

**Polyamory:  
Constructing Relationships Outside of Monogamy**

by

Krista McLuskey  
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Sociology, University of Montana, 1997

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Sociology

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University of Victoria

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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Dr. Helga Hallgrimsdottir (Department of Sociology)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Steve Garlick (Department of Sociology)  
**Departmental Member**

Dr. Annalee Lepp (Department of Women's Studies)  
**Outside Member**

## **Abstract**

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Based on five semi-structured in-person interviews with self-identified polyamorous people, I argue that people construct their relationships from the options they view available to them. Polyamory, the philosophy and practice of ethical and open non-monogamy, became how the five interviewees in my study decided to live out their relationships only after having heard of the term and concept. They found that polyamory answered crisis in their relationships and relationship views for which monogamy could not provide an adequate solution. The in-depth interviews conducted focussed on how polyamorous people envisioned, created, and maintained their multiple, loving relationships. The results speak to how people create their world from what they see around them and the options they feel are available to them. It points to how invisibility of options curtails people from being able to choose a life suited to them.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Just as societies construct sex (Steele 2005) and expressions of love (Tiefer 2005), they also construct relationship forms (Adam 2006; Barker 2004; Giddens 1992; Katz 2005). As is the nature of many social constructs, accepted and common relationship forms change across time and space (Steele 2005; Tiefer 2005). Relationship types that differ from the most prevalent form of relationship in western societies today, heterosexual monogamy, are gaining greater exposure (Barker 2004). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and non-monogamous relationships are some of these forms. Some argue that relationships are moving toward less structured forms, based not on tradition or norms, but on principles of egalitarianism and mutual satisfaction (Giddens 1992). One such relationship type is polyamory, which is characterized by consensual non-monogamy (Anapol 1997; Easton & Liszt 1997).

Polyamory has been gaining attention in the press and in the entertainment industry. Also information on polyamory is readily available on the Internet. As of yet this is a highly understudied topic in sociology (Barker 2004; Sheff 2005), although research has been done on related alternative relationships such as swinging and open marriage, especially during the 1970s. Academic research on polyamory has become more prevalent in the form of theses and journal articles over the last five years. However, little current research has explored how people envision, accept, and construct polyamorous relationships (Barker 2004; Sheff 2005).

In this thesis, I examine the ways in which polyamorous people construct their relationships in the midst of a dominant culture of heteronormative monogamy. This examination will add to sociological understanding of the construction of both alternative and mainstream relationships. As well, it will provide the polyamorous community with a larger-scale look at what they are doing and how the visibility of their choice in lovestyle can affect the lives of others who do not know that this option is available to them.

In five semi-structured interviews, I explore how the participants conceived of an alternative way of relating—polyamory, how they began incorporating it into their lives, and how they have maintained their polyamorous relationships. Using social constructionism as a theoretical perspective, I show how heteronormative monogamy caused the participants discomfort within themselves and within their relationships. Despite this disconnect they did not question the institution of monogamy itself or search for alternatives other than the ones they had heard about— infidelity or serial monogamy. I explore how their ideas regarding relationships quickly transformed upon hearing about the option of polyamory. I also discuss how societal norms regarding relationships remain an issue for how they live their relationships today.

### **Chapter Summary**

In my introductory chapter I explore what polyamory is. I also delve into the concept of identity, as some people who could fit the definition of polyamory do not attach labels to themselves, while others embrace the label. For my study, I only interviewed people who self-identified as polyamorous.

My second chapter delineates the theoretical approach I took in my thesis. Social constructionism is a perspective that: 1) takes a critical position against taken for granted knowledge; 2) understands knowledge to be culturally and historically specific; 3) sees knowledge as constructed between people in daily interaction; and 4) sees social action as tied to people's constructions of the world. In this chapter, I explore how I employed social constructionism to the study of how polyamorous people came to live and identify as polyamorous. I begin by examining how social constructionism is applied to relationships in general, to the concept of heteronormative monogamy, to the concepts of serial monogamy and infidelity (culturally assumed responses to the feelings of love or lust outside of monogamous pairings), and then to the construction of homosexual relationships. I then discuss the importance of language in the social constructionist perspective and apply it specifically to the case of polyamory.

My third chapter, the literature review, examines the literature and media pertaining to and media portrayals of polyamory. I begin by looking at academic literature on swinging (open sexual [but not emotional] relations in monogamous pairs) and open marriages, especially prevalent in the 1970s. I then explore the current academic literature on polyamory as well as the information available from the mass media via the Internet, trade non-fiction books, television, and movies.

In the fourth chapter, I delineate the methodology I used in conducting my research. I discuss why interviewing was the most appropriate method to use, and address my

sampling procedure, my position within the data, my ethical considerations, and my analysis of the data.

My fifth chapter presents the interview data. I begin with a brief description of the participants based on the information they shared with me. Then I break the interview data up into three thematic sections: how the participants envisioned, created, and maintain their polyamorous relationships. A brief summary of these three themes follows.

My sixth chapter concludes the thesis. I argue that the visibility of relationship options is integral to the choice of whether or not to live polyamorously. Currently, polyamory is all but invisible in society. However, the Internet has been a vehicle that has spread knowledge of polyamory to more people, giving them an option rather than forcing them to stay monogamous if it does not work for them. Finally, I offer numerous directions for further research on the topic of polyamory.

### **What Is Polyamory?**

Polyamory has many definitions, but it generally refers to the practice of having more than one loving, sexual partner with the knowledge and consent of all partners. The word “polyamory” is defined in the on-line encyclopedia *Wikipedia* as “the practice, desire, or acceptance of having more than one loving, intimate relationship at a time with the full knowledge and free consent of everyone involved,”

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyamory>). Similar definitions are found on many polyamory related websites and in books about polyamory such as *The Ethical Slut: A*

*Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (1997) and *Polyamory the New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relations* (1997). In 2006, the term polyamory was introduced into the *Merriam Webster* and *Oxford* dictionaries. Polyamory uses the Greek root “poly,” which means “many,” and “amor,” the Latin root for “love.” *Wikipedia* states that the term is thought to be coined by Morning Glory Zell Ravenhart, who wrote an article that is popular among the on-line polyamorous communities called “Bouquet of Lovers” in 1990. In 1992, Jennifer Wesp founded the Usenet newsgroup alt.polyamory, which popularized the term on-line.

It is unknown how many people practice polyamory. In 2005, the *British Times Online* stated that approximately 2000 people were openly polyamorous in Britain. The article did not state how the figure was arrived at nor did it approximate how many people were living in the “closet.” In “Commitment in Polyamorous Relationships” (2005), Elaine Cook, who wrote her psychology thesis on commitment in polyamorous relationship, cites a survey published by *Loving More Magazine* that estimated that approximately 500,000 Americans were polyamorous and the figure is also stated on CNN.com in the article, “Mate debate: Is monogamy realistic?” (Pawlowski 2009). The proliferation of websites and discussion forums on the Internet suggest that it is a type of relationship worthy of academic exploration.

## **Identity**

The term polyamory is increasingly being used to describe open or responsible non-monogamous relationships, in large part due to the information made accessible to large numbers of people via on-line communities (Anapol 1997; Barker 2005). Although the term itself is relatively new, the concept has existed in many polygamous and polyandrous cultures throughout history (*Wikipedia*, accessed 2005-03-20). In predominantly monogamous cultures there have also been people living lifestyles in which they had multiple loving partners and were open with their partners about it, yet did not use this particular word for what they “were.”

Even today, many people who would fit the “definition” of polyamory describe themselves instead as “swingers.” Swingers, a term popularized in the 1960s, generally refers to committed couples who engage in sexual activities with other couples or singles. Swinging relationships generally focus on recreational sexual encounters and avoid emotional attachment, whereas polyamory generally incorporates both sex and emotion (Cook 2005). However, the term swinger is better known than “polyamory,” so it is sometimes used synonymously (although there is often heated debate in polyamorous communities regarding that usage).

Some people identify as polyamorous in the same way that others might as gay, lesbian, or queer. As Bouma argued in her Master’s thesis in sociology,

Before people are able to categorize themselves, or locate themselves within a particular set of social conditions, they must learn that these categories (e.g. variations in sexualities) exist, learn that others occupy these categories, and see that they are more similar than different from people in a particular category (or categories) in terms of socially-constructed needs and interests. In addition, they must begin to identify

with others in a particular category, decide that these same needs and interests, across differing social situations, qualify them to be a part of that category. They must then take on the label associated with being in this social category (e.g. queer, homosexual) when and where it is relevant to their social setting, and, over time, incorporate these situation-specific identities into their overall concept of self. (Bouma, 2006:6-7)

The word and the identity contained in categories have an importance to people, so they include them as integral parts of themselves. However, in regards to people identifying as polyamorous, some people who could be considered polyamorous do not identify with the term, others do at certain times in their life course, and some who others in the polyamorous community think are not polyamorous identify as such.

In an examination of polyamory in *New York University Review of Law and Social Change*, Emens (2004) lists self knowledge as one of the five principles espoused by the majority of polyamorists. A component of this self knowledge is identity, be polyamory a chosen lifestyle or hard-wired genetically (another debate in polyamorous communities):

The first level involves understanding one's own sexual identity. This no doubt comprises knowledge of one's 'sexual orientation' as we typically use the term—as in heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual—but also, more importantly, it encompasses self-knowledge about one's sexual identity with regard to monogamy... some polys embrace the view that you either are poly or you are not, whereas other poly writing characterize monogamy and polyamory more as choices or constructed identities. Regardless, whether they understand 'poly' and 'mono' identities as hardwired or chosen, polys call for an interrogation of one's own identity. (Emens, 2004:321)

Emens argues that society largely views non-monogamous feelings, such as being attracted to someone other than your partner sexually, as universal, so the common belief is that living polyamorously is a choice, not an unchangeable part of who someone is.

Other people view polyamory not necessarily as part of their identity, but as something they ‘do,’ whether for a lifetime or in moving back and forth between monogamy and polyamory (Robinson 1997; Wagner 2009). This is evidenced in Petula Sik Ying Ho’s study where she argues, “...having multiple relationships was just something they did; there was no need to assume a totalized identity as someone with an alternative lifestyle.” (Ho, 2006:560). According to Ho, of the participants involved in various forms of non-monogamy (some of whom could be considered polyamorous by definition) she interviewed,

Some people can behave according to their assumed roles and yet identify themselves differently in different social spaces. They perform their social and sexual identities differently in different social contexts, and in different points along their life-course. (Ho 2006:549)

So some people who could be considered polyamorous simply do not equate a term with their behavior. It is just how they relate and they do not feel a need to label their relationships or themselves based on them. In *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* (2008), Taormino cautions people not to “get stuck” on labels if they feel confining and he encourages people to define their relationships as they please.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

### Social Construction

Social constructionism is a perspective that explains the social world in terms of how it is actively and continuously created by people as opposed to being static or “natural.”

