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School for Professional Studies Graduate Programs
Professional Project

Certification of Authorship of Professional Project Work

Print Student's Name Elaine Cook

Telephone 707-794-7334 Email cascade@hisys.com

Date of Submission 11/17/05 Degree Program M.A.

Title of Submission Commitment in Polyamorous Relationships

Advisor/Faculty Name Bob Collins

Certification of Authorship:

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Elaine S Cook
Student Signature

11/17/05
Date

Regis University
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Advisor/Professional Project Faculty Approval Form

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Relationships

Advisor Name Dr. Robert Collins
PLEASE PRINT

Project Faculty Name Juanita Ratner
PLEASE PRINT

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Juanita Ratner
Original Signature

11/28/05
Date

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COMMITMENT IN POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS

By

Elaine Cook

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Psychology

REGIS UNIVERSITY
November, 2005

COMMITMENT IN POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS

by

Elaine Cook

has been approved

November, 2005

APPROVED:

_____, MLS Faculty Advisor

_____, MLS Degree Chair

ABSTRACT

Commitment in Polyamorous Relationships

Polyamory, or having multiple loving, sexual relationships concurrently without deception or betrayal, has had little scholarly attention. This paper uses interviews with 7 long term polyamorous couples to explore the nature of a commitment that is not defined by sexual exclusivity. The author describes the nature of the relationships that respondents are involved in, their conceptualization of the nature of commitment, the ways that they maintain their primary bond, and the benefits of polyamory as perceived by the participants. The common elements leading to a successful primary relationship were mutual appreciation, emotional closeness, caring, honesty, good communication, and flexibility. The respondents were oriented towards personal growth.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Monogamy is the assumed standard for relationships in our culture. A married person who has sex outside the marriage is assumed to be cheating, to be unfaithful. The same standard is applied to anyone in a committed relationship. Yet there are people who have agreed that they will not be sexually exclusive, and who have sex with others with the full consent of their partner. One way of doing this has been called "polyamory" (often shortened within the polyamorous community to "poly").

About Polyamory

Definition

Polyamory has been defined by White (2004, p. 17) as "Living by the principle that it is possible to love more than one person at a time without deception or betrayal". Furthermore, she pointed out that most of the definitions of polyamory found on the Internet "utilize words like *ethical, responsible, honorable, open, honest, intentional, and principled*" (p 20). This is in contrast to the concept generally held in our culture that having a sexual partner in addition to your spouse is a betrayal. Couples who are polyamorous have made a conscious decision to have other partners while maintaining their connection and commitment to their original partner. This is a mutual agreement, not a betrayal.

The topic of polyamory or open relationships has received very little formal academic investigation. This is in spite of the fact that it is a subject of great interest to many Americans as shown by the number of web sites that speak about it and the number of yahoo groups which

pertain to it: a search on <http://www.google.com> on January 22, 2005 yielded 179,000 entries for polyamory, compared with 353,000 entries for monogamy. On the same day, a search on Yahoo (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) for groups which mention polyamory yielded 252 groups, a number of which had more than a thousand members. Many were intended for people in specific locations, which included 32 states, many Canadian provinces, and several countries. In addition, there are an unknown number of others which are "hidden," do not have the word "polyamory" in their description, or are hosted at other sites. Some of these are listed at <http://www.polyamory.org/SF/groups.html>, which shows groups in an additional 5 states.

Lack of Research on Polyamory

Why has there been little research on this topic? Rubin (2001) hypothesized that "Swinging, group marriages, and communes [and polyamory] may remain on the periphery of study and tolerance because they threaten the cultural image of what marriage is supposed to be" (p. 724). Elisabeth Sheff, who started research for her Ph.D. in sociology in the late 1990s, received some encouragement "because it was an area that had not been developed yet and it is good to be a groundbreaker," but also discouragement, because it is a "freaky" topic and she could be marginalized because of the topic (personal communication, January 19, 2005). The Institute for 21st Century Relationships has been attempting to start an academic journal that would be a "forum for the publication of interdisciplinary research findings bearing on the broad topic of alternative and nontraditional relationships" (<http://lovethatworks.org/journal.html>, January 22, 2005). However, they have had little success because of the lack of research. According to Jim Fleckenstein (personal communication, January 14, 2005), "There have been a

couple of published articles on swingers, but virtually nothing on polyamory or the more generic 'open relationships.' There have been some theses written, but not published."

Many social scientists support the "questioning mindset," the idea that "there is nothing that should not be doubted. Everything must be unceasingly examined" (Lofland and Lofland, 1995, p. 154). In spite of this, even an eminent psychologist like Albert Ellis (2003), who was writing about sex even before Kinsey, has had his writings that question our society's attitudes towards sexuality censored, modified without his permission, and omitted from compilations of symposia at which he presented.

Who therefore will take the risk of researching some part of this topic of polyamory which questions the cultural standard for sexual behavior? People who have a personal interest in the subject (e.g. Barker, 2005; Sheff, 2004; Wolfe, 2003). Following their example, and Berg's (2004) comment that the first person singular allows a researcher to "take both ownership and responsibility for what is being stated" (p. 156), this thesis also uses the first person singular.

Questioning Monogamy

Most people do not think about monogamy. It is simply a given. The main issue for therapists around monogamy is dealing with its failure, i.e. infidelity. The question of whether or not monogamy is a choice that people want to make is not generally discussed. Some people, however, have thought about it, they have questioned it, they have discussed it with their partner, and have chosen to live life a different way. My husband and I are among those who have consciously chosen to violate the norms of society, and are very involved in the polyamorous subculture. As someone who has been in a nonmonogamous committed relationship for almost 30 years, I am very interested in what helps other couples maintain their primary partnership

even while becoming sexually and emotionally intimate with other lovers. What we, and others like us, do flies in the face of conventional wisdom and most of the writings on marriage, which emphasize monogamy.

Our society has used laws and social pressure to encourage married couples to stay together in spite of their differences, but this clearly has not been working very well in recent years. What else besides legal sanctions provides the glue that keeps marriages together? In a discussion of cohesion in multilateral (group) marriages, Constantine and Constantine (1974) noted the need for a mechanism to encourage internal problem-solving rather than allowing needs to be satisfied externally. They commented, "The fidelity ethic in a monogamous marriage serves as such a mechanism to keep the husband and wife solving problems in their relationship. Compartmentalization of sex as an isolated modality [as in swinging] is another such mechanism" (p. 286).

About This Study

The focus of this study was on what provides this cohesion for long term polyamorous couples. What is the nature of the commitment (as they conceptualize it) that keeps them together, when they have the opportunity to follow what could seem to be an easier path of moving on to someone else with whom they have not yet developed serious problems? Interviews were used to uncover what the respondents consider to be helpful to them in maintaining their commitment to their partner. The interview questions were designed to elicit the nature of the relationships between the primary partners as well as their other lovers, and the perceived benefits of polyamory. There was a focus on the respondents' thoughts about how they maintain a strong bond with their primary partner. It was hypothesized that this research

could provide some ideas about the nature of commitment that are commonly overlooked because of the general assumption that monogamy is a requirement for sustainable relationship.

Study of Successful Relationships

This study on commitment was not intended to be representative of typical involvement in polyamory, simply an examination of what has worked to allow these couples to stay together in fulfilling relationships while following a path that is considered deviant in our culture. The study was about what the participants said works for them. It did not address the issue of deviance directly, nor look at the problems faced by people who have not been successful in this lifestyle.

Intended Value

The value for the reader is similar to that of other ethnographic studies, namely a glimpse into a different way of life, a different way of organizing our emotional realities. It allows the reader to see how some people have questioned the value of monogamy in their lives without rejecting the desire for a primary pair-bond, and in the process have created a different style of relationship which works for them. This research paper attempts to describe some of the meanings poly people associate with sex and relationships, and to expand human agency (Marecek, 2003) by showing people who have successfully followed a nonstandard cultural path. The meanings about sex and relationships that have been constructed (Reinharz, 1983) by the participants are clearly different than the meanings constructed by the larger culture (Miller, Hengst and Wang, 2003).

The incentive for the respondents to participate was a chance to talk at length about their relationship, a hope that this will be beneficial to the poly community (since greater knowledge and understanding of the community is likely to create greater tolerance for it), and the opportunity to clarify their own sense of commitment with their primary partner.

Membership in the Poly Community

As an opportunistic complete member (Adler and Adler, 1987) of the poly subculture (this means that I studied a group of which I was already fully a member), along with my husband, Zhahai Stewart, I not only take part in the community but also work to help shape it. We have taken part in discussion groups and led workshops on polyamory. We have given presentations at the University of Colorado, at the Counseling Center in Boulder, and have been interviewed on KGNU. We have both written articles for *Loving More*, a magazine for people who are exploring the option of loving more than one person ([I write as Spring Cascade] Cascade, 1996, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Cascade and Stewart, 1998; Stewart, 1995, 2000, 2001a, 2001b), and presented at their conferences. Therefore it is of considerable interest to me personally to understand the dynamics of long term poly relationships so I can share the information with others.

Appropriateness of Opportunistic Studies

Is it appropriate for someone who is involved in a community to study it? Lofland and Lofland have "counseled involvement and enmeshment rather than objectivity and distance - a counsel that is very much in keeping with the fieldwork tradition" and noted, "So-called objectivity and distance vis-à-vis the field setting will usually result in a failure to collect any

data worth analyzing." (Lofland and Lofland, 1995, p. 17). Adler and Adler stated their belief that "the native experience does not destroy but, rather, enhances the data-gathering process. Data gathering does not occur *only* through the detached observational role, but through the subjectively immersed role as well" (Adler and Adler, 1987, p. 84). Berg acknowledged that "The use of personal biography or deep familiarity with a subject has become more common and accepted by ethnographers" (Berg, 2004, p. 156), and that some researchers now encourage self-reflective or auto-ethnographies.

Adler and Adler (1987) noted that Chicago School field researchers take the view that researchers should attempt to avoid influencing their subjects. However, they also pointed out that existential sociologists and ethnomethodologists find that such influence is almost inevitable with researchers who are members of a community. Daniels observed that "a researcher is not a remote and neutral agent in a study but rather one who is interactive with and is affected by the data collected so that what is collected inevitably bears the mark of this interaction" (Daniels, 1999, p. 169). In addition, I would expect opportunistic researchers to have a stake in the community they are studying, and therefore they may have a desire to influence it. In fact, the goal of the research may be to help the community by creating greater understanding and insight of its dynamics.

What effect does being a member have on research involving a community? Riemer (1977) noted both advantages and disadvantages of such opportunistic research. It facilitates entry into the research setting; it facilitates rapport between the researcher and the people being studied; and it improves the accuracy of the interpretation. However, there is also the possibility

of objectivity being compromised by emotional involvement, and the difficulty of replicating the research. This issue is addressed in greater detail in the chapter on methodology.

Ethical Considerations

There is definitely a potential danger to people who are polyamorous if this fact should become known to the wrong people. There is a danger of losing one's job or having Child Protective Services take one's child away, at least temporarily. Confidentiality is therefore particularly important, and has been strictly maintained. Pseudonyms have obviously been used in writing about the participants.

One reason for having separate interviews was to allow someone to reveal information that could potentially be too sensitive to discuss in front of the partner, because it would cause the partner pain or embarrassment, such as a sexual preference for a different lover. Care has been taken to avoid writing about such information in a way that could be identified, in case some participants or other members of the community choose to read the thesis. This means that potentially sensitive information was not linked to a name that the partner (or anyone else) may be able to identify because of other characteristics such as age or profession.

Hypotheses

This study of the way in which some polyamorous couples maintain their commitment to their primary partner is an exploratory study which, as Bamberg (2003) noted about qualitative inquiries, is not seeking to affirm or falsify previously established hypotheses, but rather to observe, describe and understand. The inquiry is open-ended, with a goal of exploratory discovery (Sela-Smith, 2002). As Douglass and Moustakas (1985) pointed out, "It is the focused

attentiveness and internal alertness, rather than predetermined methods and procedures, that guides the researcher into revelations of meaning" (p. 49).

Chapter Summary

Polyamory involves openness to multiple loving, sexual relationships while being honest with all involved. In spite of interest in this topic in the general public, there has been little research on it. This study examined commitment in long term polyamorous relationships.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Monogamy, marriage and commitment. Our culture assumes a connection between them. Is it possible to have marriage and commitment without monogamy? What would that look like? The focus of the study will be on people in sexually open committed relationships (i.e., they have open, honest, sexual, loving relationships with others in addition to their spouse or other committed partner). Since there is a lack of scholarly work on multiple partner relationships (Sheff, 2005), this literature review includes articles pertaining to other forms of nonmonogamy (such as swinging) as well. Note that the difference between polyamory and swinging is that in polyamory there is a focus on love and the emotional relationship with other lovers, whereas swinging is often recreational sex, with an explicit intention to avoid an emotional connection. The definition of swinging used by Jenks (1998), is "married couples exchanging partners solely for sexual purposes" (p. 507).

