly experience significantly easier than I imagine it will be in the future when people expect me to 'settle down' in a more traditional manner.

Likewise, Sam said:

i think it may be easier for younger people to be poly, particularly in a college atmosphere, because hook-up/casual dating culture is so common. so i think it may be easier for me to come off as ‘available’ than older people.

To a certain extent, then, these women were able to benefit from stereotypes that cast young women as being fickle, less serious, or less knowledgeable about life; after all, if polyamory
is written off as a youthful experiment, then the consequences of discrimination are considerably lessened, at least temporarily.

Despite these positives, participants also gave reasons for why their age seemed to put them at a disadvantage within the poly community. In the paradoxical way that many stereotypes contain both good and bad attributes, participants felt that their age also caused others to take or treat them less seriously when it came to their commitment or interest in polyamorous relationships. Carina, when asked if the factor of age had affected her experiences, answered:

I'd say definitely! I mean, mainly in terms of being taken seriously. Poly folks who meet me, age 26, need time to figure out that I DO know myself, I CAN speak articulately about what I feel, and I am worth talking to.

Ryba, who was one of the few women in my study whose primary relationship was her partner’s secondary relationship, also felt that her age had negatively impacted her experiences:

I was 21 when officially became poly, which made me just old enough to catch the eyes of the married people in their mid- to late-20's that I dated, all but one of whom got bored with the novelty of a young inexperienced person within a few months. I feel that being fairly youthful in the poly scene has made it incredibly hard for me to find my own relationships--I am basically cursed with being a secondary. Because I did not enter into poly with a partner, I haven't been able to find somebody open to being poly who is not already in a primary relationship. I think if I had started being poly a little later, I wouldn't have this problem.

However, it was Abby who again offered the most detailed description of age discrimination:

[. . .] I feel often feel unfortunately objectified as a ‘toy,’ especially within the poly community. Stereotypes of my generation being promiscuous also really do not help. I feel like I get less respect within the poly community because I am young, and it results in a fair number of unpleasant interactions, with people we hardly know going so far as to ask my older, male partner to [sic] if they may ‘borrow’ me - like because I'm young, they assume I'm the toy rather than a partner in the relationship, or even an autonomous human being. A few have flat out asked if I'm their chew/sextoy, after seeing something so innocuous as the three of us holding hands in a bar or restaurant.

If Abby’s troubling experiences are even partially representative of younger poly women overall (and this is not to say they are), it is clear that the lack of respect given to young women can substantially affect their interactions with older generations, even with other polyamorists.
Many of the participants also characterized the polyamorous community as generally being older than themselves. Irene described why this fact mattered:

The established local poly community averages in the 50s and 60s (and an uncomfortable number of members tend to treat poly social events as a chance to hit on people). [. . . .] I don't object to spending time with older people, but in groups of exclusively older people it's hard for me to find any who share my life experiences. For example, they tend to be concerned with issues like coming out to adult children, a topic of no particular relevance to me, whereas my agemates often discuss things like the difficulties of coming out to parents who may still be providing financial support, a topic of no particular relevance to the over 50 crowd.

Isabelle noticed similar imbalances in her interactions with the older members of the community:

Being just out of college and in the adult world can be disorienting on its own, however being at least 15 year the junior of everyone at a poly meet up and feeling more the peer of their children made it more odd. I felt like I couldn't use poly meet ups to make friends with poly people because of it.

Notably, Isabelle addressed this issue by forming her own local “meet-up” group for younger polyamorists, a role of leadership which she says increased the amount of respect she received from older polyamorists.

I feel that it is also important to note that while most agreed that the existing polyamorous community was generally older than them, some did not feel excluded by this fact; in fact, one participant remarked that she felt grateful for the guidance and advice that older polyamorists were able to provide. Ana said:

I do tend to be more comfortable discussing this lifestyle with older people who identify as poly, because ostensibly they've had more experience and more time to figure out how everything works.