Human knowledge and understanding varies in different time periods and places. They are actively constructed as products of these conditions. “Since the social world, including ourselves, is the product of social processes, it follows that there cannot be any given, determined nature to the world or people.” (Burr 2003:5). Social construction focuses on the processes and language by which humans create their understanding. It also focuses on the power inherent in those constructions, such as social control and social actions. Language is an integral part of a social constructionist perspective as it is the means by which humans create categories and knowledge.

Social constructionism is a commonly used perspective in the sociological study of relationships and sexuality (Katz 2005; Giddens 1992; Steele 2005). As Jackson, states,

The idea that human sexuality is historically and culturally variable is fundamental to all forms of social constructionism. Not only does it hold out the possibility of transforming sexual relations, but it is also an effective means of challenging biologicistic notions of the fixity of human sexuality. (Jackson 1996)

Social constructionism takes a critical position against taken for granted knowledge. In the case of polyamory, this means interrogating the assumption that monogamy is the “natural” way to be in relationships. That monogamy is viewed as the ideal relationship

in western society needs to be examined, which would allow for the possibility of alternative forms of relationships, such as polyamory.

A second tenet of social construction is that the way we understand the world is culturally and historically specific. In terms of polyamory, this means that relationship forms have varied, and will continue to do so across time and space. So while monogamy is the norm in western culture today, this is a variable across the globe and through history. The cultural and historical specificity inherent in the social constructivist perspective also points to the fact that, “We should not assume *our* ways of understanding are necessarily any better, in terms of being any nearer the truth, than other ways,” (Burr 2003:4).

In addition, social constructionism posits that people construct ways of understanding among themselves in daily interaction. In regard to polyamory, the question of how people become polyamorous when the majority of people in western society idealize and aspire to live in monogamous relationships was a main query for me when I began my research.

Closely tied to this last aspect of social constructionism is that social action goes hand-in-hand with people’s constructions of the world. Assuming this, how can polyamory find a place in a society in which monogamy is idealized and a society in which social barriers protect monogamy against other ways of relating? As Burr states,

Descriptions or constructions of the world therefore sustain patterns of social action and exclude others. Our constructions of the world are therefore bound up with power relations because they have implications

for what it is permissible for different people to do, and for how they may treat others. (Burr, 2003:5)

It is through this perspective that I approached the topic of polyamory. Employing social constructivism to the study of polyamorous relationships sheds light on how this relatively new relationship form is being created out of a predominantly heterosexual, monogamous culture.

### **Social Construction of Relationships**

In contemporary western culture, the most visible form of relationships is heterosexual monogamy (Barker & Ritchie 2005; Cook 2005; Ingraham 1994; Stelboun 1999; Vera 1999). From an early age, it is the form of relationship that people see most frequently. Children are most often raised by two straight monogamous parents (whether natural parents or step-parents, resulting predominantly from serial monogamy), who had two straight monogamous parents themselves. Children grow up reading stories about heterosexual monogamy such as the heroines Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty and their respective Prince Charmings. They watch cartoon television programs with heterosexual monogamous characters, such as yesterday's Fred and Wilma Flintstone and today's Homer and Marge Simpson. While these representations of relationships are not necessarily realistic or even functional, they are almost exclusively about straight couples. Heterosexual monogamy is, with a few exceptions, the only form of romantic relationship that children see.

As people age they are introduced to a wider variety of material through magazines, newspapers, fiction, and movies that continues to reinforce and idealize this form of relation. In *Open Marriage*, a bestseller in the 1970s, O'Neil and O'Neil stated:

Then there are the more subtle, institutionalized pressures—all those advertisements for the good life (which simply assume you're married), the fantasies of the television situation comedies, ...and the parties you don't get invited to any more as your friends get married and you remain single (unless of course Jack and Jill have a little matchmaking in mind). America is organized around the couple, from the barbeque pit to the ocean cruise, and if you won't join you better be prepared for a fight. (O'Neil and O'Neil, 1972:17)

Much more recently, Barker and Ritchie wrote,

...the dominant version of relationships available in western culture is of life-long or serial monogamy with 'the one' perfect partner. Mainstream media are saturated with depictions of such romantic love relationships: people finding 'Mr./Miss Right' and staying 'together forever'. (Barker & Ritchie, 2006:587)

This cultural depiction of monogamy as the way to happiness and the only way to be in relationships seems not to have changed much in the last forty years. Despite the fact that finding one loving partner to marry and live with until "death do you part" is very much undermined by divorce and infidelity rates, monogamy remains the cultural ideal (Emens 2004; O'Neil & O'Neil 1972; Robinson 1997). Rubin (1989) describes sex and relationships in terms of good/normal and bad/abnormal or the "charmed circle," which includes monogamous, married couples and the "outer limits," which includes all other "unnatural" sexualities, such as polyamory. While Rubin notes that the "outer limits" have their own gradations and shift over time and place, she states that those in the inner circle benefit from society in terms of social standing, material benefits, as well as in

terms of legal status. Thus the good/bad dichotomy society presents pressures people to maintain their status in the “charmed circle.”

Alternatives to heterosexual monogamy are not completely invisible in the cultural landscape of the west. However, when alternatives such as homosexuality, bisexuality, multiple partner relationships, or infidelity are presented in media, they are usually at best treated as failures or more frequently demonized or problematized (Barker & Ritchie 2006; Stelboun 1999). Rust argues,

...relationships that do not conform to the traditional monogamous model are constructed as ‘failed’ relationships; by constructing them this way, we protect the institution of monogamy itself from challenge. (Rust 1996:131)

The cultural representation of alternative relationship types as negative and abnormal sends the clear message that monogamy and heterosexuality are natural and normal to the exclusion of all other types of relationships. By constructing a normal/abnormal dichotomy, a power relation becomes apparent. Barker and Ritchie elaborate,

In general, open non-monogamy is rendered invisible or pathological in mainstream representations. These representations serve to position monogamy as normative and place non-monogamy firmly in what Rubin (1984) calls the ‘outer limits’ of the discursive possibilities of sexuality. (Barker & Ritchie, 2006:587)

This limits the probability that people will engage in alternative relationship types because people do not feel that other viable alternatives exist or are viable (Anapol 1997; Barker & Ritchie 2006; Vera 1999). “Because we are culturally conditioned in the U.S. today to believe that monogamy is desirable, valuable and the ‘norm’ (whatever that

means), we may have assumed that it is the only way to be in relationship” (Vera, 1999:11).

Monogamy is most often not seen as a choice of how to be in relationships. It is often synonymous in people’s minds with relationships. Sexual, romantic, or emotional attractions or actions on those attractions are seen as relationship failures, but do not necessarily cause people to question the institution of monogamy itself or cause people to view monogamy as something that can be negotiated in relationships. This is the basis of heteronormative monogamy. In the absence of culturally sanctioned role models of alternative forms of romantic relationships, heterosexual monogamy retains a stronghold on western societies today.

### **Heteronormative Monogamy**

Heteronormative monogamy is based on two concepts closely bound together in our culture. The first concept is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity encompasses the ideas that institutionalized heterosexuality is the standard for legitimate sexuality as well as the assumption that people are heterosexual. It propagates the notion that heterosexuality is “natural” to the exclusion of the “other” and “unnatural” sexualities, as Ingraham states in her article in *Sociological Theory* (Ingraham 1994). It places all other sexualities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual outside of the “norm.”

Heteronormative monogamy adds monogamy to this cultural assumption, the belief that relationships are monogamous in their “natural” state (Cook 2005; Taormino 2008). As

with heteronormativity, as an ideal and an institution, monogamy is rarely critiqued in society. Citing a study by Shere Hite, Robinson's article in the *Journal of Gender Studies* (1997) highlights this by noting that even when the women of this particular study were engaged in extramarital affairs, they did not question the institution of monogamy itself, only their experience of it (either their fault, their partner's fault, or that they just have not met "Mr. Right" yet).

As a norm in society, monogamy is seen not only as the only natural and ethical choice but as the only way to be in relationships (Emens 2004; Mint 2004). Emens states,

And it is my contention that many people simply end up promising monogamy, rather than actively choosing between monogamy and other possible relationship models, because of the many social and legal pressures toward monogamy. Norms strongly encourage people toward monogamy, and law contributes to that pressure in various ways... namely criminal adultery laws, bigamy laws, marriage laws, custody cases, workplace discrimination, and zoning laws. (Emens 2004:284)

Heterosexual monogamy is thus enforced by culture and its legal mechanisms (Cook 2005; Emens 2004). Rubin argues,

Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamouring below are the unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals... Individuals whose behavior stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits. (Rubin 1989:279)

Rubin continues by saying that these benefits and supports are stripped of those who are not heterosexual and monogamous, the amount and type of benefits and supports stripped depending on the hierarchical place in the sexual schemata in which the "offenders" fall at a particular time and place in history.

It must be remembered that monogamy, in the form of monogamous marriages, is a relatively new norm even in western society. Marriage in its present incarnation, which includes it being an option available to most of society, as well as being based on ideals of love and fidelity, has only been around since the industrial revolution (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Coontz 2005; Giddens 1992.) Monogamous marriage is therefore a relatively new social construct and norm, bound by time and place.

### **The Transformation of Intimacy**

In *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, renowned British sociologist Anthony Giddens describes an evolution that he feels is occurring in the nature of relationships in the current era. Giddens sees intimacy and relationships as transforming into a new mode of relationship, the pure relationship. His idea of the pure relationship is criticized for being idealistic and obviously not a reality in all relationships (Jamieson 1999). However it may be a direction in which some relationships are moving.

A key factor distinguishing the pure relationship from Giddens' view of the romantic relationship is that it does not promise "forever." This obviously contradicts the current dominant cultural ideal of life-long monogamy. The pure relationship, Giddens states, is a relationship that either of (or indeed any of) its participants can terminate at any time. The relationship is sustained by mutual satisfaction of its participants, and should it become unsatisfying, the relationship is terminated. Confluent love is contingent love and

opposes the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' concepts of romantic love (Giddens, 1992). Giddens further argues that this new type of relationship is not only emerging, but becoming the norm. Again this has its dissenters, but serial monogamy, which is a frequent occurrence in today's society, would certainly indicate that this is the case.