This chapter starts with a look at the way monogamy is linked to commitment in books on marriage, in order to give a background on prevailing notions about commitment. The rest of this chapter looks at alternatives to monogamy, starting with academic studies, continuing with books, both fiction and nonfiction, and finishes with a section on relatively recent articles on polyamory and nonmonogamy.

Monogamy and Commitment

There have been many reasons given in the literature for monogamy. Some, like Masters and Johnson (1974), recognized that there may be some circumstances and reasons for

disregarding it, but they still presented a case for why monogamy is the basis for commitment. They expressed a concern that extramarital sex is a cure that is worse than the problem it is supposed to resolve, that it weakens the commitment that is created by the pleasure bond of the sexual act.

Healing in Monogamy

Pearsall (1994) also emphasized the commitment that is part of monogamy, and discussed the healing that comes from a loving, committed, sexual relationship. He suggested that "Sexual pleasure may be programmed into us as a signal to our brain that we are on the right track in preventing illness and staying well by making contact with another person" (p. 11). He expressed a concern that extramarital sexual relationships reduce the bonding and intimate connection that are necessary for sexual healing.

While Pearsall (1994) discussed physical healing, Hendrix (1990) proposed marriage as the arena for healing our childhood wounds. He stated that we choose as our partner a person who gives us the opportunity to work through the pain that we suffered as children, the person that we need to help us grow. Hendrix (1993) also proposed monogamous marriage as a spiritual path, and stated a belief that a committed relationship requires monogamy.

Spiritual Aspects of Monogamy

Others have also stressed the spiritual aspect of monogamous marriage. Hal and Sidra Stone, who advocated monogamy (Stone & Stone, 1993), included a chapter on spirituality in their book on partnering (Stone & Stone, 1990). Welwood (1990) described marriage as "an alchemical vessel in which two people's natures are steadily refined through the heat of their

loving commitment to stand by each other" (p. 185) This requires monogamy as a container; having other lovers or complaining to friends when things are hard makes the container too leaky. Moschetta and Moschetta (1998) "discovered that there is a spiritual element present in every strong and vibrant marriage" (p. 15). They claimed that "When you have the marriage spirit you are monogamous by choice" (p. 256). They viewed marriage as a sacred place. Schnarch (1994) encouraged the integration of sexuality and spirituality. He encouraged a voluntary choice of monogamy, made as a commitment to oneself, to promote growth and differentiation (Schnarch, 1991, 1998).

Older Studies of Nonmonogamy

Not everyone agrees with the concept that monogamy is superior to nonmonogamy, and that commitment is impossible without monogamy. Rubin (2001) observed that "The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of intense reexamination of interpersonal relationships, marriage and family life" (p. 711). He wrote a fairly thorough review of the literature on swingers, group marriages, and communes (and incidentally, on open marriage), noting that in the 1990s one had to go to the popular press to find information on swinging. Another review of the literature on swinging was done by Jenks (1998). He concluded that "Although many people in our society disapprove of this behavior and believe that swingers are very unhappy and have unsatisfactory marriages there is no evidence for such a claim" (p. 591).

Searching for Psychological Differences

Of interest to the researchers two to three decades and more ago was whether there was a psychological difference between the people who were monogamous and those who were not.

Watson (1981, as quoted by Rubin, 1982) studied 38 people in sexually open marriages and found no significant difference from the standardization norms of the California Psychological Inventory. Buunk (1980, as quoted by Rubin, 1982) found no significant differences from the norm in 50 couples with sexually open marriages in the Netherlands. Other researchers (Gilmartin, 1972; Paulson and Paulson, 1971; and Cole and Spanier, 1974, all as quoted by Rubin, 1982) concluded that "there was no evidence that swinging is harmful to marital or family stability" (p. 102). (Swinging is included in this review of literature since there are more studies of it than of sexually open marriages). Rubin's own study of 130 sexually open respondents and 130 who did not have an agreement to be sexually open, using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, concluded that "Of the couples who were living together, those in sexually open marriages were as well adjusted as those in sexually exclusive marriages. Of the couples who had 'split up,' those who had been in sexually open marriages were no more unhappy than those who had been in sexually exclusive marriages" (p. 107). Murstein, Case and Gunn (1985) found that swingers vary from societal norms in some ways and have an unusually high interest in sex, but were reasonably adequately functioning individuals. Kurdek and Schmitt (1985/86) studied gay couples and compared those that were sexually exclusive and those that were not. They found "no evidence that psychological adjustment is related to type of coupling" (p. 95). Rubin and Adams (1986) found no statistically significant difference in stability between sexually open and sexually closed couples.

Intimate Friendships and Sexually Open Marriages

Others examined particular situations. Ramey (1975) studied 380 individuals involved in what he termed "intimate friendships," friendships which included sexual intimacy, and

described the types of relationships they had. He concluded that "at least for these few respondents, if their self reports are to be believed, behavior that combines the positive aspects of friendship with sexual activity that might otherwise be covert, non-consensual adultery is seen by them as more honest, more rewarding, and a distinct improvement over the way they previously lived their lives." He cautions, however, that "It remains to be shown in any definitive way that this life style actually is an improvement over their previous life style" (p. 529).

Knapp (1976), in her report of her study of 17 sexually open marriages, noted that there had been little empirical research on sexually non-monogamous marriage, and much of that had been on group or multilateral marriage. She acknowledged her study was not rigorously scientific, but expressed hope that there would be additional research on the topic of non-traditional marriage styles.

Loevinger's Theory of Ego Development

Some researchers wrote in ways that implied some nonmonogamous relationships might require a greater degree of psychological development than monogamous ones. Ryals and Foster (1976) explained Jane Loevinger's theory of ego development (Loevinger, 1966, quoted in Ryals and Foster), focusing in particular on the stages of "conformist," "conscientious," and "autonomous." Drawing on O'Neill and O'Neill (1972), they hypothesized that couples practicing open marriage would need to be at the autonomous stage, committed to each other's growth, and respecting each other's autonomy. They stated that people at the conformist stage would not likely have the cognitive complexity to understand the notion of autonomy in marriage, and people at the conscientious stage would be likely to try "to intervene, to help, to protect, which, regardless of altruistic underpinnings, may create the status differential which

interferes with peer like equal status interdependence" (p. 301).

Peabody (1982) also referred to Loevinger's ego development theory. She noted the intensifying pressure on marriage which has resulted in an increasing rate of divorce. She explained swinging, open marriage and group marriage, and stated that "the traditional monogamous marriage can no longer provide adequately for the intimacy needs of some individuals" (p. 430). She then suggested that monogamous marriage and the three alternative life styles could be viewed on a continuum of increasing complexity, with the individuals in a successful sexually open marriage needing to be at a more autonomous level of ego development.

Counseling Implications of Nonmonogamy

There were some articles on the counseling implications of these alternative life styles. In addition to Peabody (1982), Ziskin and Ziskin (1975) explained the types of issues that might come up in counseling with couples who have an agreement that explicitly permits one or both spouses to have sexual relations with others. Constantine, Constantine and Edelman (1972) stressed both the need for counselors working with clients in open marriages or multilateral (group) marriages to avoid pathologizing their clients' choice as well as the opportunity to "help tailor the family structure to the people rather than to continue to help individuals fit a single structural option" (p. 272).

Types of Nonmonogamy

Ramey (1972) presented a model of different types of nonmonogamous relationships. He explained that there are more strains on current marriages, since much more is expected from

marriage than previously. In addition, as women became peers of men, there was a greater possibility for the alternatives to marriage to become more widespread. He classified relationships in what he termed an increasing order of complexity of interaction.

Criticism of the Research

Biblarz and Biblarz (1980) criticized the studies of swinging which had been done in the years preceding their article. They stated that the researchers were on the side of the swingers, either openly or by default, since the researchers did not believe that, as scientists, they could make ethical judgments of the behavior. Biblarz and Biblarz raised the question of whether marital improvements reported by swingers were the result of a low starting point, and raised the possibility of self-deception. They suggested that more attention should be paid to the mental, emotional, and social components of sexuality, and to the effect of swinging on the person's self-worth.

Books on Sexually Open Relationships

During the late 1960s and early 1970s there were also a number of books published on the subject of nonmonogamy and alternative relationships. Some novels, like Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1967) and Rimmer's *The Harrad Experiment* (1967) and *Proposition 31* (1968) were very influential on the young people (including this author) who went on to try nonmonogamous life styles (Ramey, 1972). In a book that seemed geared at titillating the general public, the Lobells (1975) described how to have a sexually free marriage.

Nonfiction/Serious Older Books

There were more serious books as well. The O'Neills' *Open Marriage* (1972) was a best

seller. While it was primarily about general guidelines for relationships which encourage growth for each individual, good communication, and flexible roles, it touched briefly on sexual openness. This became the focus of public interest. The O'Neills have expressed regret that the core of the book was ignored, and that open marriage came to mean sexually open marriage (Wachowiak and Leopard, 1977). In a later book, Nena O'Neill (1978) discussed sexual fidelity in a way which did not encourage nonmonogamy.

Ellis (1972) showed how to apply rational emotive therapy to extramarital relationships. The Francoeurs (1976) analyzed hot sex as a depersonalized, genital centered view of sex which is based on an inequality between partners, whereas cool sex is more egalitarian and allows people the freedom to do more exploration. The Ziskins (1973) described different types of extramarital sex agreements, gave some case histories, and wrote some general comments on reasons and realities. Libby and Whitehurst (1977) brought together 24 articles from a variety of sources which took a serious look at nonmonogamous relationships from the perspective of sociologists, therapists, historians, sex educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, and more. Mazur (1973) described the varieties of sexual life styles and different types of intimacy, suggesting ways of handling intimacy and sensuality in our relationships. Rogers (1972) in his book about what works and does not work in marriage, described a couple who, by being open and honest with each other, found they could be open to being sexual with others in a way that was positive for their marriage.

More Recent Books

The 1990s brought a new series of books. Nearing (1992) discussed polyfidelity (closed group marriage). Anapol (1997) described various forms of polyamory (which she noted comes

from the roots meaning "many loves") and how to make it work. Easton and Liszt (1997) came from the viewpoint that "*sex is nice and pleasure is good for you*" (p. 4) and discussed how to act accordingly in an ethical manner. West (1996) used the word polyfidelity to "express multiple lover relationships *openly* enjoyed in candor and good faith" (p. 73), and explained ways to do it. Kilbride (1994) suggested that plural marriage could provide better opportunities for children by giving them access to multiple parents. Francoeur, Cornog and Perper (1999) compiled a group of articles and stories connecting spirituality and sexuality and suggesting alternatives to strict monogamy.

More books have been introduced in the 2000s. Life (2004) suggested that polyamory can be a path that helps us realize our spiritual truth. Matik (2002) wrote about alternative relationships from the perspective of her experience, and noted that having open relationships "means re-defining and re-building a relationship based on your needs and your values. [It's] a political act" (p. 4). Ravenscroft (2004) explained that his book was intended to be a handbook for newly polyamorous people, answering as many of their questions as possible.

There are other books which touched briefly on the concept of nonmonogamy within discussions of ethics. Fortune (1998) recommended monogamy, but noted that the decision to be monogamous or not needed to be decided by the partners in each relationship. Heyward (1989) and Ellison (1996), working towards a liberation theology, emphasized the importance of listening to our bodies and making our own decisions about our sexuality. They stated that when people are not in touch with their feelings and able to make their own choices about their bodies, they are less able to relate to others out of strength and personal integrity. When people are not in touch with their own needs and desires, they cannot support the needs and desires of others,

and therefore cannot act effectively to break the bonds of oppression for themselves or others.

Recent Articles

Bisexual, Lesbian, and Gay Issues

Many of the recent articles on polyamory or other nonmonogamy have bisexual/lesbian/gay issues. The *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Munson and Stelboum, 1999) and the *Journal of Bisexuality* (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004) each published a double issue on polyamory and related issues that was simultaneously issued as a book.