So though some felt left out of established polyamory circles due to age disparities, there was also an appreciation for the knowledge and experiences that older people were willing to impart.

To summarize, about three-fourths of my sample agreed that age had played a role in their interactions with polyamory, with the reasons being both positive and negative. Nearly all seemed to be familiar with stereotypes that cast younger women as being less stable in their interests and identifications, and less serious overall. For some, this allowed them to postpone the most serious consequences of poly discrimination (at least in theory), but others expressed frustration and anger about not being taken seriously due to their age. Generational
differences within the polyamorist community also caused some participants to feel alienated or uncomfortable in some poly spaces, though some also felt grateful to have poly “elders” to seek advice from.

**POLYAMORY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF QUEERNESS**

When asked, eight (50%) participants did identify as queer in some fashion. Usually, this term was used to apply to fluid sexual orientations, often for the purpose of acknowledging one’s attraction to people across spectrums of masculinity, femininity, and sex. Frequently, though, these women also related queerness to a broader sense of “outsiderness,” or resistance to mainstream culture. Anne emphasized this aspect in her answer:

> I have identified as queer since age 13. The how and why of my queer identity are a little more complex… for me, ‘queer’ is a reclamation term; I am a deviation from the norm, unconventional and strange [sic] I do not fit into a preformed mold of behavior and expression. My queer identity not only includes my sexual orientation but also my approach to life in general. I live in a space that exists outside the norm and is unconventional.

Carina, when asked this question, affirmed her attachment to the word “queer”:

> [. . .] it makes the most sense to identify my simple sexual orientation that way, however it is also broader than that. I don't like the whole labeling system we use for people in terms of self-identity when it comes to gender and sexuality, so I prefer to just be recognized as a person. I feel that queer enables that, a bit, and conveys the lack of importance I place on the lables [sic].

Summer too felt that queerness was a part of her identity in many ways:

> To me, ‘queer’ is an all-encompassing word to describe anybody who is something other than heterosexual. It identifies me with the queer community, in a way that doesn’t necessarily dictate my sexual preferences, which is ultimately less important, in my opinion.

While some participants were easily able to apply the term “queer” to themselves in these ways, others were perplexed by its usage. Given the term’s complicated past as first a slur, and then later as a word reclaimed by radical queer activists, it is hardly surprising that it causes confusion and apprehension in those not already familiar with its ongoing reclamation. For example, Irene rejected the term “queer,” saying:

> No; I think of queer as being primarily related to gender identity, and I've never identified as anything other than strongly female

Crystal, who identified as sexually bisexual, but romantically heterosexual, said:
I haven’t had enough exposure to queer culture to feel that I have a full understanding of what it is, though I do have friends that consider themselves queer. I do not know what it means to be queer, and feel no need to find out, as I know what I like and don’t like and feel adept enough at describing those things to people without using the word ‘queer.’

Others expressed discomfort with this identification because they associated it with people who are more visibly or actively LGBTQ. Keira’s answer exemplified this:

I’ve generally heard ‘queer’ to refer to people who are openly and obviously homosexual (i.e. cross-dressing men, very ‘butch’ women, gay men who are feminine and very obviously gay). I generally come across as a run-of-the-mill, if slightly assertive, woman, so I don’t identify as queer.

Jennifer even went so far as to say that she would like to identify as queer, but didn’t feel as though her limited participation in the community merited it:

I would like to consider myself queer, but to me, queer means someone who is living an ‘out and proud’ lifestyle. Queer is a label for someone who actively advocates for the LGBT community and is fairly visible and obvious about their sexual orientation/gender identity.

So, in spite of the fluidity and open-ended qualities associated with queerness, it was not a term that was equally accessible to or understood by all individuals, even among those who already identified with the LGBTQ community.