Giddens believes this transformation of intimacy promises emancipation, equality, democratization of the public sphere, and self-reflexivity. Barker also believes that a shift away from relationships based on tradition is taking place. "It (polyamory) seems to be an extension of the general move towards love relationships being based around equality in terms of choice, desire, trust and compatibility rather than on tradition or arrangement," (Barker, 2005:4).

According to Giddens love, plastic sexuality (sexuality freed from the needs of reproduction), and the sexual revolution began to change the face of relationships, including the reasons that people entered into them. One enters the pure relationship not due to economic need, family pressure, tradition, or even to ensure a stable, predictable, or controllable future. In fact, one enters the pure relationship for intimacy, sexuality, and personal growth, in addition to love:

It (a pure relationship) refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another... (Giddens, 1992:58)

Pure relationships carry the expectation of fulfilling intimacy needs of both partners equally.

Mutual sexual satisfaction is an integral part of pure relationships and provides a means of defining self and of communication among partners. “Eroticism is sexuality integrated within a wider range of emotional purposes, paramount among which is communication,” (Giddens, 1992:202). Sexuality is no longer a “natural” condition, Giddens says, but is open to experimentation and is therefore constantly being redefined:

‘Sexuality’ today has been discovered, opened up, and made accessible to the development of varying life-styles. It is something each of us ‘has’, or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. Somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms. (Giddens, 1992:15)

In effect, sexuality has become a defining feature of people and their relationships.

Another central aspect of the pure relationship is continual growth and exploration, or self-actualization. “The self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future,” (Giddens, 1992:30). In part, Giddens says that this stems from a loss of traditional expectations to which people are held. Self-help manuals and other forms of mass media are components of this project. Lifestyles, including plastic sexuality, also play a central role in self-actualization, according to Giddens.

Where large areas of a person’s life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just ‘external’ or marginal aspects of the individual’s attitudes, but define who the individual ‘is’. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self. (Giddens, 1992:74-75)

The pure relationship hinges on self-actualization of all participants and when that component is neglected, the relationship no longer satisfies all partners and the neglected party can choose to dissolve the relationship altogether. Giddens feels that the pure relationship can “provide a facilitating social environment for the reflexive project of self,” (Giddens, 1992:139).

Central to Giddens’ version of romantic love is the assumption of a heterosexual, monogamous couple. Pure relationships hold no such barriers:

Confluent love, while not necessarily androgynous, and still perhaps structured around difference, presumes a model of the pure relationship in which knowing the traits of the other is central. It is a version of love in which a person’s sexuality is one factor that has to be negotiated as part of a relationship. (Giddens, 1992:63)

In addition, the pure relationship opens the door for other alternative relationships:

Unlike romantic love, confluent love is not necessarily monogamous, in the sense of sexual exclusiveness.... Sexual exclusiveness here has a role in the relationship to the degree to which the partners mutually deem it desirable or essential. (Giddens, 1992:63)

In light of this, relationships such as polyamorous relations also find a place as one more lifestyle choice in the project of self identity.

Giddens speaks of sexuality as a large part of the reflexive project of self. Relationships such as polyamorous, gay, lesbian, bisexual relationships, or the increased experimentation with sexuality in western culture could benefit from his perspective while keeping in mind that his view is held as overly optimistic by some.

## **Cracks in Monogamy**

In western culture monogamy is endorsed and idealized. This does not mean that people do not fall in love or have sexual relations with others outside their monogamous pairings. This is evidenced by rates of divorce and infidelity. These issues point to the fact that life-long monogamy with one partner is not perfect for everyone. However, as a cultural ideal, monogamy is rarely scrutinized (Ingraham 1994; McCullough & Hall 2003; Murstein 1978). O’Neil and O’Neil pointed this out in 1972,

Even in those societies where sexual restrictions are the most stringent and uncompromising, this human ‘failing’ which we call ‘infidelity’ remains an extremely frequent occurrence. And that leads us to the inevitable question: is it the ‘unfaithful’ human being who is the failure, or is it the standard itself? (O’Neil & O’Neil 1972)

There are several socially constructed “accepted” responses, including infidelity or serial monogamy (Allegra 1999; Barker & Ritchie 2006; Block 2008; Zambrano 1999). I will briefly explore these responses to love or lust outside of monogamous pairings.

### **Infidelity**

Infidelity refers to emotional, romantic, or sexual encounters outside of the monogamous relationship, characterized by deception. While infidelity of the heart or the body is not often applauded, statistics suggest that large numbers of people “cheat” on their partners.

Mint states,

...our culture condemns cheating while providing people with enough information and role models to make the act of cheating conceptually and emotionally easy. Seen this way, cheating is at its base a normal act and

the people who do it are normal people, even though they are not behaving as the cultural norms say they should. (Mint, 2004:58)

There are even dating websites exclusively designed for those wanting extra-marital affairs, which lends credence to the idea that infidelity is not only done, but also somewhat socially sanctioned, albeit behind closed doors (Block 2008; Taormino 2008).

Accurate statistics of infidelity are hard to come by; however the following are some examples of estimates. In *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey*, Michael et. al (1994) state that between 15–35 percent of married people engaged in infidelity over the course of their marriage. Bergstrand and Blevins Williams (2000) found that 29–37 percent of married people admit to having an extramarital affair in their lifetime. Anapol (1997) states that between 29–70 percent of people have sex with people other than their partners throughout their lifetimes. In all instances, the lower figures are for women, with men admitting to more instances of infidelity. Whether it is just men that “admit” to infidelity or if it is a fact, both reasons would reflect common discourse around infidelity that tends to follow assumed stereotypes, especially for males, saying that they have greater sexual appetites than woman and just cannot help themselves, although some believe that this double standard for men and women is changing (Coontz 2005). These rates exist despite the fact that infidelity was disapproved of by 75–85 per cent of the U.S. population in a 2002 national survey (Emens 2004). “Many people experience or practice non-monogamy secretly and shamefully while apparently continuing to accept the morality of monogamy,” (Jamieson 2004:36).

When infidelity occurs and is discovered in a monogamous relationship in the current era, the culturally constructed response is to break up (Barker & Ritchie 2005; Easton & Liszt 1999; Taormino 2008; Zambrano 1999). Zambrano says,

Monogamy is a way of thinking and relating that is so ingrained that the only alternatives people see when faced with multiple loves is to either break up or lie to a partner. (Zambrano, 1999:155)

Infidelity is a common theme in popular entertainment as well. In some cases it is frowned upon or shown as leading to dire, and often fatal, consequences, such as in the movies *Unfaithful*, *The English Patient*, or *Fatal Attraction*. In other cases it is depicted in a more neutral light, made into comedy, or romanticized, such as in the films *Alfie*, *Closer*, and *The End of the Affair*, and in the television series *Desperate Housewives* as well as daytime soap operas. This mass exposure presents infidelity as a possibility to accept or reject and as a tool that people use when constructing their knowledge of what relationships are to them. Weight is added to this possibility by the presence of politicians and celebrities whose infidelities are constantly showcased on news and entertainment media (Emens 2004).

The expectation of monogamy is culturally and historically dependent. Coontz, the Director of Research and Public Education at the Council on Contemporary Families as well as a professor of history and family studies, found that, “In a study of 109 societies, anthropologists found that only 48 forbade extramarital sex to both husbands and wives,” (Coontz, 2005:22). Hence it must be remembered that the notion of infidelity in the west today must be scrutinized as specific to the here and now and not taken as “natural.”

## **Serial Monogamy**

Infidelity is not the only “normal” current societal response to feelings of lust or love outside of a monogamous relationship. Serial monogamy, which refers to consecutive monogamous relationships, is also a common action taken in these circumstances.

McCullough and Hall state,

Serial monogamy is perhaps an unconscious compromise between the cultural ideal of monogamy and the facts of human nature—in other words, we acknowledge that you can love more than one person, but only one at a time. (McCullough & Hall 2003)

Serial monogamy suggests that society has constructed the “knowledge” that loving only one person at a time is appropriate.

Infidelity and serial monogamy are two socially constructed and accepted ways of addressing problems people encounter with monogamy while remaining in the dominant construction of relationships. Polyamory is a way of relating emotionally and sexually that oversteps these boundaries. Barker argues,

Polyamory, in particular, presents a fascinating avenue for exploring dominant constructions of relationships and the ways in which these may be challenged, since it involves an open refusal to conform to the standard ideals of monogamy and fidelity. (Barker, 2005:2)

However, people often frown upon open non-monogamy while tolerating other means of addressing romantic and sexual feelings outside of monogamous pairings, as noted by

Barker and Ritchie:

...many articles dismissed polyamorous relationships as childish, neurotic, and even boring in comparison to infidelity suggesting that whilst infidelity as a form of (non-consensual) non-monogamy is possible within

western cultural discourses, open polyamory is not. (Barker & Ritchie, 2006:587)

### **Construction of Homosexual Relationships**

In the past few decades, homosexuality, and to a lesser extent, bisexuality have become more visible in western culture. Mass entertainment including television shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Angels in America*, and *The L-Word* and movies such as *Philadelphia*, *Better Than Chocolate*, and *Brokeback Mountain* have begun to create mass exposure for gay culture and relationships. In addition, research on gay communities, the construction of gay relationships and identities, and queer theory are burgeoning. Sociology professor Barry D. Adams wrote,

Michel Foucault (1994:159–60) was among the first to raise ‘the question of gay culture . . . a culture that invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms’. (Adam, 2006:6)

Envisioning new relationship types remains incredibly difficult while role models and mass media at large overwhelmingly portray relationships based on monogamous, heterosexual relationships. Rather than altering what is thought of as the “natural” way of relating romantically, many gay people break with the dominant relationship form as far as sexual preference, but retain the monogamist ideal, (Rust 1996; Zambrano 1999). In “Paradigms of Polyamory,” Zambrano, currently a student completing her dissertation in Mexico, applies Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm theory to relationships. She sees monogamous relationships as the dominant relationship paradigm and discusses the difficulty of

breaking free of this paradigm and relating in alternative ways. “As lesbians, we share this paradigm because we internalized this way of experiencing relationships,” (Zambrano, 1999:155).