Loulan (1999) defended polyamory as a valid choice for lesbians, in spite of members of the lesbian community seeing "polyamory as an affront to the sacrosanct union of two women struggling against the tides of the evil world" (p. 37). Halpern (1999) noted that fears about polyamory can be internalized in a way that is similar to homophobia and that the assumption that more than one sexual bond will break up the primary relationship is likely to create that reality. She addressed the concern that bisexual women would never be happy with just a woman partner. Labriola (1999) described various models of open relationships and gave examples. She concluded with questions to ask to help people choose the relationship model that works for them. LaSala (2004) studied the relationship quality in strictly monogamous gay male couples compared with openly nonmonogamous couples, and found no difference on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. However, nominally monogamous couples who engaged in extrarelationship sex were less adjusted and satisfied. Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz (2003) studied women in monogamous, open, and polyamorous relationships with bisexual men, and how it affected their sense of being in a community or being on the outside of community.

Kassoff (1988) discussed nonmonogamy in the lesbian community. She described

different types, and clinical implications for therapists. Rust (1996) studied monogamy and nonmonogamy among bisexuals. She noted that some people find that no one person can fill all their needs. She warned against pathologizing clients who choose nonmonogamy, and commented that bisexuals often need special support regardless of the relational forms they choose because of the lack of support they receive elsewhere.

Therapy

Charles (2002) also addressed therapy. She noted that monogamy may impede self-awareness in some people, by preventing them from testing their idealized sense of self in other relationships. It may make growth more difficult, or force people into a choice between self and relationship. Ford and Hendrick (2003) included open marriage in their study about the implications of therapists' sexual values on their work with clients.

Davidson (2002) provided an outline of a talk about working with polyamorous clients. This included notes on how therapists can prepare to work with people who are exploring polyamory, basic understanding of polyamory, and key issues to watch for.

Feminism

Jackson and Scott (2004) stated that nonmonogamy was central to the politics of feminism in the 1970s, but there has been a retreat from this position from the 1980s onward. They questioned the more recent feminist assumption that, in heterosexual relations, women are damaged by nonmonogamy.

Legal Articles

The issue of gay marriage has raised the possibility of the marriage of more than two

people, with some gay rights opponents warning that "same-sex marriage leads a parade of horrors such as polygamy" (Emens, 2004, p. 279). This is the context in which Emens (2004) and Strassberg (2003) have chosen to examine polyamory, marriage and the law.

Strassberg (2003) examined polyfidelity (closed group marriage) in the light of Hegel's analysis of the function performed by romantic love and marriage in supporting the modern liberal state. She concluded that "polyamory may be more of a Pandora's Box than many realize" (p. 563).

Emens (2004) described some reasons that monogamous people might find polyamory threatening, and suggested some ways in which laws might be rewritten to avoid privileging monogamy.

Studies of Polyamory

The only published survey of people who identify as polyamorous that this author is aware of was published in a nonacademic magazine (Weber, 2002; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002). Weber estimated that half a million Americans are polyamorous (even if they have not heard the word). The more than 1,000 people who responded to the survey were more highly educated than the general population, and had a higher household income. Pallotta-Chiarolli reported that a large majority of the respondents did not have children. Another survey was being done at the beginning of 2005 at www.polystudy.com for a dissertation, but the site is no longer active. Sheff (2004) did an ethnographic study for her dissertation. Wolfe (2003) studied jealousy and compersion in the polyamorous community. She notes that the term compersion was coined by the Kerista community, which used it as the opposite of jealousy, or taking pleasure at seeing one's partner enjoying him or herself with another lover. (Kerista was a commune that existed in

San Francisco from 1971 to 1991. For information on Kerista, see <http://www.kerista.com>).

Sheff (2005) found that polyamorous women expand their family, cultural, gender and sexual roles. The women she interviewed felt both more empowered and more disempowered in their relationships. They felt empowered by their greater freedom to make their own sexual choices, create new roles for themselves and express themselves sexually, and disempowered by feelings of insecurity with respect to their partner's other relationships, fear of censure, and social stigma because of their deviance.

Barker (2005) outlined ways "in which polyamory might challenge key elements of the dominant construction of sexuality" and described how some members of polyamorous communities "construct their identities in relation to more dominant cultural constructions" and explored "the implications that being polyamorous has for their own sense of self" (p. 76).

Conclusion

As can be seen by this fairly thorough review of the literature on polyamory and nonmonogamy in general, it contains little or nothing on commitment, especially not about the issue of how couples maintain their commitment. Therefore this study of commitment in polyamorous relationships is addressing an area which has not yet been researched and published.

Chapter 3

METHOD

This thesis was a study of seven long term polyamorous couples, couples who have been together and actively poly (i.e. they have both had other partners rather than simply being open to that possibility) for at least 5 years, and who consider themselves to be in a stable, committed relationship (as is common in the poly community, this will be referred to as their primary relationship).

Participants

An email request for participants was sent to poly and poly-friendly groups in Northern California and appropriate friends soliciting participants. The email explicitly stated that the study would focus on commitment, so that the participants could think about that issue before the interview. The seven couples interviewed were selected from among respondents to that email based on a short phone interview or personal knowledge. Preference was given to couples who had been polyamorous for the most years, and in addition, a couple with a child living at home was specifically sought out. While it was clear that there were some issues in some of the couples which might eventually cause a breakup, all the couples seemed relatively stable.

A number of the people who responded to the email requests for participants (directly or indirectly because a friend of theirs had let them know about it) were unqualified or marginally qualified, because they had been in a poly relationship less than or barely five years. Some qualified participants were not interviewed because the original goal of four to six couples had been reached (the seventh couple was included because they are raising a child). As it turns out,

four couples were friends or acquaintances. In one other case I had talked with the man but had never met the woman. One couple was totally unknown, and another couple thought I looked familiar; we determined after talking that we had probably been at a workshop together.

Responses to Solicitation

My solicitation for participants elicited some vigorous discussion on one email list about polyamory and how I was going to present it. Guy Thomas (who requested that I use his name if I quoted him) expressed concern that focusing on couples would feed into the "assumption that couples are the most important or the only 'real' relationships." Another person wrote, "I don't like the thought that something will be published into the world portraying polyamory as primary/secondary relationships because I think that's only a subset of polyamory, and one closest to monogamy." A third person thought that the poly community should all be "committed to breaking out of the 'couple' model of love and sexuality." These comments make it very clear that there are people who are polyamorous who have a very different concept of poly relationships than is presented in this paper, since it focuses on polyamorous couples.

Personal Acquaintances

What are the effects of using personal acquaintances as participants? McCracken (1988) stated that respondents should be complete strangers. However, he also noted that they are influenced by their impression of the interviewer. Just as a complete member of a group is given considerable latitude (Adler and Adler, 1987), a member of the poly community is likely to be given more trust, since the respondent can rest assured that the information gained will not be used to harm the community. I mean by that that it will not be used to attack the community,

though it may contain critical observations. While friend respondents may have a tendency to bias their observations to avoid stresses on the friendship, the interviewer has the advantage of understanding the respondent's comments in the context of observed behavioral interactions, thereby reducing the likelihood they will get away with telling a story that is completely inconsistent with actual behavior. It is important in this situation that the interviewer have the reputation of being able to keep confidentiality. The current context is one in which the respondents who are acquaintances are members of groups which agree to confidentiality, and have presumably learned to trust the interviewer. Note that one of the participants told me that he was willing to participate because he already knew me.

In addition, it would not have been practical to find couples to interview who are neither friends nor potential friends, since the group of people who identify as polyamorous in the San Francisco Bay area is limited, and the individuals are likely to attend the same events that my husband and I do. It is likely that I will meet people I do not yet know at a poly oriented event some time in the future, and we will almost undoubtedly have friends in common.

For an interview to go deep, a connection has to be established between the interviewer and the participant. One of my interviewees (who was not previously an acquaintance) commented that people sometimes confuse sexual expression and the resulting emotional connection, and noted, "By us having a dialogue like this, and you asking me questions, there's an emotional connection between us, and it's palpable, I can feel it and I'm sure you can too." Note that I understand this as a comment about the nature of an open conversation between two people, where at least one of the people is revealing personal, intimate information. His point was that we can feel a connection through conversation that is not related to any sexual

expression or desire.

As Lofland and Lofland (1995) pointed out, whatever the relationship of the investigator to the setting, whether as a member or an observer, it is simultaneously an advantage and a disadvantage. In this study I have been able to take advantage of the greater depth of data available, the greater openness of respondents that comes from their knowledge of my similar experience, and my ability to supplement the data with my own insights (Adler and Adler, 1987).

Demographics

The participants all lived within a two hour drive of my home north of San Francisco. Most interviews were conducted at the home of the participants, with one exception where the respondent preferred to come to my home.

No same gender couples responded to my solicitation, so all couples were male-female. One woman is only interested in other women at this point, with the exception of her primary partner. Another woman had had an important relationship with another woman, and was clearly interested in both men and women, and another had some sexual relationships with women. I did not specifically ask about sexual orientation. However, many of the participants volunteered that they were comfortable touching someone of the same sex when they were in a three way sexual situation.

The age of the respondents varied from 29 to 72, with an average age of 52 (two were 29, 4 were in their forties, two in their fifties, and the rest over 60). They had been in their current relationships for at least ten years (and as long as 44), and had been polyamorous within that relationship for at least 7 years.

Interviewing Procedure

I interviewed each person individually, using what has variously been called a qualitative interview (Babbie, 2004), an unstructured interview (Lofland and Lofland, 1995), an open mode interview (Kvale, 2003), or a long interview (McCracken, 1988). The essence is that there were some general questions, but unlike a survey interview, the questions were not phrased in a particular way, or asked in a particular order (Babbie) (though usually they were asked in the same order). Additional questions were asked when it seemed appropriate. The point was to elicit rich descriptions of the respondents' experience (Lofland and Lofland) of their relationships and how they experience and practice commitment in those relationships by allowing them to talk freely (Kvale). The respondents were told that each interview would likely take between one and three hours and would be taped. In practice, the interviews took from one and a half hours to three hours and twenty minutes, with an average of two hours and twelve minutes. The interviews were subsequently transcribed. The respondents were asked if they wished to select their own pseudonym. Eight of the fourteen did so.

The participants were interviewed separately rather than as a couple, since there were some delicate questions about their sexuality with their primary partner (the other member of the couple) and their other partners. In addition, I wanted to see whether the answers of both members of the couple are consistent with each other. On occasion I said something about my own experience, especially when asked, or made a reference to a common experience, following the concept of Clements, Ettling, Jenett and Shields (1999), that "The story of the researcher can act as a catalyst for the story of the participant" (p. 78).

The Questions

For a list of the intended questions, please see appendix A. As noted above, the questions were not necessarily be phrased the same way for everyone, or asked in the same order, but followed the flow of the conversation.

Demographics

The interview included some demographic questions: age, occupation, the length of the relationship, whether or not married. There are also questions about how long they have been polyamorous, and how they approached polyamory (how they became polyamorous).

Nature of the Relationships

There were questions to give the flavor of their relationships with other people, and with each other's lovers. What types of other sexual relationships do they have? What types of things do they do with their other lovers and with their partner's lovers, and what type of connection do they have with them? Do they share interests with their lovers that they don't share with their primary partners? These questions were intended to provide ideas about ways in which polyamory enriches or detracts from their life as a couple.

Questions about the emotional connection with the primary partner allowed a comparison with the other lovers. There were also questions about sexual satisfaction with both the primary partner and other lovers. These were intended to give us an idea of whether the additional relationships are intended to satisfy an unmet need in the primary relationship, or are seen as an expansion of a satisfying relationship.

Ground Rules

People who are polyamorous often have some ground rules or agreements about what is acceptable and what is not. These may involve particular sexual activities (restricting some to the primary couple), they may involve the ability to "veto" an involvement with a particular person, how often they get together, etc. The questions about ground rules were intended to give us some idea about the way the couple has structured their other relationships to allow them to keep the primacy of their own bond.

Children

The questions about children were general questions which were not necessarily expected to shed light on the commitment of the couple, but to reveal some of the dynamics involved in their relationship.

Effect on Their Lives

I expected that couples who have been polyamorous for several years and consider themselves committed to each other would find that polyamory has been beneficial to them. However, it seemed possible that one member of the couple would have a stronger feeling in that direction, or that one member would think that polyamory has created more problems than benefits. I thought that the question about how polyamory has affected their lives might also reveal more about what keeps them together as a couple.

Jealousy

The issue of jealousy is one that has to be faced on an ongoing basis by people who are polyamorous. It was defined in the interviews as any feelings of discomfort that come up when one's partner is involved with another person emotionally or sexually. This includes envy, issues around time, comparison, competitiveness, specialness, fear of loss and any other discomfort. How a couple handles these feelings has an impact on their relationship.