Regardless of whether they actively identified as queer or not, all participants were asked if they considered polyamory to be a “queer” practice. Though a more theoretical discussion about this possible relationship will take place in the fifth chapter, here I will focus specifically on participants’ perspectives on the matter. Participants unanimously felt that polyamory could, but ultimately should not be assumed to be a queer practice. The distinction seemed to lie primarily in sexual orientation; most felt that having multiple partners did not mean that one necessarily rejected heteronormativity as well. Mary responded,

I think straight people can practice polyamory and still identify as 100% straight, in that they’re only romantically or sexually interested in members of the opposite sex. And if you’re somebody who has multiple partners but who is very invested in, say, maintaining traditional gender roles, I would still call that straight. Very straight. Too straight for me.

Anne used a more inclusive definition of polyamory to demonstrate why “queer” was not applicable to all polyamorists:
When one considers the translation of polyamory (poly=many and amor=love in Greek and Latin) anyone involved in a multi-person relationship is technically poly. Using the concept of ‘many loves’ FLDS\textsuperscript{20} plural marriages are polyamorous even though the sister wives do not engage in sexual intimacy with one another or several sister wives with their husband at the same time.

Sam also felt that queerness and polyamory constituted separate identities:

No, I know many heterosexual polyamorous people, and many queer monogamous people. The sexual desire to be with someone of a certain gender or sex is a very different issue from whether a person is comfortable being limited to being in a relationship with only one person at a time. I am queer because I am attracted to people of various sexes and genders—I’m not queer because I don’t like being figuratively tied down and feeling like my partner owns me and controls my actions.

Thus, participants were careful to establish polyamory as a practice and/or identity that existed outside of queerness, and should not be subsumed beneath it.

This did not mean, however, that they completely disavowed the connections between polyamory and queerness. In fact, most also recognized that queer people were a part of the polyamorous community, and that the queer community was accepting of polyamory. Ryba, for example, did not think that polyamory was queer in and of itself, but did notice the queer presence amongst polyamorists:

I don’t think that poly is a queer practice in and of itself, but there is a large queer population within the poly community. I am queer regardless of how many people I am in a relationship with. The fact that I am queer and poly is purely coincidental.

Jennifer characterized the queer community as being especially tolerant of polyamory, stating,

I think it’s more accepted in the queer community, but I don’t think most polyamorists consider themselves queer. The word ‘queer’ has only really been adopted by the LGBT community and I personally haven’t heard it used to identify people living other atypical sexual practices.

Following her earlier quote, Mary also continued on, writing about the overlap between the two communities:

I think polyamory can be seen as a ‘queer practice’ for two entirely different reasons. First, it seems that a lot of poly people are poly because they’re bisexual

\textsuperscript{20} “FLDS” stands for the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a fundamentalist Mormon denomination that follows the doctrine of plural marriage (unlike the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or LDS church, which renounced polygamy in 1904).
to some degree, and interested in having partners of different genders simultaneously. When I was actively trying to meet women, I found plenty of people in the same boat I ended up in: women who were attached to men, but who wanted to date women also. I suspect that the overlap between queer-identified people and poly-identified people is far greater than the overlap between straight people and poly-identified people. [. . . .]

Second, it's ‘queer’ in the big-tent sense that it questions social norms surrounding sex.

Mary’s second point—that polyamory, like queerness, questions established norms within society—also echoed throughout other participants’ responses, usually with the caveat that polyamory did this to a lesser extent than queer politics. Isabelle compared it to a point system, saying:

[. . .] I don't feel like being poly make me queer. Polyamory is outside of the charmed circle to be sure, and thus I feel it is somehow give me [sic] a ‘queer point’ where if enough of them add up I could claim queer as an identity. Which is to say, it can be part of a queer identity, and it may help one move toward one, but it is not sufficient for claiming one.

Lydia used similar logic, eventually rejecting polyamory as not queer “enough” to merit its application to all polyamorists:

I can see how a polyamorous person would be considered queer. I don’t personally think of it as something that alone would categorize a person as ‘queer’. Being queer is a matter of self identity, and applying the term queer to a practice as broadly defined as polyamory seems to be too much of a generalization.