However, this re-working of heterosexual monogamy to homosexual monogamy is certainly not always the case in gay relationships. Many aspects of the dominant relationship paradigm simply do not work for bisexual, homosexual, or lesbian romantic partners. Some of the barriers include the gendered and patriarchal aspects of heterosexual monogamy (Sheff 2005; Stelboun 1999), as well as the fact that homosexual relationships are not legally sanctioned by marriage in most places, although this is beginning to change. In addition, for bisexuals in particular, having a monogamous relationship may not meet their romantic and sexual needs or desires. While serial monogamy is an option that many bisexuals (as well as heterosexuals and homosexuals) choose to adopt to address this issue, other relational alternatives are being created, explored, and lived. In their 2008 article in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Finn and Malson state,

With regard to gay male non-monogamous partnerships, Worth, Reid, and McMillan (2002) argue that the discursive practices of monogamy, romantic love, and normative masculinity are significantly reproduced within these relationships with many men struggling to resolve a desire for sexual monogamy as the condition for emotional security with an opposing desire for casual sex. (Finn & Malson, 2008:521-2)

Many forms of gay relationships defy the monogamous dominant construction of relationships in varying degrees. Without traditional molds to fit into, some relationships

in gay culture come from sheer innovation in an effort to make relationships work for the needs and desires of the individuals involved.

Giddens viewed gay and lesbian relationships as the most developed “pure relationships” at the time he wrote *The Transformation of Intimacy*. His conception of pure relationships was relationships that are egalitarian, provide mutual satisfaction, continual growth, and can be severed at any time when any party in the relationship is not satisfied. Gay and lesbian relationships are less burdened by, but not immune to, gender roles and therefore have a longer history as egalitarian relationships, he believed. In addition, he wrote, gays and lesbians have never had the traditional marriage model or its expectations to fall into.

Giddens says,

Gay women and men have preceded most heterosexuals in developing relationships, in the sense that the term has come to assume today when applied to personal life. For they have had to ‘get along’ without traditionally established frameworks of marriage, in conditions of relative equality between partners. (Giddens, 1992:15)

Giddens sees gay and lesbian relationships as the “pioneers” of pure relationships for these reasons. Again, Giddens’ dissenters feel that his view of pure relationships as egalitarian (whether homosexual or heterosexual) is overly optimistic and that inequality still abounds in relationships today (Jamieson 1999).

In "Relationship Innovation in Male Couples," Barry D. Adam describes the sexual culture of gay men as a new way of relating, largely separate from heterosexual, monogamous scripts. Adams states,

Several theorists have been struck by the new freedoms available for same-sex relationships in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and how lesbians and gay men are perhaps 'condemned to freedom' in the sense of innovating relationships without many of the signposts familiar to heterosexual kinship, but are at the same time now able to avail themselves of new opportunities for constructing relationships... (Adam, 2006:6)

It is suggested that in the gay community today, monogamy is not taken for granted to the extent it is in the heterosexual community (Jamieson 2004). One of the ways that some homosexual or bisexual people have constructed their relationships is a coupling of long-term, emotionally committed relationships with short-term sexual relationships of varying emotional degrees (Adam 2006). While the term polyamory is not necessarily how all gay people living openly and ethically non-monogamously label themselves, books such as *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader* (1999) suggest that some certainly do.

People construct their relationships from models that they see around them in society (Barker 2005; Burr 2003). So the question remains how people envision alternative relationships out of a predominantly heterosexual monogamous culture. Adam (2006) found that younger gay males and males from cultures without open gay communities tended most often to stick to monogamous relationship scripts. In contrast, he found that men living as openly gay for longer periods and thus exposed to different styles of relationships tended toward non-monogamous relationship models, as did men from countries such as Canada that have open communities of gay people. In his words:

Gay sexual cultures, especially in major cities, provide opportunities for sexual self-expression and for communication networks among homosexually-interested men, permitting the emergence of innovative arrangements in sexual and emotional connections among men. (Adam, 2006:23)

Therefore it would seem that exposure to alternative ways of relating provides choices whereas non-exposure leaves people without options or even the knowledge that there are options available.

### **Construction of Polyamorous Relationships**

While monogamy remains the norm in western society, the proliferation of polyamorous communities on the Internet, increased academic interest on polyamory, and the recent appearance of polyamory and open relationships in the media point to the fact that people are indeed constructing polyamorous relationships, although how this construction takes place remains largely unexamined (Barker 2005; Sheff 2005). In western society, relationships are assumed to be monogamous. This culture of virtually compulsory monogamy tends to replicate itself because people construct relationships from what they know and see. As Barker and Ritchie state,

The social constructionist approach to sexuality is grounded in the belief that our identity, desires, relationships and emotions are shaped by the culture in which we live (Weeks, 2003). We come to understand ourselves in terms of the concepts available to us in the time and place we live in. (Barker & Ritchie, 2006:585)

If people cannot see polyamory as an alternative to monogamy, and they do not know what polyamorous relationships look like, constructing them is extremely difficult.

Taormino elaborates,

There are no scripts or models for open relationships, so people in them must invent their partnerships by living them. When their relationships change, they are just as likely to renegotiate them to make them work as they are to end them. (Taormino, 2008:xix)

For this reason, the increased popularity of the Internet in western cultures has had an important influence on the polyamorous community. The Internet provided increased visibility and voice for people living in relationships other than mainstream heterosexual monogamy. Before the Internet gained popularity, mass media was the main social window to the world. If a subject was not addressed on the news or in films, people did not have easy access to information about its existence and could therefore not as readily incorporate alternative models of relationships into their conceptions about relationships. Murstein addressed this issue of invisibility of options regarding swinging in 1978:

'To swing or not to swing,' is a decision that few couples have faced, primarily because only a bit more than half of the population have even heard of it, with but a handful who knowingly have ever had contact with swingers. (Murstein 1978:109)

When people do not realize that there are options available, they construct their worlds with what they know. The Internet has the ability to expose different ways of living to large audiences, allowing people who may not have seen alternatives in relationship structure, to make their own decision rather than just accepting the norm. "Use of the Internet has dramatically increased the number of people living in polyamoric relationships because it has them in touch with one another and assured them that they are not isolated 'freaks,'" (Smith 2005).

### **Language**

The power of naming is at least two-fold, naming defines the quality and value of that which is named—and it also denies reality and value to that which is never named, never uttered. That which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts, is rendered mute and invisible;

powerless to inform or transform our consciousness of our experience, our understanding, our vision, powerless to claim its own existence. (DuBois, 1983:198, in Loue 2006:180)

Language is a central component of social construction (Barker & Ritchie 2005; Burr 2003). It is the vehicle by which the social world is created and passed on. "...the way a person thinks, the very categories and concepts that provide a framework of meaning for them, are provided by the language that they use." (Burr 2003:8). As well, language (or lack of language) contains the power to label things normal or abnormal.

Polyamory is a relationship form, but lack of language for it has created a vacuum and renders it all but invisible. Indeed, the number of people who even know the term is small. Barker and Ritchie comment on this lack of language relating to polyamory,

The dominant ways of understanding relationships do not allow for relationships between more than two people or for one important relationship at a time. The conventional language of relationships is the language of coupledness. (Barker & Ritchie, 2006:591)

According to Barker and Ritchie, two main ways that polyamorists have addressed this lack of language have been to reclaim words with negative connotations and to create their own lexicon:

It seems that the existing language of sexual identity may shape our experiences but that people and communities also invent, alter and reclaim language in order to fit experiences for which there is no existing language. (Barker & Ritchie, 2006:586)

### **Reclaiming Negative Language**

The book *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (1997) by Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt is a prime example of the reclamation of language. Just as the

terms “queer” and “dyke” have been taken back and used as self-descriptors by people from the gay community (Barker & Ritchie 2005), “ethical slut” has been embraced by many members of the polyamorous communities. The authors acknowledge that the term “slut” has extremely negative connotations but they juxtapose it with the term “ethical” to emphasize that you can have multiple concurrent relationships and do it ethically.

### **A New Lexicon**

Until 1990, the word polyamory (which is often abbreviated to “poly”) did not even exist. A predecessor and descriptor for polyamory was non-monogamy; however by labelling something as a negation of something else, it retains a dichotomy of normal versus abnormal and good versus bad. Without language to express emotions or situations, living them is difficult.

Being non-monogamous (polyamorous or otherwise) has several culturally available descriptors. Words like “cheating” or “unfaithful” describe intimate relations with someone outside of a monogamous pair. These words are loaded with negative connotations and do not adequately describe what polyamory is about. Being without language to describe what people are, do, or feel affects the identity of people and their willingness to talk about certain aspects of their lives.

With the increased popularity of the Internet, a new lexicon is being created for polyamory and the feelings and behaviours associated with it (Barker & Ritchie 2005). Many websites about polyamory now host glossaries of words created to describe

polyamory, configurations of polyamorous relationships, and feelings that polyamorous people experience. This language is known as polyjargon. There are words for emotions that do not have parallels in the monogamous lexicon such as compersion or frubbly, which mean “love manifested when a person takes joy in his or her loved one's happiness with another person,” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compersion>). There are words for certain types of polyamory such as polyfidelity, “the restriction of one's sexual activities to a single group of people, each of whom follows the same rules and has sex only within the group,” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyfidelity>). There are also words for referring to partners of one’s partner, such as metamour (Barker & Ritchie 2005).

Having a word for what people do and are creates a sense of community for people who live polyamorist lifestyles. If there is a word for something, the self-identified polyamorists feel it gives it a sense of validity and also means that others are engaging in the same practices as they do. The following quotations were found on a Live Journal polyamorous community regarding this point:

We had no idea that other people did these things until a couple of years later when I was reading a PanGaia magazine and saw an ad for Loving More Magazine. That's when we found out that there was a name for what we did and we weren't the only ones doing it!

(<http://www.livejournal.com/community/polyamory/>, March 30, 2005)

My husband and I have decided to open up our marriage and until now we didn't really know how to describe our wants, this community pretty much sums it up and we're glad to actually now have a name for it.

(<http://www.livejournal.com/community/polyamory/>, March 30, 2005)

By reclaiming negative language and by creating new language, polyamorists have begun constructing their identities by finding ways to express them. Barker and Ritchie argue,

“...the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships and emotion can enable alternative ways of being,” (Barker & Ritchie 2006:596).