Maintaining the Primary Bond

The questions about fears or concerns about growing apart led naturally to the question about how they maintain their primary bond. One way some people do this is to reserve certain activities for each other. There was less time taken on this question than originally expected, probably because many of the ideas had already come up earlier in the interview.

Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Finally, since polyamory is not a lifestyle that is condoned or supported by the culture at large, it was helpful for the purpose of this study to get an idea of the perceived benefits of polyamory from the perspective of the participants, as well as the challenges and drawbacks. Asking them what else they would like the interviewer to know about their relationship allowed some people to add some extra comments, such as a desire for the shadow side of polyamory to be expressed as well the benefits; for people to understand that the ways polyamory can be lived are infinite; that it can be a spiritual path; that polyamory "has a lot to offer as a path and should be allowed and celebrated as a choice;" and a suggestion that people talk about their most delightful poly experience.

Analysis

The interviews were analyzed from an activist perspective of human agency (Lofland and Lofland, 1995), looking for the strategies that the respondents use to maintain their commitment to their primary partner, and the stories that they tell (Murray, 2003) to reinforce their commitment. As in heuristic inquiry, the object was to discover the nature of the phenomenon (commitment to a primary partner in polyamorous relationships), not to prove or disprove any particular influence (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985). The analysis remained open-ended at the start of the research, to allow the information gathered during the interviews to influence the focusing decisions and to allow new perceptions to emerge (Lofland and Lofland). As Rogers (1965) stated, "it is the dedicated personal search of a disciplined, open-minded individual which discovers and creates new knowledge. No refinement of laboratory or statistical method can do this" (as quoted in Moustakas, 1990, p. 98)

Chapter Summary

Long term polyamorous couples, some of whom are personal acquaintances, were interviewed about the nature of their relationships, possible ground rules, the effect of polyamory on their lives, jealousy, their techniques for maintaining their bond, and the benefits of polyamory. The interviews were analyzed to discover the nature of the commitment they have and how they maintain it.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews. The first section, "Types of Relationships," is a discussion of the types of relationships that the participants have, both with each other and with other people. This is intended to give a general sense of the ways in which polyamorous couples may organize their relationships, and is therefore organized by topic. The second section, "The Nature of Commitment," contains more description of the nature of the primary relationships as well as the respondents' description of their commitment to each other. It is organized by couple to give a feel for each couple and the way they experience their commitment. The following section, "Maintaining the Primary Bond," is organized by topic to emphasize the different methods used to keep the relationships healthy and primary, and to allow some comments which, for the sake of additional privacy, are not attributed to a specific person. The next section, "Perceived Benefits of Polyamory," explores the reasons the participants have given for being polyamorous. Finally, there is a chapter summary.

Note that this is a very small sample of committed long term polyamorous couples, which comprise a subset of polyamorous people, and therefore it does not necessarily represent typical views.

Types of Relationships

All of the participants expressed a desire for intimacy, closeness, or an emotional bond with their other sexual partners in addition to their primary partner. This was expected, since this was a study of polyamorous couples rather than of swingers, who sometimes limit their

connection with others to sex. However, the participants did not have to have the same level of intimacy with all secondary partners.

The Primary Relationships

Emotional closeness was important to all of the couples. Some of them expressed a sense of absolute commitment to each other; others were facing some current challenges or possible future challenges. All valued honesty and communication, and recognized the need to be adaptable. Several participants specifically mentioned personal growth as something they want and appreciate. They all have active sex lives and close emotional bonds with each other. More detail on the primary relationships is included in the section on commitment, below.

Style of Relating to Others

One way in which respondents differed in their style of relating to others has to do with whether this is a joint or separate activity. As Mary expressed it, she and Fred are a "package deal." They include other people into their sexual activities, and, until recently, did not have sex unless the other was in the room. One reason for that is that it reduced the jealousy. As Fred expressed it, "To me that's the kind of the thing that creates safety for us ... we don't exclude each other." In addition, it sparks the eroticism between them: "One thing actually that turns me on is just Mary's sexuality, so having seen her be sexual with other men sort of gets me to have more of a sense of her as a sexual being, which actually makes me more attracted to her."

Carol and Pseud started the same way, including other people in their sexual activities. Pseud coined a term for it, "addogamy," meaning adding on to their monogamy. They have since opened up, but they still almost always spend the night together, without other partners. If

a sexual partner is visiting, the partner will spend the night alone in another room, rejoining them for snuggling in the morning.

Jerry and Annie, on the other hand, usually have sex separately (though they occasionally have threesomes), but if only one of them has another lover visiting, the three of them will sleep together. They always sleep together when in the same house unless, as Jerry said, they each have a partner, since their bed does not hold four.

Lizful and Paul also have a habit of spending the night together. Lizful mentioned driving some distance to go home rather than spending the night with a lover. They sometimes have separate lovers and sometimes interact with a couple. As Lizful described, one mode of interaction they sometimes have

when we're involved with another committed couple, is that we spend a lot of time in a lot of intimate interaction without any, without there being any barriers, but when it gets down to actual intercourse, we make love with our own partner, but in each other's presence.

Rogelio and Shakti, on the other hand, tend to interact with their lovers separately. Jackie and John have shared a lover in the past, but currently John sleeps on the living room couch most weekends when Jackie's lover comes to visit.

Length of Secondary Relationships

Some sexual interactions were one time events. Some people had fairly short term secondary relationships. John, for example, said, "My long term relationships have lasted 2, 3, 4 months, but they were really important to me." His partner Jackie's current relationship has lasted a year and a half.

Annie had the longest significant secondary relationships. She has been involved with

Forrest for ten years, though she does not see him often since he lives in another state, and with Daniel for five years. She is quite committed to both of them, and sees Daniel 3 nights a week. Jerry is content with that, and reported, "Daniel's like a brother to me. He could move in here, and we could live together seven days a week, I wouldn't have a problem with that. Daniel and I are very, very close."

Shakti has been seeing Zeke on a regular basis for almost four years. Other people have had multi-year relationships that are not as close.

Sex and Play Parties

Most of the participants have on occasion attended a sex or play party, though they may have found them less than satisfying. Mary commented,

What I've found for me, is ... it's just too busy, there's too much stuff going on around and I guess I'm not enough of an exhibitionist to get into that aspect of it... The funnest times have been going with a group of people [we already know]. But I wouldn't want to go - I personally can't see going to a play party and meeting somebody there for the first time and getting all sexual... I feel like that's not really what I'm looking for. I'm looking for something where it's a deeper, ongoing relationship of some sort that includes, it's like a friendship and a sexual relationship both, but not just sort of the one night stand, what was your name again kind of thing.

Others found they did not fit in. As Jerry put it, "Annie and I did some swinging club things, but frankly, people don't hit on us. We're not the swing club type." In addition, they are not into anonymous sex, they want to build relationships.

For Lizful and Paul, a swing club was their entry to the world of open and honest nonmonogamous sex, and allowed some valuable exploration. Lizful discovered, "to my intense surprise and pleasure, that I actually, contrary to everything that I would think about myself, was something of an exhibitionist. The kind of thing that we really liked doing there and that was

very sweet, was simply making love with each other in public."

Ambiguity of Relationships

When I asked participants about their current relationships, it became clear that the status of some sexual relationships, particularly of long distance relationships, was not clear. There might not be a clear ending point to a relationship, or to the sexual aspect of a friendship, so when people had not seen someone for a while they were sometimes unsure whether to include them as current partners. Mary commented that with some people it was a sporadic thing, "It's one of those things where you have a friend that you haven't seen for several years, and you get together, and ... it's just like you haven't been apart for a long time." This came to mind because one of their friends from the east coast whom they had not seen for a few years had visited shortly before I interviewed them. Otherwise she might not have included him when she was talking about their current relationships

Carol mentioned that they had had several people they saw as a couple in long distance relationships that they would see occasionally, but only two of those were still current. "The others are possibilities, we just haven't gotten together in a long time, and it's kind of like a natural death to the relationship kind of thing, and I'd say there are two that we would still expect to see in the future." However, it sounded as though the possibility for the others was still there, since there had been no formal decision to terminate the relationship.

Couples or More

While all the couples interviewed are committed to their relationship with their current partner, they might not stay in the current configuration. Some would consider (or are

considering) including one or more others in their committed primary relationship. Of course, if they had already done so, they would not have been in the current study since it was limited to couples.

The Nature of Commitment

What is the nature of the commitment that holds these couples together? How do they conceptualize their commitment and the bond that they share? What do they see as the benefit of being in a couple? This section examines both the nature of the primary bond between the individuals in each couple and their commitment to each other.

All of the couples interviewed are together because they want to be, because they find value in their relationship. Some are facing challenges, others are very solid.

Lizful and Paul

Only one couple, Lizful and Paul, expressed any sort of moral imperative about their commitment as a couple. For Paul, commitment "just means being there no matter what." He would not hold it against someone else if they did not stay married lifelong, "but I think I would hold it against myself very powerfully." He remembers feeling even as a young child that "I won't do that, a man shouldn't do that, that's wrong. And so I think it's extremely ingrained in me that, it would have to be something like Lizful going berserk and murdering our son or something, to make that happen."

Lizful said they had a sense very quickly that "this was a lifelong commitment, and that neither one of us would ever deviate from that." Lizful talked about the "gnarly patches" that occur about every seven years, but Paul could remember only one time that the idea that perhaps

they should not stay together was briefly mentioned. But they are dedicated to working it out together, so the moment passed quickly as they realized, "How can we fight if we're apart? We have to stay together to fight this out."

This is part of a living, vital relationship, not just inertia or a difficult constraint. They work on their commitment. Paul observed, "I really think [commitment] has to be more in the present day. It's something that you build. It's very much building equity, and in this case it has to do with building a sense of an open flow, an honesty." With love and trust and commitment, a couple decides together how to make things work.

For Lizful, commitment involves inclusiveness:

Commitment to me means trust, above probably all else, and honesty. And the absolute complete expectation that everything that we do individually is woven into what we are together. That there is no such thing as something that does not belong in a relationship.

It involves faith in one's ability to work things out:

Commitment is possible and it's not a limitation, and you have to know that you have to work at it, and you have to be unbelievably patient and have a complete faith that no matter how shitty something looks at the present time, what commitment means is that there will still be a relationship there when you come out the other side of this particular gnarly part.

She sees commitment as settling for more, not less.

Paul saw both practical and growth advantages in being in a couple (or more than a couple). The practical included things like tax breaks and working together to accomplish tasks. He also expressed a sense that going through life as a couple provided for a much richer experience, because there was always a sounding board.

Lizful commented that being in a couple "expands and deepens all kinds of things. I think it takes you to places, both erotically and in terms of love, agape, that you don't get to experience

as completely and as consistently if you're not part of a couple." She thought it helped people become stronger, and their core to become bigger and deeper. She also saw marriage as a business partnership, as well as providing someone with whom to face life's fears.

Their commitment has worked for them. Lizful commented, "I just feel like we are the most blessed, luckiest, people I know."

Jerry and Annie

Other couples are simply so happy in their relationship with each other that they cannot imagine breaking up. Jerry and Annie have both been married before. They have been with each other for 15 years. This time they have found lasting happiness together. Jerry commented, "We both know that we're the best thing that ever happened to each other." He feels closer to her "than I've ever been to anybody else."

In spite of their closeness, he sees the individual as more important than the relationship. When asked about advice for a couple considering polyamory, he responded, "I'm not ever going to be committed to their relationship. I don't think that their relationship as a couple is as important as their individual understanding of who they are and what they want and what they're doing." He also commented on the number of couples who split up after attending a particular series of workshops. At first he thought the workshops were bad for relationships, but "then it occurred to me that the reason those relationships ended was cause they weren't good relationships, and they went to [the workshops] because they were having trouble. And so [the workshops] gave them permission to end that relationship and begin another one."

Annie noted that Jerry had told her, "'All I know is that I fully expect to die in your arms, or for you to die in mine,' and that will happen." She has "always felt close to Jerry, but it's like

it just gets closer." Her statements show a consistent high degree of connection: "I just can't imagine not being so bonded to Jerry, he's been so good to me," and "I can't imagine life apart from Jerry."

This couple clearly stays together because they want to, because their relationship gives them joy. Both consider the state of being coupled to be natural. Jerry commented, "I think as human beings we're couple bonded, we're couple programmed." Furthermore, "The benefit of being a couple is that you have somebody you can share your life with, which I think is pretty innate." Annie expressed similar sentiments, including her own desire to be with another person. In addition, she noted, "I think most of us need security from another person validating, interacting, and supporting us."