I suspect that these attempts to qualify polyamory’s degree of queerness may stem from the differing levels of politicization within the two communities. Participants associated “queer” with fluidity in gender and sexual orientation, and, in some cases, with high visibility and activeness in LGBTQ issues as well. These definitions, when combined with the radical nature of the queer movement, imbues the idea of queerness with significant political undertones. However, only one-quarter (25%) of participants felt that their identities as polyamorous women were distinctly political, or motivated in some way by their other political beliefs. The vast majority (75%) did not see their polyamorous identity as being political; in some cases, they rejected the notion of politicization almost vehemently. Ana declared,

Absolutely not political for me. My participation is purely based on my own need and desire to give and receive as much love as possible.
Ryba also explained,

My poly identity is not political. I am poly because that is how I am—I’m not trying to prove anything to anybody or make a statement.

Most respondents repeated variations of the above quotes, drawing a clear line between their love lives and the largely negative connotation of politicization.

However, while they were clear about separating politics from their relationships, most also asserted that they felt strongly about increasing tolerance for all sexual identities and practices, and supported the political action that attempted to accomplish this. Justine offered a representative statement:

I don't think my polyamorous identity is all that politically motivated. I do think polygamy should be legal between consenting adults, as well as homosexual marriage.

Crystal gave another example, saying:

I do not consider it to be political at all, though I do feel that people should be given much more rights to explore their sexual identities and discover the infinite possibilities without being hindered by laws enforcing who and how many can and cannot get married and perform other legal actions.

Quite similar to Hadar Aviram’s (2010) findings (discussed earlier in Chapter 2), the participants were passionate about equality between all types of relationships, but largely indifferent to the idea of mobilizing around polyamory specifically. This lack of politicization may be one factor that contributed to their characterization of polyamory as queer only in limited ways; unlike the queer movement, most polyamorists do not feel that political action is necessary, or that they need to have their relationships legitimized through the state.

**RESEARCH CHALLENGES**

Like other researchers before me, I found it difficult to find participants who were diverse in race and class. Although part of this outcome could be attributed to various methodological factors that affect Internet research, such as how various groups within a population may use the Internet for very different purposes, and thus occupy different “corners” of the Internet, it also seems to confirm what has already been indicated in earlier studies: that the polyamorous community is predominantly white and educated.
I also encountered a significant amount of hostility from people who saw my 18-35 age limit as ageist and misguided. For example, after posting my recruitment ad to the Polyamory.com forums, I received the following reply from another forum member:

I might mention that if you want more real value other than a passing grade for a class from your research, you may want to consider dropping your age restrictions you originally posted.

I suspect that what you would find is that particular subset (broad generalization that should hold) will be a group that is still 'finding their way' in general - in life as well as polyamory. Correspondingly, you will likely find much corresponding with the mistakes, misunderstandings, lack of experience/knowledge etc. In other words, many of the struggles and horror stories so prevalent.

In order to get a broader understanding of where polyamory CAN lead longer term I think you may need to broaden your perspective.

In the same thread, a different individual took offense to both my age limit, and my use of the word "queer":

Your study is not a random sample and you need to be clear about that.

By limiting your age range, you are showing bias. I personally would find your word of queer women to be offensive. I think most people consider themselves lesbians.

I understood why women who were outside this age range (or who were unfamiliar with the reclaimed use of the word "queer") reacted critically and, at times, angrily, as society in general tends to be dismissive and even demeaning towards middle-aged and elderly women. As part of my commitment to feminist research, I always tried to be transparent and explain my reasons for this limitation (both in e-mails and message board responses), so that my recruitment materials would not contribute to the disempowerment of other women. On more than one occasion, after I explained that younger women’s experiences with polyamory had yet to be fully explored within the literature, my critics were surprised to hear that there were academic studies on polyamory at all, and requested sources that I happily shared.