## Chapter 3: Literature Review

### Academic Literature

Little academic research has been done on polyamorous relationships to date (Barker 2005; Cook 2005; Keener 2004; Noel 2006; Sartorius 2004; Sheff 2005). In a review of literature on polyamory when she was a human sexuality studies graduate student, Noel found that the published work focuses on personal experiences or is instructional. She goes on to state,

...authors fail to meaningfully move the discussion beyond a discourse of individual agency... The homogeneity may be an inherent flaw in that polyamory is so newly defined, and perhaps thus more fiercely protected from criticism and open debate. It may also be a function of the authors closing ranks to protect the perceived marginalized status of its participants. (Noel, 2008:608)

A search on Google Scholar only produced 405 hits as of November 2007: however the number is growing considerably over time with 1,300 hits in August of 2009. Google Scholar searches “peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and articles, from academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories, universities and other scholarly organizations” (Google Scholar, accessed November 22, 2007). Barker says,

Social science and psychological writing has paid very little attention to non-monogamy within contemporary Western cultures, despite the obvious implications of such orientations for a constructivist perspective on relationships. (Barker, 2005:2)

There are numerous reasons that there is a lack of academic research on polyamory and alternative relationship forms in general. One of the reasons is lack of funding for this topic area (Rubin 2001). Another reason for the limited academic research in this area is that the study of alternative relationship types threatens the cultural image of what

relationships are supposed to be (Cook 2005; Finn & Malson, 2008; Ingraham 1994; Rubin 2001).

### **Historical Related Academic Literature**

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of particularly active research in the field of alternative relationships. As Rubin argued in his 2001 article in the *Journal of Family Issues*, the sexual revolution, “free love,” rising divorce rates, and increasing exposure and acceptance of homosexuals were all reasons for this academic interest. Two of the alternative relationship types that garnered the most attention were swinging and open marriages.

Swinging, also known as wife- or mate-swapping, is largely based around recreational extra-marital sex among couples (Butler 1979; Rubin 2001). In the 1970s, it was estimated that between one and two million Americans were involved in swinging (Butler 1979). This number rose to about three million by 2000 (Rubin 2001). Research on swinging included socioeconomic status, psychological profiles, and the “swinging scene.”

Open marriage became well-known during the 1970s as well after the best-selling book *Open Marriage* (O’Neil & O’Neil 1972) was published. The book deals mainly with openness in a marriage in general (communication, friendships, personal autonomy); however it also contains a chapter on sexual openness that is often the focus when referenced. Open marriage is very similar to polyamory in philosophy (although it is

restricted to married people). Unlike swinging, open marriage and polyamory work on the premise that love is not finite, and it is unlikely that one single person can meet all of another person's needs. In the mid-1970s, the *Family Coordinator* featured journal articles relating to counseling patients in open marriages. These articles dealt with approaching open marriage in a positive manner. Rather than automatically assuming that it is abnormal or unhealthy behaviour, they emphasized communication, and addressed jealousy management (Knapp 1975; Ryals & Foster 1976).

Research on open relationships almost ceased in the 1980s and 1990s. Rubin (2001) postulates that this was due to lack of funding, lack of academic reward, the belief that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS decreased the number of sexually open relationships, and the shift of media attention to homosexuality, single-parent families, step-families, and dual-partner working families.

### **Current Academic Literature**

There is little current research that focuses on swinging or open marriage, although it is still present in western culture. The numbers of swingers is unknown; however it is estimated that there are around 300 organized swinging clubs and 4 million swingers in North America (Gudgeon 2003), and approximately 120 swingers clubs in the United Kingdom (de Visser & McDonald 2007). There are also informal clubs, which would add to these numbers. However, searches in academic search engines such as JSTOR, Academic Search Complete (EBSCO), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences

(IBSS), Social Science Index, and Web of Science turned up very few results since the mid-1970s; this was also the case with Google Scholar.

Polyamory is a subject that is producing more literature in the form of theses and journal articles particularly in the last five years (Finn & Malson 2008). To date, academic research on polyamory and open marriages has been particularly active in the field of psychology. However, according to Rubin, a 2001 analysis of three popular marriage and family textbooks contained very little mention of alternative relationships. "It is like a family secret. Everyone is aware of it, but no one acknowledges it." (Rubin 2001:723).

Of the current academic literature, Barker's "This is my partner, and this is my... partner's partner: Constructing a polyamorous identity in a monogamous world," relates most closely with this thesis topic. Although it was written in the field of psychology, it approaches polyamorous relationships from a social constructionist perspective. Barker, a university professor in Great Britain, is openly polyamorous and has garnered much media attention after "coming out" in her journal articles. Barker (2005) states that polyamory challenges three main elements in the dominant construction of relationships. According to Barker, the first tenet of heterosexual monogamy that polyamory defies is that a relationship should be between a male and a female. In polyamory, this is not always the case. Often, polyamorists can be engaged with members of their own sex as well as members of the opposite sex. Secondly, she says a major component of the construction of relationships is that they should be monogamous. Polyamory allows for more than one loving and sexual relationship simultaneously, and therefore defies that

aspect of the construction. Thirdly, in the dominant construction of relationships, the male is usually the “active” participant in the relationship, while the female is expected to be “passive.” Polyamory tends to provide more egalitarian forms of relationships. Barker found that polyamorous people negotiate their identity as polyamorous through the use of discourses around difference and sameness, identity and behaviour, nature and choice (Barker 2005).

In addition, Barker’s “There Aren’t Words for What We Do or How We Feel So We Have To Make Them Up’: Constructing Polyamorous Languages in a Culture of Compulsory Monogamy,” continues the exploration of the construction of polyamory, focussing on the lack of language available. She examines how polyamorous people have attempted to overcome the language barrier by developing new words to come to terms with their sense of identity, their relationships, and their emotions that cannot be explained using monogamous language.

Another article relating to how people construct their polyamorous relationships is “Women, Sexual Subjectivity and Power.” In it sociologist Elisabeth Sheff investigates women’s sexual subjectivity in polyamorous relationships. In particular she examines how it relates to power. She also investigates the impact that living a polyamorous life has on women, including their expanded social roles, identities, and power. She found that women often experience liberation from the “traditional” female role, including more power and freedom in polyamorous relationships than in previous monogamous

relationships. However some women in Sheff's sample also experienced anxiety and disempowerment, largely related to stigma from a predominantly monogamous society and the lack of role models. The lack of role models is central to my queries on how people construct relationships in the absence of culturally available examples. Sheff views polyamory as a positive vehicle to undermine suppression of women and sexual minorities as it is an attempt to live outside "the narrow confines allowed by heterocentric patriarchal culture," (Sheff 2005:280).

Also pertinent to the social constructivist perspective I have taken in examining polyamory is "Monogamy's Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence" (2002). In it, Elizabeth F. Emens investigates western society's perception of polyamory's threat to monogamy and the legal discourses and structures that keeps monogamy in a privileged state. While the article is written from a legal standpoint, it ties in with the social constructionist perspective on polyamory. It emphasizes that it is society's laws that maintain the dominant construction of relationships. These laws, including zoning, custody, and adultery laws, ensure that polyamory is not included in the recent revisions to legal marriage. She wonders why viewing same sex marriage as a "slippery slope" to plural marriage is such a successful scare tactic. She also wonders why, when the one "man" and one "woman" part of marriage law is being investigated, that the "one" is not open for discussion as well.

### **Research with a Vested Interest**

Much of the research done on polyamory in academic fields has been spearheaded by researchers who are personally polyamorous or who have an affiliation with polyamorous people in their personal lives or with patients. Meg Barker, a psychology lecturer at London South Bank University and Ani Ritchie, a lecturer in Media with Cultural Studies at Southampton Solent University, came out as polyamorous partners at an academic conference while presenting papers on polyamory. Sheff (2004) and Cook (2005) also incorporate personal experience with polyamory into their work on the subject. Cook (2005) speculates that the reason for this is that studying a marginalized topic is academically risky, as Rubin (2001) also stated, and so the people who do the groundbreaking work are often those with a personal stake in the topic area, such as is the case with feminism and queer studies.

## **Mass Media**

The mass media is an important forum for the social construction of knowledge and understanding. “Mainstream media representations are one place where dominant cultural discourses are reflected and perpetuated...” (Barker, 2005:6). As such, increased visibility of polyamory and alternative relationships in the media is of great interest to the study of the construction of these relationships.

## **The Internet**

The Internet has a plethora of information on polyamory. A general Yahoo search produced 1,200,000 hits in November 2007, jumping to 2,860,000 by September 2009. Live Journal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>) which consists of on-line journals and location- or subject-specific communities, has 379 communities related to polyamory. These communities are a forum for polyamorous people or those interested in the lovestyle to discuss the concept, debate issues, create lexicons, and share personal experiences. Sites such as alt.polyamory (<http://www.polyamory.org/>) offers FAQs, discussion forums, “dos and don’t’s,” and links to other on or off-line resources. The Loving More website (<http://lovemore.com/>) offers links to conferences on polyamory and information on their quarterly magazine. In addition, there are hundreds of personal websites with polyamorous content. Finally, sites such as Poly Matchmaker: The Perfect Place to Find Your Poly Mates (<http://www.polymatchmaker.com/>) offer personal advertisements that are for poly-friendly people. The website had 7,525 members as of September 2009.

### **Trade Non-Fiction**

In the past decade, several trade non-fiction books about polyamory have appeared on the mass market, the majority of which would fall under the self-help genre (Noel 2006). The following represent several of the key works in this area:

*The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*, by Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt was published in 1997. On-line polyamorous communities often call this book the

“bible” of polyamory. Easton and Liszt reclaim the word "slut," and in their usage remove the negative connotations associated with it and advocate sexual and relationship experimentation. The book covers many topics, including dealing with jealousy, boundaries, and childrearing in open relationships. The overall message of the book is that enjoying and exploring sexuality is positive when done responsibly, openly, and ethically. Easton and Liszt also describe how western culture limits the possibilities we can imagine for our relationship forms and the difficulty people in open relationships may experience reconciling their lives with the engrained culture.

There is a collection of books falling under the self-help and instructive genre. *Polyamory the new love without limits: Secrets of sustainable intimate relationships* (1997), by Deborah M. Anapol includes sections on ethics, dealing with jealousy, coming out poly, and how polyamory benefits all of society. It also includes lists of movies and books dealing with the topic of polyamory and a glossary of terms relating to polyamory. In *Polyamory: Roadmaps for the Clueless & Hopeful* (2004), Anthony Ravenscroft, a sociologist, approaches polyamory and the common mistakes people make when embarking in a polyamorous lifestyle with wit, sarcasm, and hope. He highlights common mistakes and common joys people involved in polyamory experience from a personal point of view. *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* (2008) by Tristan Taormino is a self-help-style book dealing with many forms of open relationships with chapters relating to styles of open relationships, coming out, raising children, legal considerations, and safe sex practices. *Open: Love, Sex, and*

*Life in an Open Marriage* (2008), by Jenny Block is a memoir of the author's open marriage.