Fred and Mary

Fred and Mary are another couple who are together because their relationship is very satisfying to them. Mary likes having someone else to share the world with and to communicate with. Fred commented, "We're always there for each other. Whatever else happens with other relationships, we've always got each other, and that's really important."

They feel a growing closeness to each other. Fred stated, "I think I feel closer to Mary than I have to anybody else I've ever known in my life." Far from the alienation that some couples feel after a decade or more together (they have been together 13 years), their love keeps growing. Fred commented, "I feel really loved by her and I really love her and I'm really attracted to her, and I trust her. I really have deep trust for her. I feel like my attraction and feeling of closeness has grown over the years." Mary has the same sense, and several times expressed variations on, "We're growing together, becoming closer as time goes on." For Fred,

some of that is the shared experience that they have, which he really would not want to lose.

It is not that they do not fight - they just recognize when it does not serve them. Fred mentioned, "One thing that's really different about my relationship with Mary than any other relationship I've been in, is that when we fight, we get to a certain point and we just stop fighting, because it's just, we love each other, what are we doing this for, let's not fight. And it's like that takes priority."

Mary found that a series of workshops helped her become more open to the idea of being sexual with others, because they helped her to start looking at things in a different way. The first of the workshops "probably had the most impact of sort of shifting my - or opening my view of thinking more that relationships and sex can mean more and different things than [our current] society would typically value."

Mary pointed out that they moved at the pace of the slowest person, what she referred to as the "slowest common denominator." She felt that this has been extremely important for them in evolving comfortable relationships with others.

Fred makes a conscious choice to put Mary and the needs of their relationship over his own desires. He commented on commitment, "It just means that I sort of hold myself back from following my impulses and that I put her first and I make a conscious choice to have this relationship be primary and I just don't let anything else get started unless it's okay with both of us."

Communication and trust are very important for them. For Mary, commitment is "like a foundation of trust and communication and an intention of being in something for the long haul so that if bumps arise along the way, or issues come up, there is the intention to work things

through instead of walking away from them." It is "kind of like this foundation of trust and respect and promise to work on things together and grow together." She said they had been able to continue to grow together because she feels that Fred is totally open. Fred said he does not "really worry about us growing apart without knowing it because I think we're pretty good about communicating what's going on."

Evelyn and Scott

Evelyn and Scott are another couple who emphasize communication skills. They have a written relationship agreement (for themselves and for all people who are sexually or romantically involved with them) which includes a stipulation that "All relationship partners agree to use good communications skills to the best of their ability, and to continue to better those skills within themselves." In addition, personal growth is a primary value.

They both commented on observing someone who had a two year cycle of relationships, with the same problems recurring each time. They agreed to a commitment to work through any problems that came up. They would only split up if it still made sense to do so once the issue had been resolved as well as it could be. This is clearly a challenging process. As Evelyn expressed it, "Polyamory tends to be a crucible in which you either figure out how to do relationships or the relationships are transformed into something else. And so we've been smelted down and remade a number of times in this process."

They have faced some major challenges in their relationship, but as Evelyn said, "We were both committed to staying with each other and to supporting each other in our growth and it was clear to us that [polyamory] was our path." Scott noted that, "I'm committed to doing everything that's humanly possible to try to make our relationship be one that we're both happy

with."

Evelyn observed that being in a couple "provides a lot of sense of center, a sense of stability."

Currently they are experiencing some tensions about the direction of their business and a difference in approach to life. They still feel close. Evelyn stated, "We're close, but we're having some disagreements about business." Scott noted that their current fighting "dampens my sense of closeness in an immediate sense. But it also is the case that there's another sense of closeness which is about the relationship in the longer term which isn't really impacted by it."

John Bender and Jackie Greene

John and Jackie also recognize the importance of good communication. John noted that "To be truly committed to a person, you need to have real open, honest communication with that person." Jackie's advice to people who are interested in polyamory was, "You need to be honest, you need to communicate, you need to let somebody know how important they are to you, and how much they mean to you." She said she feels that polyamory has made her a better communicator, it has helped her be more open about what she wants. Another advantage of polyamory is that it also allows them to talk openly and honestly about their attractions to other people. Jackie appreciates having the "consistent, loving support" that comes from being in a couple, and loves "having somebody to come home to, to be happy with, or to talk about."

To John, "Commitment really is just another word for loyalty, just honesty, respect, and the desire to do anything for another person... Commitment is about having a strong bond based on those things, the desire to see the person that you love happy." Openness and trust are also important elements of a strong commitment, a strong bond. He said he does not know of anyone

who has a stronger commitment than he has to Jackie, and he has never felt closer to anyone than he has to Jackie.

The challenge they are facing is that Jackie has become deeply involved with another woman, Jenny, who is not yet comfortable with polyamory, and with sharing Jackie. Jackie had some questions about her relationship with John when she was first head over heels in love with Jenny, but has realized that she does want to be in a romantic relationship with him. She explained that, "When I try to picture my life without him, I don't like it. When I picture my future together, I picture me and him having kids together, things like that." John has been clear that he needs more time with Jackie, who has been devoting her weekends to Jenny; given that she is not home most evenings until 9, that leaves little time for John.

Carol and Pseud

Carol and Pseud have also had to face a challenge to their commitment because of her relationship with another woman, Joanie. They had made an agreement to spend the nights with each other, but as Carol and Joanie became deeply involved, the two women wanted to spend some nights together. Furthermore, Carol and Pseud had agreed to give each other veto power over their other relationships. Carol explained, "We had veto power either way, that if we felt the other person was hurting our relationship that we would veto that and it would have to end."

Carol was in a quandary. If she ignored Pseud's desire for her to come home for the night, it could risk the end of her relationship with Pseud (or with Joanie). She did not want to risk that. So they kept talking; she was unwilling to surrender to his desire when she knew that she would continue to resent him for that.

When Pseud was willing to relinquish his veto power, she recognized that she needed to

make the boundaries. She found that "There was a definite shift in me, I actually started being more conscious of his needs and wants."

One thing that helped Carol maintain her commitment to Pseud while she was very much in love with Joanie was looking at the meaning of sex. She asked, "What do you make sex mean, what do you make it mean that this person wants to be with somebody else, what do you make it mean when you want to be with somebody else?" She created her own meaning: "I made it mean, this is New Relationship Energy, this is very exciting, this is not the kind of love that I have with Pseud. I put certain meanings on that, which is probably what made it a little more easy to deal with." Having concepts such as New Relationship Energy was a help:

"Because I know that NRE is NRE, it helped a lot. I had the concept that yes, this is normal, this doesn't mean I love her and not love him."

In discussing commitment, Carol observed,

On one level, commitment means that I will be present with you, I will be truthful and honest with you, you are my primary partner in life, I intend to keep you as my primary partner in life but I am not promising that I will do that, that my commitment to you is that I will do my very, very, very best to work out the very, very best solution that I can.

She explained that she is deeply in love with Pseud and cannot imagine what would separate them, but, in my words, she values herself above her relationship:

The commitment part is that I will do my very best, in spite of NRE, in spite of whatever, that you are my partner and I will work out whatever I can work out to stay with you, and I'm clear that if it turned into a bad toxic situation that I couldn't work things out, that I'm out of here. That word is not above my life energy value.

Later she commented, "It's about a commitment to growth and relating rather than keeping the relationship together."

Commitment to Pseud "means a promise that you try real hard to go with. In the case of

Carol, we're committed to each other." When asked to elaborate, he continued, "It means that we have a very strong bond, we care about each other very, very much."

Pseud explained that commitment to honesty is paramount. "We talk things over and push for 100% honesty, and that is the bedrock, one of the major keys of our successful relationship." Carol clearly agrees: "One thing that Pseud and I have always been extremely clear about is being honest with each other. We made an agreement the first long date that we would push for 100% honesty." Later she explained, "The thing that creates the bond most I think is the honesty and the ability to work through conflict and the ability to, when we're upset with each other, find out what it is about us that - what's the button, what's the hook." So she can get annoyed at him, but together they figure out the problem and come back to a loving space.

Rogelio and Shakti

Communication and emotional connection is important for Rogelio. He explained that "My desire with Shakti is a deeper need for emotional connection and acknowledging that need." Furthermore, "We communicate, we talk about our emotions, we explore what we feel like today is not allowing us to connect, but it's more on a feeling level, on an emotional level than whether we have really great sex and now we feel really close to each other." There is more to emotional connection than sex: "My sense is that people mistake sexual expression and the connection that gets created emotionally by having sex with emotional connection." If we conflate the meaning of sex with emotional connection, we restrict ourselves unnecessarily: "Seeing that aspect of the physical pleasure as meeting your emotional needs is really limiting, it's like only seeing one aspect of what is this vast, bounteous potential."

Commitment for Rogelio is

Saying I'm going to do something and doing it. It's being willing to set my needs aside to meet someone else's needs or expectations in the hope that I'm building a relationship that has a sense of stability. Commitment is pretty serious. It means getting in there and digging in the trenches with someone... It's like a commitment to grow old together.

He is committed to Shakti as his life partner in a primary relationship. Commitment also involves

being willing to show up and confront other people on the parts of them that aren't real... And saying, I think you're fucking up here. And welcoming that in another person as a spiritual exercise. That to me is the ultimate commitment. Commitment to one's spiritual growth.

Shakti described Rogelio as her lifemate. She said, "I think the biggest commitment I have with Rogelio is to show up and tell the truth." This is not a commitment to make the relationship last, but rather, "It's a commitment to make the relationship as truthful, as deep, as mutually supportive, as evolving for the other person and for ourselves as possible." Allowing for change is important. What she would tell others, whether polyamorous or monogamous, about commitment is,

Commitment that is something set in stone is a faulty commitment, because it means that you've somehow gone to sleep on what is true and real and if you really want to be committed for the rest of your life to this person, you're going to need to keep showing up and finding out what's true in that moment so that you can keep evolving together, because if you're committed to some ideal or some pretense, it's going to backfire.

Although Shakti is "awed that we're so close after 10 years, and there's a part of me that would love to keep evolving together, till we die," she recognizes that "there might be some time when it's really clear to me that this, that I can't keep living this way" (referring to an issue that is not related to polyamory). She recognizes that being part of a couple is something that is ingrained in us: "The air we breathe is coupleness... One of the biggest advantages is fitting in to the society." However, there's a personal aspect as well: "I just love having a witness that's a

day to day witness to my life." She has tried communal living situations, but they are difficult: "Every additional person is exponentially more processing."

Common Elements

What is clear in talking with all of these couples is that they are together because they **want** to be, because their relationship gives them pleasure and joy and enhances their life, even if it presents difficult challenges at times. Their relationships add value to their lives. None of them are in the kind of relationship that seems dead or that hangs on solely because of inertia or obligation. Their primary partners are very important to them, and they are willing to work hard to maintain those relationships.

Maintaining the Primary Bond

Couples who wish to maintain a primary bond with each other while also having other intimate partners have often put considerable thought into how to avoid threatening their relationship, and how to keep it strong and vital. There are different aspects to this. One is to have agreements or ground rules, of which a prominent one is veto power. Some activities may be reserved for the primary couple, although that did not show up in any absolute sense in this sample. In addition, couples may do specific things together to keep their love alive. They also have to learn to deal with jealousy.

Safer Sex Agreements

There was a universal concern about safer sex. Some couples may reserve unprotected sex for each other, others may not. In three cases the couples mentioned being part of a larger fluid-bonded group (meaning they are not using barriers to prevent the exchange of fluids during

sex). In one case, the couple are fluid-bonded with the other-gender member of another couple, and also with another woman, but use safer sex with other sexual partners. The other fluid-bonded groups are involved in what is sometimes called a line, because there are two people (on either end of the line) who only have sex with one person in the group, and the others each have sex with two other people in the group. For example, in one case the couple is at one end of a five person line consisting of the man, his wife, her lover, her lover's wife, and the lover's wife's lover. The other case appeared to involve a seven person line. Again, some members of these fluid-bonded groups have other sexual partners with whom they use safer sex.

Definitions of safer sex vary, and the interviewer did not ask what exactly the participants meant by safer sex (e.g. just condom use or also barriers for oral sex, the use of latex gloves, etc.), though in some cases an interviewee brought it up. Some of the couples have levels of safer sex, the level of barrier required depending on how much is known about the person, how safe their behavior is, and their STD testing status.