Several times, my posts and listserv announcements were also met with a barrage of questions that sought to determine whether or not I was performing a legitimate study; I always attempted to answer these questions in a timely and honest way, in hopes of establishing a positive reputation with these online poly communities (however insignificant that reputation may be). My only truly negative experience was with a male respondent who
posed as a potential participant, asked me questions about myself (which I misunderstood to be a “test” for possible bias in my research, and naïvely answered), and then revealed his identity by offering to personally introduce me to polyamory.

While it was admittedly difficult to respond politely to the few individuals who were rude and demanding, most seemed reassured by my willingness to engage with them, rather than simply posting an ad and disappearing from the community. After I answered one poster's questions about privacy protections, he or she wrote:

Thanks, this is good to see, and thanks also for posting the approval/IRB info. If the comments here seem suspicious and unwelcoming, it's because of previous survey attempts - not everybody who wants to survey poly folk knows what they should about human subjects research.

I eventually understood that the suspicions this poster referenced were probably warranted, and that such reactions were not unusual within the world of online social research. Chen, Hall, and Johns (2004) categorize three distinct types of reactions to the presence of researchers and journalists in online forums and listservs: animosity, conditionality, and welcoming. Animosity occurs when group members openly reject (and often insult) the researcher seeking information, sometimes even preventing them from access to the group altogether; conditionality occurs when group members require that the researcher provide some reassurances about confidentiality, anonymity, accurate sourcing, and/or a supportive attitude toward the topic before participating in their research; and finally, some groups exhibit open and welcoming attitudes towards researchers from the start, especially if they are hoping to generate public interest in their shared issue. I encountered all three of these attitudes (sometimes from different people within the same forum), and while this was initially frustrating to me, it also helped me to appreciate the poly community’s protectiveness of its members, as well as its sensitivity to misrepresentation, exploitation, and the potential consequences of claiming a public polyamorous identity.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapter, I utilized the findings of my study to bear emphasis on the usefulness of applying intersecting factors of circumstance and identity to readings of polyamory as both an identity and as a practice. With this, I also began to untangle the complex, tricky, and sometimes intangible divide between the polyamorous and queer communities. Though I cannot promise any sort of definitive answers to my original inquiries, in the following pages I hope to outline the broader implications of the themes I found, as well as what they may reveal about the positionality of polyamory within subcultures of sexuality.

Even in the earliest stages of this project, I was struck by how most literature and academic research presented polyamory simply as a matter of choice, in the abstract way that neoliberal ideology reduces most choices down to individual preferences. By presuming a “level playing field” where all actors have equal access to the same set of options, such a perspective strips away political context and universalizes the experiences of white, middle-class U.S. citizens. Questioning these representations, I sought to apply a critical feminist gaze to polyamory, one that dynamically dealt with the factors that are too quickly dismissed as mere demographic information, rather than influential components of identity. While my sample did not quite reach the level of diversity I had hoped for in terms of race, I still found a great deal of support for my suspicion that forces such as race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation all impact one’s experiences with polyamory.

For most of the participants, polyamory seemed to open up the options available to them. Instead of bowing to cultural pressures that encourage women to self-sacrifice in their relationships, the women in this study felt empowered to pursue and fulfill all manner of personal needs. For the bisexual, pansexual, and queer majority, polyamory also allowed them the freedom to acknowledge their attraction to people of varying genders and sexes, without having to sacrifice either their existing relationships or their visibility as queer people. Because polyamory seems to increase the regularity of communication in their
relationships, they felt better able to assert their needs, and were more self-aware of what those needs were.

However, the testimony of the sixteen participants also revealed a variety of complications, not all of which were necessarily due to polyamory alone. Despite feeling positive about exercising their agency in their relationships, the majority of participants felt disempowered by the sexual double standards that exist for women, and feared that they would be accused of being promiscuous and irresponsible. Others feared that polyphobia would someday have serious consequences on their employment status, or their families. Stereotypes about the respondents’ relative youth sometimes allowed them to skirt serious judgments against them, but many were also frustrated when they were taken less seriously or given less respect by adults older than themselves.