Two books available are compilations of academic articles, personal accounts, and fiction pieces relating to polyamory. They were also published in academic journals. *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex* (1999) is a collection of articles published concurrently in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. It is divided into four sections: Choosing Alternatives, Friends and Lovers, Living the Dream, and So Many Women, So Little Time. It contains a mixture of academic articles and personal accounts. *Plural Loves: Designs for Bi and Poly Living* (2004) was a compilation of articles co-published in the *Journal of Bisexuality*, edited by Serena Adnerlini-D'Onofrio. The collection examines the intersection of bisexuality and polyamory through historical and theoretical perspectives as well as fiction pieces.

### **Television**

Polyamory, in name or in concept, has begun to make appearances in mainstream entertainment. *Ally McBeal* featured an episode on a committed triad attempting to change the law allowing the threesome to marry. *What About Brian?* features a couple opening up their marriage to additional sexual partners. *Sexual Secrets* has highlighted polyamory on several episodes. *The Tyra Banks Show* aired an episode on polyamory. Not all television productions portray polyamory, open marriage, or multiple partner relationships as a positive alternative to monogamy. In fact, as Wolfe argues in her dissertation, many polyamorous people feel that only fringe polyamorous people take the

spotlight and that the sexual aspect of polyamory is over-emphasized (Wolfe 2003).

However, the fact that mainstream television is including alternative relationship types in their plots is a fairly recent phenomenon.

## **Discussion**

Polyamory is a relatively new subject area. Monogamy remains the cultural norm and is widely considered to be the ideal form of relationship. However, people have begun constructing relationships outside of the monogamy “box” and relationship innovation is occurring. The ways that people construct these alternative relationships remain largely unstudied. In my research, I examine the ways in which polyamorous people construct their relationships in the midst of a culture of heteronormative monogamy.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

In order to explore the construction of polyamorous relationships, I used a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism is a commonly used perspective in the sociological study of relationships and sexuality (Katz 2005; Giddens 1992; Steele 2005). Employing social constructionism in the study of polyamorous relationships sheds light on how this relatively new relationship form is being created from a predominantly heterosexual monogamous culture.

In order to obtain information on polyamorous people, I used a phenomenological qualitative research design. I conducted face-to-face interviews with men and women who self-identify as polyamorous. The interviews were held in the participants' own homes whenever possible to ensure their comfort and privacy. Interviewees had the option of ending the interviews at any time and/or to refuse to answer questions if they felt uncomfortable with them. For my research, I interviewed five polyamorous people, including two straight men and three bisexual women.

The interviews were semi-structured and were based around a set of approximately forty open-ended questions. The sequencing of the questions was orchestrated to begin with factual, concrete questions, such as facts relating to socio-economic status. More personal questions regarding family history, beliefs, struggles, and joys were introduced after a level of comfort had been established. In order to delve more deeply into the participants' lives, I allowed for open dialogue between the participants and myself, probing particularly on topics

in which the participant showed interest and passion. I encouraged the participants to share their life stories in order to explore what being polyamorous has meant for them. Each interview lasted between two and four hours.

I took notes during the interviews, but also taped them. I transcribed the tapes immediately following the interviews. After transcribing all of the interviews, wherever necessary, I went back to the participants in-person or emailed follow-up questions for the purposes of seeking clarification and explanation before I began coding and analyzing the data. At this stage, I shared the typed transcript with the interviewees who had expressed an interest in seeing it. After all participants were interviewed and their interviews transcribed, coded, and analyzed, I began writing my thesis.

### **The Interview Questions**

The interview questions with which I approached the participants were designed to elicit how the participants perceived relationships across their life course. Questions relating to their upbringing and family situations demonstrated how their initial construction of relationship views were formed. I then continued probing about how and when they began seeing new relationship forms around them, such as serial monogamy, infidelity, homosexual relationships, and openly non-monogamous (polyamorous) relationships and how the participants incorporated this into their relationship views. I then asked about barriers that they encountered in society (social actions) after having chosen to live polyamorously. Finally, I approached issues of power relations, including gender equality/inequality in their

relationships. By addressing these points, I was able to formulate an opinion on how their knowledge of relationships was formed early in their lives and what factors altered their views, enabling them to break with the dominant construction of relationships.

### **Rationale for Procedure**

Learning how polyamorous people learned of and incorporated polyamory into their lives from their own points of view provides justification for conducting interviews in order to gain depth of detail about their lives and beliefs. Discussion of relationships is a private and potentially volatile topic that could lend itself to defensiveness, so before the interview I met with the participants (where possible) or emailed them to discuss the project and its purpose. This interview method allowed for building a comfort level with the participants, which is crucial for an in-depth look into their lived experiences (Singleton, et al. 1993). Once a level of familiarity was established, the participants became more relaxed and willing to bring up topics they felt related to the research topic that were not covered in the interview questions. The fact that the interviews were conducted in participants' homes whenever possible was also important. Participants seemed less nervous in this context; therefore more forthcoming with answers to questions and more likely to take the discussion to areas that the questions did not address. It should be noted that all participants were very forthcoming with their answers to my questions, offering in-depth responses and also taking the interview to places not addressed by the questions through exposition.

Interviewing did have its drawbacks for this particular research. A formidable one was that face-to-face interviewing considerably limited the number of participants that could be interviewed. Finding a large number of polyamorous people to interview, setting up interviews, travelling to and from interviews, and transcribing and evaluating data is costly and time consuming (Singleton, et al. 1993). As this is thesis research, constraints of time, money, and human resources only allowed for a small number of interviews in a local area, thus making it difficult to generalize the data to the larger community of polyamorous people. However, in order to get the detailed look into the participants' lives that was necessary for this research, interviewing is definitely one of the best options available (Allen & Demo 1995).

## **Sample**

### **Polyamorous People Included in Sample**

The two main criteria for participant recruitment were: first, a participant must be at least 21 years of age; and second, people must have self-identified as polyamorous for three or more years. These criteria ensured that participants had several years of experience in the maintenance of polyamorous relationships. This is important in exploring how polyamorists envision, create, and maintain their relationships outside of the norm, in order to gain further understanding of how relationships are constructed. In addition, the interview participants were recruited in southern Alberta as this location was most accessible to the researcher.

My sample included only those people who self-identify as polyamorous. By only accepting self-identified polyamorists in my sample, this excluded people who could be considered to

live polyamorous lives, such as those in open marriages or those who do not adopt a label for how they live their relationships. Many people with multiple partners do not take an identity such as polyamorous but simply live their lives as they choose (Ho 2006). However, polyamorous people sometimes view being polyamorous as an identity; it is “something they *are* rather than something they *do*,” (Barker 2006). By interviewing only participants who self-identify as polyamorous, it included people that may only be in one relationship at present but who are either open to poly or who have partners who have multiple partners.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The population of polyamorous people is not readily accessible. There are no comprehensive directories or lists. Due to this difficulty, I accessed the population through the non-random procedure of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is often used when attempting to access hard-to-reach populations and when accessing particular types of people in a population (Neuman 1994). I employed snowball sampling when I was unable to find enough participants through purposive sampling. To begin my search, I posted a letter explaining my research and requesting assistance in finding polyamorous people willing to participate to the following on-line communities: Cal Poly Live Journal ([http://community.livejournal.com/calgary\\_poly/](http://community.livejournal.com/calgary_poly/) (polyamorous people in Calgary, Alberta), and the Gay Calgary Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?ref=home#/group.php?gid=8676588300>). In order to access those in the population that had no affiliation with formal bisexual, gay, lesbian, or transgendered groups or polyamorous groups, I placed an ad in the *FastForward* newspaper (a free entertainment weekly). Having several areas of entry into the population allowed for a

more diverse sample of polyamorous people (i.e., those on on-line forums, those affiliated with groups in the bisexual/gay/lesbian/transgendered communities, as well as those with no affiliations). In the end, I obtained two participants through on-line communities, one through the weekly entertainment newspaper, and two through snowball sampling.

## **Analysis**

In the analysis of the interview data I first read through each interview, jotting notes as I went along. On the second read, I generated a list of important concepts and topics from the interview transcription, using terms and phrases from the data. In addition to the concepts discovered in the data, in my third read, I looked for the following themes: the influence of families of origin and dominant society on the participants' ideas of relationships; participants' relationship history; how the participants were introduced to the concept or practice of polyamory; how their relationships have developed since practicing polyamory; conflict areas with their families or society at large regarding polyamory; sources of support within their families and within society; and societal affects of heterosexism, homophobia, and stigma. I decided to examine these themes as I needed to encompass all locations from which the participants could have formed views on relationships. I used these themes as they would show the milieu from which the participants learned about relationships and generated their opinions of relationships, as well as how they learned of polyamory and incorporated it into their previously formed views on relationships. When I encountered a previously undiscovered theme in an interview transcription, I then went back to the previous transcriptions to verify whether it was a common theme. In a few instances when new

concepts emerged, I contacted previously interviewed participants to gauge their opinions on the topic.

My thesis brings together the above themes and newly found ones in order to construct a picture of how polyamorous people envision, construct, and maintain polyamorous relationships within a society dominated by monogamous relationships. At all times, I endeavoured to ensure that the themes came from the data and were not superimposed by my preconceptions.

### **Reflexivity**

It is important to note that in my analysis, I bring with me my own expectations, social assumptions, and morality. Although I attempted to remain impartial and to rely solely on the interview data, this can never truly be accomplished. As researcher, I am viewing the data through my own personal lens. This is an inherent danger in analysing qualitative research. By explaining my position in relation to polyamory it will enable the reader of this thesis to draw his or her own conclusions as to my potential biases.

My initial exposure to alternative relationship styles was to swingers. Approximately nine years ago I learned that a couple of my friends had begun swinging. This was a revelation to me. Although having known the word and concept, I considered it to be bound to the 1970s type lifestyle that I had seen in movies, such as key parties. It did not seem like something that my “normal” friends would engage in the year 2000. Although I was very surprised by

my friends' participation in it and of its contemporary existence, I did not think badly of it or judge them. It piqued my curiosity about how it worked emotionally and in regards to jealousy.