While this may not seem to have to do with maintaining the primary bond, it definitely has to do with creating safety. In addition, as Evelyn pointed out, some people confuse the emotional issue of safer sex (or sex with another partner at all) with the epidemiological (disease) issue. She suggested that these issues should be addressed separately.

Veto Power

Veto power, or the agreement that one person can veto the other's relationship with an outside partner, is widely discussed in poly groups and email lists. The fact that there is little agreement on this was reflected in this study, though in discussion groups there is often a much stronger voice in favor of veto power.

In only one case did both members of the couple mention veto power, and that was the case where, although they had agreed upon it at one time, they are again negotiating about it because one person is recognizing that it is not good for her to have it hanging over her head, and her husband still wants it. In one case neither of the couple mentioned veto power. In two cases one person did not mention it, and the person who did was clearly opposed to the concept. In the other three cases one member mentioned that veto power was in their agreements, but the other did not. Each of these is a different situation. In one, both partners are present when they are sexual, so it might seem obvious that they will be in agreement about their sexual partners. In another, the person who mentioned it said she would not be willing to use it for fear of appearing controlling. Her partner has not used it or indicated any desire for it, so it seems like a moot point. In the final case, the veto was ultimately used once, by the person who mentioned it, but in a situation where it might not be an issue currently because of the other agreements which they now have.

Note, however, that what people mean by veto power varies. One woman who said that she and her husband do not have veto power, that they do not in principle believe in it, also stated that, "If he got involved with somebody I thought was actively trying to harm our relationship, I wouldn't tolerate that, and I wouldn't expect him to." Some people would consider this having veto power; the issue is under what conditions someone would use it.

Honesty and Communication

All of the participants stressed honesty and communication. Scott noted the lack of models for people who are polyamorous, but suggested that the thing that most poly people would agree on is the importance of "Open, honest communication." His observation was

accurate for the study group.

Rogelio's emphasis was on being authentic. Communicating is important in maintaining their relationship. Fred does not worry about growing apart because his communication with Mary is good. John and Jackie both stressed the need for open, honest communication. Carol and Pseud committed to pushing for 100% honesty. Shakti emphasized that their main agreement was to "to show up and tell the truth."

There are some poly people who have a "Don't ask, don't tell" agreement. No members of this study group acknowledged having such an agreement, and some respondents specifically commented that they did not like that model and did not see how it could work.

Other Agreements

There were a number of other agreements that were mentioned. Some people try to let each other know before they are sexual with someone new. Others, if they are traveling, agree to tell each other as soon as they can thereafter. Some noted the importance of being careful to be sensitive to each other's needs, which may be different from their own. For example, Shakti needs reassurance when Rogelio is going off on a date, but he needs to have some connection with her partners.

As mentioned above, some people have agreements about spending the night with each other even if they have spent the evening with a lover. Some agree not to use their bed with a secondary partner, or only under special circumstances. In most cases the respondents said they want to get to know someone their primary partner is going to see on a regular basis. Paul mentioned that they do not discuss their couple-related issues with others. Jerry and Annie commented that they never shut each other out, so they can walk in on each other even in a

sexual situation if they need to. Also, they never refuse sex with the other, although they can negotiate the timing. Evelyn and Scott have a written list of agreements.

Actions Taken to Keep the Relationship Alive

Most people talked about making sure to spend enough time together, and sometimes going away together. Communication was acknowledged as very important in keeping their bond alive. For those who had a common business, working on that together was a bonding experience (though it also created tensions). A number of people mentioned working on personal growth and self-awareness together, and attending workshops together. Shakti commented that the intention to stay together helps, and also that sleeping in the same bed together may create a psychic bond. Carol said they work hard for a win-win solution rather than a compromise, and she stands up for what she wants. For some, being sexual together with a third person or another couple is part of what energizes their relationship.

Two couples mentioned a daily practice that involved some time spent focusing on each other. Paul and Lizful described their full moon and horned moon celebrations, which are times for deep connection, special sexual exploration, and a focus on pleasuring one of them.

Dealing with Jealousy

All of the participants have had to deal with jealousy, whether their own or their partner's, and usually both. Some people mentioned that how they handle their jealousy is a common question that other people ask them when they discuss polyamory.

John's comment exemplifies the most common response: "If I'm jealous or upset about something, then we'll talk about it and I'll get over it." Later he observed, "Everyone goes

through that, jealousy's natural, you just have to learn how to get through that." On the rare occasions that it occurs, Jerry talks himself out of it. Several others also talk their way through jealousy.

Several people worked to identify the roots of the problem. Pseud recognized his jealousy as a fear of abandonment. Annie noted that

Jealousy for me is around my anxiety issues...this is change, what is this going to mean. Is it going to mess things up? Is it going to hurt me? Is it going to hurt us? ... And it's not about sex. It's about how is this going to change our relationship.

Lizful found that the normal ways of dealing with jealousy did not work for her, and with much exploration discovered that "the closest I could come to saying what hurts has to do with my being literally non-existent." She felt like she did not exist when Paul was with someone else.

Some respondents said it was helpful simply to recognize that jealousy is a feeling like other feelings, and let it pass. Scott, who had struggled a lot with jealousy, discovered some research that gave him a model for how jealousy works in the brain. This allowed him to notice jealousy as a reaction and not let it run him.

There were some specific suggestions. A friend of Jackie's encouraged her to make plans for nights when John was on a date. She found that it was very helpful to go out and do something she enjoyed so she would not be home thinking about how much fun he was having.

Some people found that having sex together (as a threesome or foursome) reduced the likelihood of jealousy. Some do this as a general practice. Others, like Annie, do it on occasion:

I advise people because a lot of people who are exploring polyamory talk to us about jealousy, particularly sexual jealousy. Our response is go to bed together. All of you. Because I learned with Jerry early that if I watched him make love with someone else or I was part of that, that's much better for me. Not all the time, but once or twice. Because I think people, they're speculating, wondering, is it better with this partner, what are they doing - well, go see. Really, I think it takes away one major cause of jealousy. It's just

sex.

Perceived Benefits of Polyamory

Our culture assumes that monogamy is better than nonmonogamy. Many sing the praises of monogamy and write about its benefits (see the literature review in chapter 2). People who are polyamorous clearly find enough value in polyamory to go against the societal norms and expand their relationships to include additional intimate partners. What inspires them to do this? How do the people in this study conceptualize the benefits of polyamory?

While everyone recognized some challenges in being polyamorous, the foremost of which was time, they all were enthusiastic about their own participation. The benefits fell into a number of different categories.

Growth

As mentioned above, Evelyn commented on polyamory as a crucible. Scott suggested that "You need to take on poly as a path for long term personal growth, because if you don't, you'll be taking it on as a path for long term personal suffering." He liked the personal growth path. In discussing the challenges inherent in polyamory, Carol remarked, "Challenges can be disruptive, but I see basically challenges are growth-promoting, and that's a big value for me." Annie observed, "I also think [polyamory] facilitates your growth, your maturity, it's just so much more interesting because you are confronted with things that are difficult sometimes." There were many other comments indicating that the speaker had learned a great deal about communication in the process of working on the issues that were brought up by polyamory. It is clear that personal growth is highly valued by this group of people. As Shakti noted, "It's kind of

hard to stay asleep when you're poly."

Truth and Honesty

Closely related to personal growth is the value placed on truth and honesty. All of the participants mentioned honesty. As described above, some of them included honesty in their core agreements about their relationship and about dealing with polyamory. Paul listed having to be more honest as a benefit of polyamory. Fred explained that it allows him to be honest about his feelings: "I used to have this secret that I was really attracted to all my friends. Now it doesn't have to be secret." For Lizful, the concept of being in complete honesty has been a great asset. Polyamory required it: "I think it makes a huge difference, the level of openness and communication and honesty that you have to do if you're being poly, that you ought to do anyway." Rogelio expressed a sense that being intimate with more than one person is "going to demand that you show up more honestly, where you can kind of hide out with one person and not be authentic." Since he values authenticity, this is clearly a benefit. In a previous relationship, Carol felt she had to cheat or be frustrated sexually. She much prefers to be both honest and satisfied.

Love, Connection and Community

In polyamory, some of the participants found a greater connection with others and a community that was supportive. They felt they had more love in the lives than they would have had otherwise.

As Lizful expressed it, "It's one way of having a wider community of people with whom you can rejoice and on whom you can count if you need help. Some people do it through their

church, but the same kind of thing, you can do it through your poly." Rogelio finds it helpful to get support from a lover who has intimate knowledge of him. His heart opens in polyamory, and he feels more compassion. Scott believes that "poly benefits people by making a stronger community." For him, polyamory is about building an extended family. John remarked that "Polyamory is about soaking up as much love as possible, from every source." Carol noted that it allows her to "experience others more deeply and more intimately," especially emotionally.

Fun, Sensuality and Sexuality

Lizful's first response to the question about the benefits of polyamory was, "Well, it's fun. Let us not neglect the fact that it's fun."

The fun is not all about sex. Carol appreciated having "a lot more people I can laugh and play with on a more fun level." In addition, "We're more playful when we're with a 3rd person than we were when we're just by ourselves." Carol also expressed enjoyment of the ease of touch she found in the poly community: "For me it provides a lot of sensual nonsexual [touch] - polyamorous people are more likely to be open to being sensual and touching and giving nurturing touch than non-polyamorous people, in my experience."

The participants enjoyed the ability to experience a greater variety in their sexuality. Some felt they learned more about sex by experiencing different people; they learned more about their own sexual responses as well as how to be a better lover. One woman specifically mentioned finding that some sexual positions worked well with one person but not another. Having sex with a lover who had a small penis allowed her to see that intercourse did not have to be painful; subsequently her physical problem was diagnosed and corrected surgically.

For some people this is a natural way to express their sexuality. As Fred explained, "I really love the feeling of being sexual in a group. I just love the feeling of connection with everybody. I just love it. I had dreams about it when I was about 12 years old."

Improving the Primary Relationship

A number of people observed that polyamory had improved their primary relationship. One of the ways this happened was that some people felt an extra sexual juiciness. Some of this was from New Relationship Energy. One woman said she had more and better sex when she had an outside relationship. Part of this may have come from the energy of her partner reclaiming her when she returned home from seeing a lover: "He never says it, but there's an energetic, You are mine, and that is played out sexually. It's great and delicious."

Another way to bring the NRE home for Scott was to notice what he was doing for his new lover, think about what he would tend to do for Evelyn under similar circumstances, and do it.

One woman said, "I get more turned on in my life... [there are] more hues to the pleasure spectrum." She remarked, "The best part of the benefits is the variety of loving attention and experiences of pleasure in a responsible way."

Clearly growth and honesty are also factors in improving the primary relationship.

Kids

The people who commented on kids included the parents with a child currently at home, people who have not yet had children but plan to do so, and parents of adult children who either came to polyamory after their children were adults, or whose children did not know about the

parents' involvement in nonmonogamy while they were still at home.

All of those who commented on children thought that polyamory was beneficial for the children. Other adults can help raise the kids. If the other adults are local, "The kids are never on the shorts for somebody who can pay attention to them." The kids have more role models. The parents suggested I interview both the child and her older stepsister, but I told them that that would have to wait for a different study.

Choice

Polyamory gives people more choice. For two of the women it gave them an opportunity to explore serious emotional and sexual relationships with women as well as with men. For some people, it gave them more freedom to explore sexually. They could partake in activities (whether sexual or nonsexual) that their primary partners were not interested in with their lovers. One man said it allows him to explore what relationships are, and gives him the freedom to explore where a relationship naturally wants to go. As one woman stated, "I have a sense of that wonderful combination of freedom and commitment." Another commented, "One of my big challenges in life has been being able to make choices, to feel that I am at choice, and by choosing polyamory I am choosing a path of choice... I equally believe that monogamy needs to be a choice too."

Polyamory is natural for Annie: "Finally I get to be who I am. I'm an open, honest, loving person who's not risking creaming somebody by having another relationship." Some others also felt they had had a natural tendency towards polyamory since they were very young.

Nonconformity

Some people specifically appreciated not conforming to society's norms. One commented, "I know that there are some subset of people who like being poly or pagan or queer or whatever because they like tweaking the noses of the societal structure that hurt them when they were kids, whether that's Christianity or whatever. I know for me that was much more important when I was younger." Another appreciated not being "like the mainstream, out of integrity, world." However, when the desire for nonconformity was present, it seemed to be a side benefit, not the main attraction.

Chapter Summary

The people who were interviewed all found their participation in polyamory satisfying. They have different ways of relating to others sexually. Some relationships are separate, some are joint. Some secondary relationships are long term, others more casual.