The findings also suggested that polyamory may not be a relationship construct that is equally accessible to all individuals; instead, there were a variety of factors that seemed to affect the likelihood of one’s participation. Although approximately half of the sample did not think that race had been relevant to their experiences in polyamory, several others acknowledged that white privilege allowed them more room for social experimentation, and did not cause them to feel alienated by polyamorous spaces where white was the majority race. Two participants also offered examples of how the ethnocultural differences associated with race dramatically affected attitudes toward polyamory (making it unthinkable in one case, and simply unnecessary in the other).

Finally, an examination of class gave insight into the financial and practical benefits of having multiple partners who could combine finances and contribute to household labor. While participants noted the ways in which they had benefitted from a partner’s financial stability (or vice versa), they also pointed out that such situations often led to interpersonal tension and power disparities within the relationship. Others discussed how class dictated the amount of time and energy that could be directed to maintaining or pursuing multiple relationships, as well as how access to health care services could seriously influence the decision to be polyamorous or monogamous.

Reviewing the data, it is easy to see why an intersectional analysis is so paramount to the study of any particular social phenomenon or behavior; rather than presuming that it was a coincidence that most polyamorists were white, middle-aged, and middle to upper-middle
class, this study indicates that one’s socioeconomic status (which strongly correlates to race) plays a large part in determining whether an individual will have the time, energy, and inclination to commit to a polyamorous lifestyle.

The far more difficult task was attempting to further an understanding of the relationship between polyamory and queerness. Much of the challenge arises from the fact that “queer” is an intentionally slippery term; used primarily to refer to fluid gender and sexual orientation, it is also a concept that is increasingly used by scholars to describe nearly any subversion of norms. As intriguing and thought-provoking as abstract conceptualizations of queerness are, I sought to discover where the boundaries of queerness exist in the real world, and how they interacted with polyamory.

At the start of my research, I thought of polyamory as being inherently full of queer possibilities and innovations. Because my original introductions to polyamory were through gay and lesbian histories, I mistakenly assumed that it must still be motivated by political and emotional objections to heteronormativity. Fortunately, the research process requires us to verify such suspicions, and in doing so, I found that my initial assumptions were not at all accurate. Despite having an overwhelmingly bi/pan/queer sample, most were adamant that their identities as polyamorous women existed separately from their queer identities. However, it is still unclear what kind of identity polyamory represents in and of itself, due in part to the fact that not all polyamorists agree on whether polyamory arises as the result of an internal orientation, or an individual choice. There were respondents in my study who expressed each of these perspectives. The confusion that this issue presents may partially explain why polyamorists are so committed to an apolitical stance, in respect to their poly identities, and perhaps also why they do not wish to claim a place within the wider queer community. Until there is greater clarification and reflection on this issue by polyamorists themselves, it remains difficult to disentangle these tensions.

There seemed to be an additional factor that influenced why the participants felt that the polyamorous community, despite defying mononormativity, could not be considered to be part of larger queer networks. Much to my own surprise, several respondents specifically stated that the presence of heterosexual men within the polyamorous community meant that there was a possibility for the proliferation and reinforcement of traditional male-female relationship inequalities (as in the case of some fundamentalist polygamist sects), and that
this potential made the community "too straight" for queer inclusion. Participants also made sure to describe how, in their experiences, most polyamorists had initially entered the community as heterosexual couples who were "opening up" their relationships. In other words, because heterosexual relationships remain very much at the core of polyamory's acknowledged\textsuperscript{21} history and the romantic/sexual experiences of many polyamorists themselves, the community as a whole can still benefit from heterosexism in a way that queers never will. In several of the answers I received, there also seemed to be subtle clues suggesting that while same-sex relationships may be accepted by most polyamorists, they were not as valued as heterosexual relationships. This is not to say that the participants actually felt this was the case; but because their relationships with other women were often considered to be their “secondary” relationships, rather than their “primary” ones, this hierarchal terminology suggests different levels of primacy or importance. One participant even stated that male same-sex relationships would receive far less approval than female same-sex relationships, presumably because straight polyamorous men do not eroticize gay male sexualities as they do lesbian sexualities. Thus, the presence of heterosexual privilege and homophobia may be functioning in several different ways to effectively neutralize the "queer" aspects of polyamorous subversion.