I first came across the term polyamory in 2002. I was out for drinks with a friend and it was brought up that my friend's friend was polyamorous. Having never heard the term, I asked what it meant and learned about polyamory. At this time, I became very interested in polyamory, especially about the fact that I could never have imagined that people could actively seek out to live this way. Previously I had been in love with more than one person at a time, but I had felt I had to choose between them. It had never occurred to me that there was an option when faced with that situation other than cheating or breaking up with my current partner, neither of which appealed to me. Learning of polyamory showed me there was another option that I had not considered at the time.

While I do not consider myself polyamorous (I would consider myself polyfriendly) I do view polyamory as a viable option now that I know of its existence. Whether or not I would be able to live polyamorously, I do not know. However, the fact that it offers an alternative for me to choose or reject is important to me. The fact that I did not come up with this option on my own caused me to question what other assumptions I make about the world that I do not question.

## **Ethical Considerations**

There are ethical considerations inherent in interviewing polyamorous people. Family history, family structures, and beliefs will be discussed so assurance of anonymity and the confidentiality of the data was essential for the participants. When approaching participants, I assured them that their names and other identifying information would not be used in my research report. As well, the Human Ethics Research Board at the University of Victoria approved my methodology and my questions before I interviewed the participants. Before commencing the interviews, all participants read and signed the consent form. To further ensure that I was not harming the participants in any way, I closely observed the participants' mannerisms while conducting the interviews. If any subject had appeared to upset the participant, I would have let him/her know that we did not need to continue discussing the topic; however, this did not occur in my interviews. All participants signed an ethical release form acknowledging that participation was voluntary, that they understood that emotional responses could occur due to the personal nature of the questions, that they had the right to stop the process at any time, and that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

## **Chapter 5: The Interviews**

This chapter relates the life stories of the five participants in my study as revealed to me by them. The interpretations of motives and circumstances are the participants' own. The interviews examined how the participants viewed relationships as they grew up, based on the relationships they saw around them. It looks at how this came to change as they grew older and saw other models of relationships. It discusses what problems they encountered when living (or trying to live) monogamously. It shows how they learned of polyamory, and how they began living and maintaining polyamorous relationships.

### **Participants**

Five interviews were completed, each lasting between two and four hours. Participants chose their own pseudonyms and other identifying information has been altered so that they or their partners could not be identified. Below is a brief description of the participants, based on information about themselves that they shared with me in the interview. The five interview participants were as follows:

#### **Amy Lynn**

Amy Lynn is a 36 year old bisexual woman. She has been polyamorous for approximately 13 years. She is married to a straight, polyamorous man. She is also in a committed long-term relationship with a polyamorous woman.

Amy Lynn grew up in a very traditional 1950s style nuclear family. Her father worked while her mother raised the children. She and her siblings saw very little affection between her parents, although she feels they are content in their marriage. She was exposed to the concept of infidelity in high school when a number of her friends cheated on their partners. She had no tolerance for the deception. During high school Amy Lynn had some boyfriends, but she did not have her first sexual encounter until she was 19 years old. It was not until after she was married that she became polyamorous and had sexual relationships with women as well.

### **Mora**

Mora is a 24 year old bisexual female. She has been polyamorous for approximately 5 years. She has been dating a monogamous man for the past year. While she dated other people while with him, he is currently her only partner.

Mora was raised in a strict Christian household by her mother and stepfather. She admired their relationship greatly. Although she found her mother a little overbearing and her stepfather a little passive, she feels they balance each other well and are very happy. Mora's biological father had cheated on her mother and her mother was very open to Mora and her siblings about that fact. Since Mora was about 12 years old, she has had a male romantic partner in her life, most often older boys, and she became sexually active at a young age. Most of these relationships were short term. During these relationships, Mora often cheated on her partners and then broke up with them because she had done so. Once she was around 19 years old, she began telling her partners that she was not

monogamous, rather than lie to them later on. After she read about polyamory in a book, she was better able to articulate what she wanted out of relationships to prospective partners.

### **John**

John is a 45 year old heterosexual male. John has been polyamorous for approximately 15 years. He has been married for 16 years to a bisexual polyamorous woman. His wife is in a long-term relationship with another woman. He also has a long-term love relationship with a polyamorous woman who is married and in a long-term relationship with another woman.

John was raised in a small city by his single mother. He never knew his father and his mother had very few boyfriends as he grew up. John feels his conception of relationships was mainly formed by reading books and watching movies, which led to him having a fairly romantic view of relationships. Growing up he was around a lot of his mother's female friends and employees, so he feels his view of men in relationships became coloured by their stories. He knew he did not want to behave like the "scoundrels" he heard about. He did form definite opinions about infidelity at this time; he knew that if he was ever cheated on, he would leave the relationship. Although he had a few girlfriends in high school, they were all short-lived. John admired the relationships of a few of his friends' parents in high school. One couple were divorced but they still spent time together and supported each other's romantic relationships. Another couple that helped form his opinion of what a caring couple was was a woman who was dying and who

made her husband a list of prospective partners so he would not be alone after she died. Both these couples had a profound influence on John's views on selflessness in love. It was not until he met his wife when he was in his mid-twenties that he had a long-term relationship.

### **Kierin**

Kierin is a 37 year old heterosexual male. He has been polyamorous for approximately 13 years. He is currently married to a bisexual, polyamorous woman. Since his marriage approximately 6 years ago, Kierin has not had any partners other than his wife. During their marriage his wife has had additional partners.

Kierin was raised by his mother and father until he was 9 years old. Once they divorced, his mother got full custody of him. When Kierin was 15 he moved in with his biological father to remove himself from an abusive situation. By the time he was 16, he was living on his own and had developed a dependency on alcohol and drugs. Until he was 21 years old and had overcome his drug and alcohol problems, Kierin did not have any serious relationships. Since then, Kierin has had two long-term relationships, both of which were polyamorous. The first was with a woman he was engaged to for a time although they did not end up married, and who introduced the concept of polyamory to him. His current wife was also polyamorous before the two met.

### **Anna**

Anna is a 38 year old bisexual polyamorous woman. She has been polyamorous for four years. She has been married to a heterosexual polyamorous man for 14 years. Her husband has not had any long-term relationships outside of their marriage, but is open to the idea. She is also in two additional long-term relationships, one with a heterosexual polyamorous man and one with a bisexual polyamorous woman.

Anna was raised Presbyterian by her mother and father in a small community. While her mother and stepfather were not overly affectionate, they held great respect for each other. The oldest of several siblings, Anna took on a lot of responsibility at a young age. She said that in order to find an escape from the responsibilities she held at home, she began having sexual relationships with older men by the time she was 13 years old. This was her first exposure to adultery and infidelity. At this point, she formed the opinion that sex was not the ultimate expression of intimacy. As well, she learned quickly to be an independent woman. When she was 25 years old she met and married her current husband. He was affectionate and loyal, which was completely different than her previous relationships. They remained together and free from infidelity despite some marital issues. After about 10 years of marriage, Anna was introduced to the term and concept of polyamory. Soon after, the two decided to open their marriage and become polyamorous. Anna believes that had they not begun living a polyamorous lifestyle, their marriage never would have lasted. Anna can no longer imagine living monogamously. After she became polyamorous, Anna began to date women as well as men. Just recently she began to identify as a bisexual. “Actually referring to myself as bi is actually a new thing. I believe in loving love. I go where I'm interested and whatever form that takes.

Have I always been bi? I don't think I've ever been anything. I just kind of go where it goes," (Anna, February 10, 2009).

### **Envisioning a New Way to Experience Relationships**

With some of the interview participants, there came a point in their lives when they struggled with the dominant construction of monogamous relationships, with heteronormative monogamy, which eventually led them to becoming polyamorous. For some the struggle was situational, a problem arose that monogamy could not solve and the culturally available responses of infidelity or serial monogamy were unacceptable to them. For others it was internal—their nature, they said. For others it was more intellectual and theoretical—it just made sense.

For John, there came a point in his life when he encountered a problem in a relationship for which traditional monogamy had no acceptable resolution. That point came when his girlfriend became uneasy about committing to him for life without ever having been sexually involved with anyone but him. While the two of them were in love and wanted to commit to each other for life, his girlfriend relayed her concerns to him about not knowing what other relationships were like and that perhaps she was making an uninformed decision.

John worried that these concerns would not disappear over time. He felt that despite her assurances that she would never cheat on him, this problem would crop up at some point

down the road and he wanted the matter resolved. John's opinion of cheating was such that he would end a relationship if infidelity occurred because of the betrayal and loss of trust. He found himself unwilling to lose his girlfriend as a part of his life and decided it would be better to let her go and experience other relationships than not be able to have her in his life even in the capacity of a friend. So, not wanting to deny her the right to explore other relationships and not wanting to be betrayed, he told her that they could break up so that she could see what other relationships offered. However, John was not able to assure his girlfriend that he would be there when and if she came back to him. His girlfriend found this unacceptable, so they remained together and soon after got married. The problem was not resolved, but monogamy only offered John these two choices.

Shortly after John and his girlfriend married, he came across the term polyamory on the Internet. He was surfing the alt.sex newsgroup and found a posting for alt.polyamory. After reading about what polyamory was, John became very interested and excited about the concept. This seemed to him to be a viable answer to the issue of his wife exploring other relationships without the betrayal of trust via infidelity.

After reading this group, alt.polyamory, and all the information I suddenly saw a connection between that and (my wife's) and my situation that she hadn't had any lover other than me. And in my mind was still probably very curious. I saw this as a possible resolution where she could go out and explore without us having to break up first. And us being open and honest about it with reassurances and whatnot that we weren't ending our relationship. (John, December 1, 2008)

Prior to discovering polyamory, John's problem with monogamy emerged because he did not see a solution to this problem other than breaking up or denying her the right to explore other relationships. With each of these options there was a risk. With breaking

up, it was losing her as a lover and life partner. With the second option there were two problems. Firstly, it would deny his girlfriend the chance to experience a part of life she had not had the chance to experience before meeting him. Secondly, it created a risk that this uncertainty would lead to infidelity that he felt he could not forgive. Once he read about the concept of polyamory, he discovered that there was another, more desirable, alternative.

For Mora the disconnect between monogamy and her life was more of an internal struggle. She often found herself being unfaithful in relationships, failing at monogamy. Once this occurred, she would end the relationship.