Their commitment varied from absolute to a commitment to work out their issues to recognizing that there could be deal breakers. Their appreciation and enjoyment of each other were primary factors in keeping them together.

Honesty and communication are important tools in maintaining the primary bond. The couples all have some type of safer sex agreement. They have different attitudes towards veto power. They have found a way to deal with jealousy.

For these participants, the benefits of polyamory include personal growth, a need for truth and honesty, greater love, connection and community, more enjoyable sex and more fun. They find it improves their primary relationship. Those who mention children think polyamory is beneficial for them. They like having a choice about their relationships.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter starts with some comments on the ways that the sample may not be representative of people who are polyamorous. It then has a summary of the common factors in these relationships which contributed to their success, followed by some general observations from the study. Next there is a section which discusses the reasons for monogamy which were given in chapter 2 in light of the results. A section on possible conclusions from the research is followed by a section on possible future research.

Comments on the Sample

The people who participated in this study are clearly not a representative sample of the poly community in general, or even of those in long term committed relationships. Some attributes of the sample are examined in this section.

Parents

There was a shortage of parents with children at home in this sample - only one such couple was included. Why were there so few? Is this representative of the poly community as a whole?

In this author's opinion, this is likely to have to do with the time factor. For some people, working and raising children does not leave any extra time to consider having additional relationships, especially ones which require a lot of talking and processing, so they are not

actively polyamorous while they are raising children. For others, they are simply too busy to be part of a study. They may not have heard about it because they do not have time to be on the email lists which were used to solicit participants, and even if they have time for email, the one to three hour interview for each person may have seemed unmanageable.

Without a carefully designed study, it is not possible to know whether fewer people in the poly community have children at home than in society at large, and if so, whether people currently raising children are less likely to become polyamorous, or people who are polyamorous are less likely to subsequently have children. The effect of the combination of polyamory and raising children on the stability of the primary relationship is also unknown.

Age

The high average age of the sample may also be a factor in the lack of children at home, which leads to a question about why it is so high. This may be because of greater time availability (some of the participants are retired, others are not working full time jobs), or simply because the groups that this interviewer used for recruitment purposes are less appealing to the younger generation of adults.

It is also possible that younger adults do not engage in this type of type of behavior as much, have not yet had time to discover that there is a like-minded community, or simply do not feel a need for a community.

Polyfidelity vs. Polyamory

Note that couples who are interested in a polyfidelitous (similar to monogamous but with more than two people in the relationship) relationship are naturally excluded from this study.

Either they are part of a larger group, and therefore no longer simply a couple, or they have not yet found other partners for their group, and therefore are not in multiple ongoing relationships.

Sociological Factors

The study group members appeared to be exclusively white, which was unsurprising given the author's experience that the vast majority of people who participate in organized poly activities are white. Possible reasons for this would need to be addressed in another study.

While there was no specific question about education in the interviews, it was clear from occupations and from comments made that the majority of the people in the sample were at least college educated, and many had further education. This is consistent with the author's impression of the poly community in general, that most people who identify as polyamorous are well educated, whether formally or, in some cases, informally. This researcher speculates that people who are educated are more likely to be able to find a subset of the society that is outside their original social group, and perhaps also more likely to be willing to question the traditional values that would discourage them from becoming members of that community. It is possible that if information about polyamory becomes more widely available, especially on television, that this might change.

Success Factors in These Relationships

There are some common factors in these long term polyamorous relationships that might provides clues as to why they have been successful.

Appreciation

One thing that stands out in the interviews is the level of appreciation expressed by the

respondents. They have a great deal of appreciation for each other and for their relationship. They **want** to be together, they enjoy their relationships. Some of this comes from a sense of shared history. Some appreciate the effort that the other has put into the relationship in difficult times, or the other's willingness at times to relax the agreements they have made. Some of the respondents seem to dwell on what it is that they like about each other and the good things that they have together.

Appreciation can be helpful for any relationship. Gottman and DeClaire remarked that "Our research shows that married couples who regularly express their appreciation for each other have much happier, stronger marriages" (2001, p. 79). They include an exercise on how to "transform a crabby, critical habit of mind to one that praises and appreciates." The relationships examined in this study are in accord with their findings.

Closeness

Perhaps related to appreciation, the participants expressed a sense of closeness to their primary partner. Several expressed the sense that they just keep getting closer and closer. Some feel an underlying closeness even if they are currently experiencing some tension or are in the midst of reworking their agreements.

Since only committed couples were included in the study, perhaps couples who do not feel close to each other have been weeded out. However, if that is the case, it adds credibility to the idea that nurturing a sense of closeness is one of the ways to help maintain commitment. What is interesting is that for some of these couples, being polyamorous appears to have increased their sense of closeness and their commitment to each other. Some of this closeness appears to be a result of the communication needed to manage a polyamorous relationship.

Communication

As Lizful noted, the level of honesty and communication required to be polyamorous is one that all couples should practice, but it is required for polyamory to work. Communication and honesty were mentioned repeatedly as vital to maintaining poly relationships. As Mary mentioned, being polyamorous "is forcing us to communicate, and that's always a good thing." Jackie noted that in a monogamous relationship, "there isn't that constant need to maintain communication."

Good communication was seen by the participants as both a requirement to make their relationships work, and a benefit of being in a poly relationship.

Willingness to Change

All of the respondents have had to make changes in their relationships, changes which are not part of the standard expected experience of marriage. They have had to listen to their partner's expressed needs and desires, and work with their partner to figure out what works for both of them. They have had to be adaptable. We might speculate that someone with fairly rigid ideas of how things should be done might have a difficult time in a polyamorous relationship, or in any long term relationship.

Willingness to Deal with Jealousy

While a few of the participants did not experience any jealousy, most of them have had to find ways to avoid letting it control them. They have been willing to face it and let it pass. They have actively worked on finding ways to reduce its hold on them, and on helping their partners manage it as well.

Flexibility and the Relative Importance of Desires

The issues that Carol and Pseud were trying to work through related to veto power and their agreement to spend nights together have some very interesting implications for what enables a couple to stay together happily.

Carol had the wisdom to recognize that acquiescing to Pseud's desire to spend all their nights together when she very much wanted to spend the night with Joanie would not be healthy. She saw only two good choices. One was surrender, "meaning let go of my want, honor his want, and do it in a way of love so that I don't resent it." Since she was not able to do that, she had to take the other option, namely to keep talking about what she wanted and needed, even though that involved a lot of crying. She had to stand up for her needs and desires.

Pseud was able to recognize that Carol's desire for a night with Joanie was more important than his desire for her to come home. As he said, it was not a deal breaker. He did not want her to feel resentment towards him, so he was willing to let go of their agreement, or at least to loosen it.

This incident points to the limitation of agreements.

Limitation of Agreements

Agreements can be helpful, but they also need to be flexible. What one person agrees to at one point in a relationship is not necessarily what will work twenty, ten, five or even one year later. There can come a point when one person says, enough, I can't do this any more. The partner can try to hold him or her to the agreement, but at that point that will likely lead either to resentment and a deterioration of the relationship, or to a breakup. If both partners can be

flexible, and do as Carol mentioned (which is look for a win-win resolution) then the relationship, with modified agreements, is more likely to survive.

A corollary to this is that, as Schnarch (1998) pointed out, when your partner's happiness is as important to you as your own happiness (as happens when people love each other), it is in your self interest to find a way to do the things that will make your partner happy.

In a healthy relationship this could lead a couple to assess the relative importance of their desires in a particular situation, and give priority to the person with the stronger need or desire. As long as both partners are doing this with a willingness to be flexible, they are more likely to create the kind of relationship that will work for both of them.

Agreements are also limited by the willingness of the people involved to stretch and push their boundaries. Moving at the pace of the slowest person worked for Mary and Fred, because there was movement. They moved forward at a pace they both felt comfortable with. In poly groups an agreement to move at the pace of the slowest is often promoted; however, there is also discussion of the problem that occurs when the slowest person stops moving. In principle he or she may be willing to allow his or her partner to have other relationships, but in practice there is always some reason the particular one in question is unacceptable. At some point such agreements are likely to break down.

Heartshare

Couples sometimes have opposing desires which they both feel very strongly about. For couples in the study, it could have to do with polyamory, but it could just as easily have to do with whether or not to have children, or where to live, or many other types of choices that have to be made. How can these be resolved? Lizful mentioned a process which had been extremely

helpful for her and Paul, called the heartshare, which she said they learned from an article by the UV Family (the UV Family is a group of people dedicated to exploring new territory in relationships. For information about them, see <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC10/UVFamily.htm>). She described it as follows:

You sit down and one person is the initiator, you sit down and the initiator simply talks for as long as it's necessary to do it. Basically it's coming from, this is what I'm feeling, this is what's going on, this is - I'm opening to you, trusting you to not get hurt personally, to be able to take it. It's not venting... This isn't trying to punch somebody out. It's basically a no-holds-barred opening. And the business of the person who's listening is to totally refrain from not only saying anything, because you must remain completely silent, but you don't start building your rebuttal in your mind. You don't do anything other than hear. You just fucking listen. And then, when it's run its course, the listener can say, Can you talk to me more about this? I'm not sure that I got that. Or, if I tried to express something back to you like this, would I be saying it right? And then that's it.

There's no rebuttal. Now you can turn around the other way, and the other person does their own, but it's not on the basis of what you just said. It's not a response. It's what the other person would have said if they went first. And then that's it. That's it. And you'd think, by god, there's no communication, oh yes there is... It's absolutely mutually agreed that ... the only thing that's going to flow from it is an embrace, and if there's something that wants further clarification, then you do. And that has been - oh, it's made such a difference.

Other Observations

Here are some general observations from the study.

Unmet Needs

A common comment used to justify polyamory is that one person should not have to (or cannot) meet all of another person's needs. This type of comment showed up during the interviews, and the author has heard it many times elsewhere. However, this did not really seem to be a prime motivator in the study sample.

For two women, being polyamorous allowed them to have emotional and sexual

relationships with both women and men, although in one of those cases, the woman identifies as a lesbian, and her male primary partner is "grandfathered" in. (None of the men indicated a romantic or sexual interest in other men, though there are many men in the poly community in general who are bisexual). In some cases, one person enjoys some particular types of sexual activities with his or her secondary partner that the primary partner is not interested in, but that seemed to be a benefit rather than the motivating force behind the secondary relationship.

Some people recognized that they were not successful at monogamy. Annie mentioned that she and Jerry agreed that since they had both failed at monogamy, they would not attempt it again. Perhaps this could be construed as polyamory helping them meet their need or desire for multiple partners.

The Meaning of Sex and Intimacy

In the monogamous paradigm, as discussed in the review of literature, sexual intimacy needs to be reserved for one person. The participants in this study have created a different meaning for sex and intimacy, one that allows them to maintain a strong primary bond with one other person while also allowing them to experience closeness, connection, intimacy and sexuality with other people as well. As described above, Mary and Carol both explicitly commented on the meaning of sex. Mary noted that experiencing a shift in the meaning of sex had allowed her to become open to polyamory, and Carol described how she consciously created a meaning that allowed her to keep her relationship with Joanie from becoming threatening to her primary relationship.

Mint (2004) noted that the enforcement of monogamous behavior extends well beyond actual sexual behavior and includes restrictions on "Spending time alone with someone....,

holding hands, and of course flirting, touching, or smiling too much. All of these actions are signifiers of a possible sexual relationship in our culture, and this is what makes them socially dangerous" (p. 60). Some people who are polyamorous have redefined the meaning of touch as well as of sex so that it is no longer necessarily dangerous. This is shown in Carol's observation that in her experience polyamorous people were more open to sensuality and touch.

Redefining the meaning of sex, intimacy, and touch allows people greater opportunities for having those experiences. It gives them a greater choice in how they relate with other people and allows them to explore what types of activities are most satisfying for them.

A Crucible for Growth

Schnarch (1991, 1998) proposed that the monogamy provides a crucible for growth. He suggested that the purpose of monogamous marriage was to produce differentiation: integrity, the ability to stand up for what you believe in, the ability to maintain a clear sense of self in close proximity to a partner. This requires the willingness to risk your partner's displeasure rather than letting the relationship deteriorate because talking about what you really want seems too risky. He stated that other relationships detract from this.

This might be true for clandestine affairs, which allow people to meet their sexual needs without having to confront their partner. However, when people are open and honest about their relationships, it appears that they have to grow and engage in the type of communication and confrontation which encourages differentiation. As Evelyn commented, polyamory tends to be a crucible. It forces growth - or the couple may split up.