In the end, though, this is a complex issue that is almost impossible to entirely deconstruct within such a small-scale study. The most reliable lesson to be learned is that we should not be too quick to presume that the boundaries of queerness encompass all those who defy some type of romantic or sexual norm. While academic definitions of queer can afford to remain unfixed and destabilizing, lived experiences seem to draw bolder lines around what it means (or doesn't mean) to be queer.

Of course, an inevitable question remains: where to go from here? The results strongly encourage future studies to also adopt an intersectional analysis, in order to better locate polyamorous men and women within the cultural contexts that likely influence attitudes or even predispositions toward polyamory. The class and economical aspects of polyamory are also rich with potential insight; out of all the factors I asked about, I was most

\textsuperscript{21} I use the word "acknowledged" here to indicate how the contemporary polyamorous community as a whole rarely makes reference to the specific gay and lesbian non-monogamies that co-evolved, if not preceded, their own.
surprised and impressed by how class particularly seemed to have substantial effects on who could practice polyamory, and who stood to benefit from it the most. Since women’s economic security has been historically tied to their romantic relationships, this is an issue that warrants a feminist investigation, especially.

In light of my results, I would also like to advocate for a more in-depth cross-cultural comparison between polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamy that exist around the world. How specific is polyamory to Western and white-majority societies, and why? How do women assert their desire for multiple partners in other cultures, and how does it affect their internal identity construction? How might the concept of women openly having multiple partners antagonize cultural fears about female sexual agency, or correlate with women’s overall status in society?

Such questions are becoming increasingly important as non-monogamous practices receive more attention in the worldwide mass media. Even at the time of this writing, anti-polygamy laws are being contentiously challenged in the B.C. Supreme Court in Canada. Two sides have emerged in this legal battle: religious fundamentalists, who, along with a select few polyamorists, have positioned the issue as one of personal and religious freedom; and advocates of women's and children's rights, who have also provided powerful evidence of how such practices (within religious contexts) are systematically used to subordinate and harm women and girls (Bramham, 2011). As such discussions reach both the public and the state, it becomes ever more vital that we attempt to reconcile these contrasting experiences and uses of non-monogamy, in order to address the differing needs of those who choose it, and those who are coerced into it.

The study of polyamory is also overdue for an ideological comparison between the non-monogamies of the 1960s and 1970s and the contemporary polyamory movement. How does each of these “waves” of non-monogamy represent differing attitudes toward community, communality, and individualism? Will later generations of polyamorists, like the women in my study, embrace the utopian visions that are so much a part of polyamory’s past?

Finally, my research also revealed to me exactly how little focus has been directed toward understanding whether polyamorists feel as though their identity represents an internal orientation, or whether they view polyamory simply as an alternative option for
relationships. Although I did not ask about this topic, I had participants who espoused each perspective; the lack of clarity around this issue is in and of itself a huge gap in our knowledge, though it may not be source of conflict among polyamorists themselves.

In light of these additional lines of inquiry, this study seems relatively small and limited in its scope. However, even this finite contribution was able to reveal how complex women’s negotiations with their sexual and emotional needs can be, especially when attempts to do so defy the very patriarchal norms that would wish to limit their autonomy. While polyamory offers no easy answers for women who desire multiple relationships, it does present them with opportunities for empowerment and self-expression. In an era of conservatism that encourages the policing of both women’s bodies and hearts, the importance of this should not be underestimated. For as long as women take the care to intervene and question the compulsory forces that shape their lives, as the women in my study have done with monogamy, they will remain better equipped for resisting the oppressive forces that seek to restrict their self-determination.
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