Making conscious choices may be a greater factor in differentiation than the particular choice (such as whether or not to be monogamous).

On Being a Couple

While some people in the poly community are adamantly against the open couple model, as was evident in some of the responses to the solicitation for participants in this study, the respondents appreciated having the daily connection with another person and the ongoing support they found in their relationship. However, some of them could imagine the same benefits in a triad or larger configuration of committed partners. Some appreciated the ease of fitting into society as part of a couple, as well as the practical benefits that come from marriage (such as tax or health insurance benefits). Some also noted the growth opportunities that come with a long term relationship.

Comparison with Reasons for Monogamy

Chapter 2 examined some reasons given in the literature for monogamy. This section responds to those reasons based on the observations of the participants.

Commitment

As we have seen, people who are not monogamous can still be very committed to each other. For some, the pleasure bond that Masters and Johnson (1974) discussed can even be enhanced by sharing with others sexually.

Healing

While the respondents did not specifically talk about healing, and certainly not the type of physical healing discussed by Pearsall (1994), they did talk about growth. Some of them mentioned that polyamory is one of the growth paths that people can take. There were even some comments that people who are not interested in and willing to work on growth should not choose

polyamory. This emphasis on growth may provide the opportunity to heal childhood wounds, which Hendrix (1990) emphasized as the purpose of monogamous marriage.

Spirituality

While not many people specifically mentioned spirituality in the context of polyamory, for those that did, it was a positive element. One example is Rogelio's comment that welcoming being confronted when one is not fully authentic is a commitment to spiritual growth. Similarly, Carol, who said that "a lot of being in a relationship is about emotional and spiritual growth," commented that for her personally polyamory is more spiritual than monogamy.

While they would probably agree with Moschetta and Moschetta (1998) about the presence of a spiritual element in strong and vibrant marriages, they clearly disagree that that necessarily leads to choosing monogamy.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the observations of seven long term committed polyamorous couples about their relationships. It has portrayed some ways two people can be in a committed relationship with each other without using sexual exclusivity to protect their connection; in other words, some of the ways that people who are not monogamous have organized their emotional lives to maintain a strong couple bond over the long term while at the same time they develop emotional and sexual bonds with others. It has described the ways the participants handle multiple relationships, the ways they view their commitment to each other and nurture it, the ways they handle jealousy, and the benefits they perceive in polyamory. These relationships are custom made, created by each couple to meet their own needs.

The cohesive factors which have been discussed by the participants are mutual appreciation, emotional closeness, good communication, and flexibility. They have embraced honesty and personal growth.

This study suggests that the desire to be together and finding value in the relationship can be a major factor in the success of relationships. These couples stay together because they **want** to be together. What this suggests for relationships in general is that attention needs to be focused on what is working well in a relationship, not just on what needs to be changed. To encourage marriages to last, it may be more important to help couples stay in touch with the qualities they appreciate in each other than to stress the obligation they incurred in marrying.

The couples in this study manage to keep a focus on each other, even though their attention is also on others. They pay attention to and nourish their relationships. This suggests that one of the factors for a successful relationship may be to avoid taking each other for granted, to pay attention to each other and nurture each other.

The respondents do not get trapped by their concept of what they **should** be doing, but talk with each other about what they want and how to create it. They keep a perspective that helps them avoid getting too caught up in NRE, in new love, by recognizing that this is a stage and the current excitement does not mean that the new relationship is better than the existing one. So flexibility and the willingness to be creative in finding the ways of relating that work for both partners are other factors in commitment.

Possible Future Research

Since there has been little research on polyamory, future research could take many directions. Here are some questions that could provide a focus for future research on polyamory.

Commitment in Poly Relationships

Future research on commitment in polyamorous relationships could be expanded to include triads (3 people), quads (4 people) and even larger groups. Some of these groups are polyfidelitous (meaning they are sexual only with others within the group) and others are open. How does this affect the dynamic? How do polyfidelitous groups gain new members?

A longitudinal study of people in committed poly relationships could study the differences between the couples or groups which remain together after five or ten years and those that split up. Are there some factors that are good predictors of the longevity of the relationship?

Some people prefer not to have a primary, marriage-like relationship with anybody. What types of relationships do they want? Do they create (or want to create) long term committed relationships?

Children

Our society tends to assume that a nonmonogamous situation is bad for children, and a court may remove a child from the mother's custody simply because the mother is in a polyamorous situation (see discussion of the Divilbiss case in Emens, 2004 and Cloud, 1999).

What effect does living with parents who have open, honest, loving relationships with multiple partners really have on children? Children who are currently in that situation could be interviewed, along with adults who grew up with polyamorous parents. Does it make a difference whether the extra adult(s) live with the family or not?

What effect does having children have on people who are polyamorous? Parents who were poly before they had children as well as parents who became poly while their children were

growing up could be interviewed in order to look at the effect that the children have on their connections with other adults.

Is there a correlation between polyamory and being childless? Do people who do not have children or whose children are grown up more often choose polyamory, or does being polyamorous discourage some people from having children?

Varieties of Poly Relationships

What is the relative frequency of various types of poly relationships? This should include both actual situations and the ideal that people have. In addition to committed couples and groups, and people who prefer to remain single, there are people who have more than one relationship that they would consider to be primary, even though those relationships are separate.

Clandestine Relationships

How many people have had an affair (a clandestine relationship) even while in a polyamorous relationship? What are the factors that caused that (the relationship and the lack of communication about the relationship)? How many people who are now polyamorous had affairs in the past?

Mono/Poly Relationships

Some couples manage to maintain a relationship where one person is polyamorous and the other is monogamous by choice. In our culture, many people are more concerned about the monogamy of their partner than their own. This is an observation based on numerous discussions over the years, and is also noted by Schnarch (1991, 1998). This can make being in relationship with someone who is polyamorous particularly hard on the monogamous partner.

How do these couples make their relationship work? Are there techniques that they have used which other couples in a similar situation could use?

Attitudes Towards Marriage

What attitudes towards marriage do polyamorous people have? How many would like to have group marriage legalized? How many would like to abolish marriage altogether? How many would abolish marriage if some practical matters were handled, such as universal health care and an easy way to include multiple partners as members of the immediate family (for example for hospital visits)?

Psychological and Sociological Profiles

How do the psychological and sociological profiles of poly people compare with the general population? Do they have a different Myers-Briggs distribution, for example? Do they have a greater interest in sex than average? Do they have a greater focus on emotional intimacy than others? What was their religious upbringing and what is their current religious affiliation/identification? Do they differ from societal norms in other ways? Where are they on the political spectrum? Is there any reason polyamory would be less appealing to people of color?

Chapter Summary

The participants in this study have some noticeable differences from the general population. Among these differences are the number who have children at home, the average age, and the racial composition. The factors contributing to the success of these relationships, as mentioned by the respondents, are their appreciation of each other, their ongoing and often

increasing emotional closeness, a high degree of honesty and good communication, and flexibility in meeting the desires of both people. Finding a way to meet unmet needs (other than for variety) did not seem to be a major factor in the choice of polyamory. The participants have created a different meaning for sex and intimacy than is common in the culture, and have found polyamory to be a crucible for growth. Some of the reasons given for monogamy seem to be met by polyamory. This study suggests that some of the factors for successful relationships include paying attention to each other, caring about the partner's needs and desires, finding ways to enjoy each other, focusing on what is working well, honesty, and flexibility in finding ways to relate that works for both partners. Some possible directions for future research involving polyamory were presented.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONS FOR THESIS STUDY

These questions were not asked precisely as listed, or in the exact order listed. In addition, some were occasionally omitted if it appeared they had already been answered. Other questions were asked as seemed appropriate in the moment.

- Age
- Length of your relationship
- Occupation
- How long polyamorous
- How did you approach poly/become poly
- What types of other relationships do you have? (do you relate separately, together, do you have sex in relationships, at sex parties, with people you just met ...).
- Do you know each other's lovers, do you spend time with them? Do you have a friendship or emotional connection with them? Are you sexual with them?
- Are there interests that you share with your lovers that you don't share with your primary partner?
- How close are you to your other lovers (do you talk about your feelings for each other, about feelings in general, how much do you share about your life, do you feel understood, do you trust them)?

- How close are you emotionally to your primary partner? (What do you share or not share with each other about activities and feelings? Do you trust each other? Do you feel understood, respected, appreciated? Do you feel that way towards your partner?)
- How would you describe your sex life with your primary partner, and with your other lovers. Is one better than the other? Are there things you share with one and not the other?
- What kind of relationships would you like (what is your ideal)?
- What types of ground rules/agreements do you have?
- Do you have children? What do you tell them? How old are they? How has your lifestyle affected them?
- How do you think polyamory has affected your life? (including your relationship with your partner and with yourself)
- Do you ever experience jealousy? (defined as feelings of discomfort, either minor or major, when a person you love is developing a relationship or being sexual with another person. This includes envy, fear of loss, issues around time, competitiveness, fear of comparison, etc.).
- Are you ever concerned about growing apart? About your paths taking you separate directions?
- Have you thought about splitting up, and if so, what prompted those thoughts?
- How do you maintain your primary bond with each other? (What has kept you together as a couple)
- Are there some activities that you reserve for each other?
- How do you handle New Relationship Energy? (the excitement that occurs when you're falling in love with a new person)

- What does commitment mean to you?
- What is your commitment to your primary partner?
- What do you think poly couples should know about commitment?
- What are the benefits of being a couple?
- What do you consider to be the benefits of being polyamorous?
- What are the challenges or drawbacks of being polyamorous?
- Is there anything else would you like me to know about your relationship, or any questions you wish I had asked?

Appendix B

GLOSSARY

The following definitions are from the Polyamory Language Page (no date).

Compersion n : the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another[. T]he term was coined by the Keristan Commune in San Francisco which practiced Polyfidelity[.] Kerista disbanded in the early 1990's.

New Relationship Energy n or adj: energy that flows between partners in a "new" relationship, the excitement and discovery that occurs during this time as opposed to old relationship energy that is part of a more settled, stable, comfortable time in the relationship.

Open Relationship n : an agreement among the members in which the partners decide that they can have sexual relations outside of the relationship. Partner[s] have agreed that they can have sexual relations independently of each other.

Polyamory n : is the nonpossessive, honest, responsible and ethical philosophy and practice of loving multiple people simultaneously. Polyamory emphasizes consciously choosing how many partners one wishes to be involved with rather than accepting social norms which dictate loving only one person at a time. Polyamory is an umbrella term which integrates traditional multipartner relationship terms with more evolved egalitarian terms. Polyamory embraces sexual equality and all sexual orientations towards an expanded circle of spousal intimacy and love. Polyamory is from the root words Poly meaning many and Amour meaning love hence "many loves" or Polyamory.

Polyfidelity n : a group in which all partners are primary to all other partners and sexual fidelity is to the group; shared intent of a lifelong run together. More primary partners can be added with everyone's consent. The term was coined by the Kerista commune.

Poly Mantra n or v: communicate, communicate, communicate and then communicate some more.

Primary Partner n : a person of polyamorous orientation that is intimately involved in your life on day to day basis, the person [who] provide[s] emotional and economic support [with] mutual sharing of resources, goal[s] and life paths.

Primary Relationship n 1 : the closest relationship type, the person(s) given the most time, energy and priority in a person's life; includes high level of intimacy, attraction and commitment as demonstrated by marriage-level bonding (such as shared life paths, goals, parenting, economics, housing, important values, ongoing emotional support, etc.), typically includes a desire for a shared lifelong future together.

Quad n : A multiple partnered relationship with four members.

Secondary Partner n : a person of polyamorous orientation that is intimately involved in your life but usually not daily[. T]he person provide[s] emotional support [and] may or may not provide economic support[. T]here may be some sharing of resources, goal and life paths but they are few as compared to primary partners.

Secondary Relationship n : a close relationship type, by definition it is given less in terms of time, energy and priority in a person's life than any primary relationship[. I]t includes aspects of primary relating, such as sexuality and emotional support but usually involves fewer ongoing commitments as evidenced by fewer shared values, plans or financial/legal involvements[. It] may include a desire for a long term future together.

Swinging vb : Recreational sexual activity, also called "sport sex" where partner[s] or participant[s] agree to have casual sex with each other[.] There is usually no emotional involvement. A form of monogamy in which usually two primary partners agree to have casual sex with other couples or singles.

Triad n 1: any three person lovestyle. 2: three people involved in some way; most often used in a committed sense; in some cases involving ceremonies of commitment. 3: a union or group of three usu[ally] closely related persons or things.