This is what happens, right? You slip up and you don't have the kind of relationship that you can be with someone else. And something happens and well, you've got to end your relationship. And that's what ended a lot of my relationships. (Mora, February 3, 2009)

Once she was around 19 years old, she had begun to examine this aspect of her behaviour in relationships. She decided that she did not want to be in one-on-one, monogamous relationships anymore. She also knew that she liked to be in relationships and would likely not be able to remain single, but she did not want to lie to her partners about being monogamous. So Mora began telling her prospective partners that she was not looking for monogamous partners and that she would be dating other people at the same time. So Mora realized that she was not monogamous by nature, but that the only culturally prevalent alternative to that, lying and infidelity, was not something with which she was comfortable.

Mora first read about polyamory in the book *The Ethical Slut*, around five years after she began living non-monogamously. She had heard the term when she was younger and studying other cultures in school, but did not learn much about it. From reading about it, she realized that she was not alone and that she was not abnormal.

The book changed my life because it made me feel like, ok, I'm not like crazy. There are actually a lot of people out there like this. Because you know guys and girls would get really mad at me for thinking like this and it kind of gave me a like, 'Ok, I'm not crazy.' It changed my life absolutely. It was like reading my soul on paper. There was some stuff that I didn't necessarily agree with. But it really helped me sort out a lot of things that I was thinking but didn't know how to piece together into a sentence. (Mora, February 3, 2009)

So while Mora came to the conclusion that she did not fit into society's dominant monogamous construction, she did not accept that she had to lie about it or sneak around as is often the case. Reading about the concept after having lived it took away her sense of being alone in this way of thinking; it gave her a community, and at the same time helped her to articulate her relationship desires. In other cases, the interview participants were introduced to the idea of polyamory and began to incorporate it into the conception of relationships as an intellectual process.

Anna had been monogamously married for just under ten years when she learned the term polyamory. She was a member of a medieval recreation society and prospective members came to her with questions. One man asked her via email if the group was polyamorous. Not knowing the term, she googled it, and from that, discussions with this man ensued.

For me it was just like putting a title to something I already suspected and knew. It wasn't a foreign concept, the ability to love more than one person. Maybe because I did not see love as that undying romanticism of commitment. Of course you can love more than one thing. I have three

children, are you telling me that if I have another you have to stop loving the first? (Anna, February 10, 2009)

As Anna began corresponding about polyamory with this man, she began to examine the expectations she had set up for herself as a wife.

I think initially it was the realization that I had come up with a series of standards for myself and my conduct that I couldn't trace an actual directive from. When did I start to think this? Did I ever ask him this? And better yet, when we were dating it wasn't this. When we were dating I was far more polyfriendly, very flirtatious. And his rule was, so long as you're sitting on my lap at the end of the night when we go home, I don't care what you're doing. So that sudden realization that 10 years, 11 years into a marriage, it wasn't true anymore. Exploring how unhappy I was in so many areas in my life and trying to figure out why and where this all happened. That triggered the conversation. The awareness then, that no he didn't expect me to be this 1950s housewife that didn't live and breathe solely for him set off a chain of firecrackers in my thought process, each igniting the next one, thinking what about this, what about that? And this sense of confinement and claustrophobia within the relationship dynamic suddenly started to vaporize. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

So after years of marriage and self-set expectations for herself in the role of wife, she asked her husband if he shared the same expectations for her. She was shocked that he did not. Discussions progressed between Anna and her husband around polyamory and the lines of their marriage, such as whether it was acceptable for another man to touch her or hug her or kiss her. From this began their process of becoming polyamorous. This decision had incredibly positive effects on their marriage and their roles in each other's lives.

...no wonder he was constantly feeling pressure, constantly feeling exhausted, constantly feeling like the sole responsibility for my happiness, was because I was solely living for him and he had never asked me to... There was a very motivating feeling about pursuing this thought process as both of us suddenly, he saw the light of not being responsible for not being responsible for my entire world and existence, and I saw the

freedom to not have to make my existence for him. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

Kierin first heard the term polyamory when he was around 22 years old. His first serious girlfriend brought it up to him early on in their relationship. Right away the thought of it made him curious and made sense to him.

For me I think a lot of it started off as an intellectual process. What I did know about it and how it was described to me it seemed logical to me. It was perfectly valid and made sense. The whole idea that love is finite is like, 'no,' even in a regular husband, wife, two kid kind of scenario; the love is not decreased when they had children. If a marriage doesn't work out they go on to another partner. It's like when they first got married, they thought that they found the love of their life, they're going to be together, they found their soul mate, amen. Done. Then 6 or 7 years down the road things aren't working out anymore and several years down the road they find someone else and think this is the one. It seems to be the reality that you can obviously love more than one person in your life, and why should there be a barrier to loving more than one person at a time. They either have serial monogamy or they can be polyamorous and explore multiple relationships at the same time. So long as you're open and honest and respectful about it, I don't think of it as something that's wrong. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

Kierin and his partner began discussing the topic in depth. He was comfortable with the concept of many loves, so their discussions centred on the "what ifs" and the mechanics of how it would work in their particular relationship. They then began practicing polyamory.

Amy Lynn had encountered infidelity amongst her friends in her life and her views on it were clear.

It always bugged me cause if you make a promise to someone that you're going to be monogamous then you need to follow through with that. One of my big core values is no lying, no deceit. I had zero sympathy for the crap they were getting into in their relationship or their marriage because

they promised this other person that they were going to be monogamous so really they reap their own rewards. (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

However, when she was 18 or 19 years old and dating her first serious boyfriend (who later became her husband) she realized that she would not mind if her boyfriend slept with another woman with her full knowledge. This came about when her boyfriend mentioned that one of his ex-girlfriends, who he still had sexual feelings for, was coming into town.

And without really thinking about it I'm like 'Oh, you can sleep with her if you want.' ...I just felt that if he wanted to have sex with her that's fine, because I know he loves me and we have a solid relationship and if he goes out and plays with her, it's not going to threaten my relationship with him. But before that, honestly I didn't even give polyamory a thought; I didn't know what it was. I was just okay if he wanted to have sex with his ex-girlfriend. (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

At the time, this declaration caused tension with her boyfriend because he had no intention of having sex with anyone else. They married approximately one year after this incident. Over the next year they had further discussions regarding their security in the relationship, their belief that loving people in similar capacities was possible, and that finding one person to fulfil all your mental, emotional, and physical needs was unlikely. Then her husband came across the term polyamory on the Internet.

Because he does a lot of Internet research he started looking into it and discovered that there's a name for this and a whole sub-socially accepted practice of polyamory and it was kind of neat to have a name for what I'd considered what was totally cool... We both didn't believe that a single person could satisfy the needs and desires of another person. We thought it would be extremely rare that you'd have such a perfect fit that you would never need something more that somebody else could offer you. And we also had a lot of discussions on our security in our relationship and that introducing another person we hoped wouldn't threaten what we had. And we felt that the communication the two of us had between ourselves was good enough that we should be able to resolve any insecurities or fears

that could pop up. So we had a whole lot of discussions and decided that yeah, we could give this a try if there was anyone somebody else was interested in. (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

A year or so after they married, Amy Lynn and her husband decided to become polyamorous.

### **Creating a New Relationship Form**

After the interview participants had begun to incorporate the idea of polyamory into their relationship views, they began to build this new relationship model into their lives— they began to construct new ways of relating to their partners. The participants who were in existing relationships, which would be primary to all other relationships, all began this process by formulating a set of rules. These rules were used by them as safeguards to protect the integrity of their existing relationships, as well as the physical and emotional security of both primary partners.

John and his wife set up rules for their outside relationships after having read about polyamory on the alt.polyamory news group.

With the information at hand from the newsgroup, we set some ground rules in place to try to reassure each other that we were going to be considerate and careful about the whole thing. The rules were fairly prohibitive. Things like not having other partners in our bed, had to be in someone else's bed, letting the other partner know that some sexual activity was going to take place before it actually did, having approval from the partner of the person we were interested in before we pursued them. Various other things that later on proved very unrealistic. But at the time it reassured us, protections in place. (John, December 1, 2008)

These rules were basically about boundaries to maintain the uniqueness of their relationship, such as never sharing their marital bed with other people. John and his wife also agreed that they would meet each other's prospective partners and have approval and veto power over them before a relationship began. The approval or veto of potential partners guaranteed the primary status of their relationship. Having the primary partner aware if sexual activity was going to take place focussed on communication and trust.

Despite having agreed to become polyamorous and setting up the rules, after John's wife had her first sexual encounter with another man, she returned home afraid that having actually had sex with another person might cause the demise of her marriage. Although they had both agreed in theory, she worried that the transition to actual practice might lead to jealousy. John found this insecurity in her very reassuring because it meant that she still loved him, still wanted to be with him, and was afraid to lose him even after having been with another man (before this, he was the only person she had slept with). John did not experience jealousy in regards to his wife's first boyfriend.

For Kierin, the rules he had in place at the beginning of his relationship with his partner mainly dealt with the levels of intimacy she could share with other partners. His girlfriend (and later wife) found it very easy to attract other partners, while limits on his time due to a heavy work schedule limited his ability to have other relationships.

The first few times I was generally putting unreasonable barriers on the relationships she was having. Usually relating to intimacy... Literally, it took a couple months for me to actually bite the bullet and say that I'm just putting up barriers for the sake of putting up barriers because I'm uncomfortable. And we can get those barriers out of the way, it's like an emotional Band-Aid, let's just tear this off, I'm not going to put up any

more barriers at this point. Whatever you guys want to do together, go out on dates, stay over, etc., as long as we're not neglecting our relationship, I'm not going to put any more rules in the way. After that things actually got a lot easier. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

After Kierin decided to remove the barriers to intimacy he was putting on his wife's relationships, their rules evolved. Now the rules they have are that all partners must be tested for STDs and that they need to keep checking in with each other because their marriage is their primary and most important relationship. Time spent with each other versus with other partners is an important part of keeping their relationship healthy and maintaining its primary status.

When Amy Lynn and her husband began to incorporate the practice of polyamory into their marriage, they set some ground rules. The first rule being that their relationship was primary—the most important relationship. The second was that their partner had to be aware of and approve the other relationship before any sexual activity could begin. They each had veto power over the other's prospective partners.

Both Amy Lynn and her husband have used the veto power to stop each other from seeing prospective partners. Amy Lynn vetoed one of her husband's desired partners because she felt that the attraction between them was only physical for the most part. While Amy Lynn had begun to accept the philosophy of polyamory into her life when she realized that she would not mind her husband sleeping with another woman, as time went by she began to feel that the relationship aspect of polyamory was an important part in how it would work best for the two of them. "As we started to develop our polyamory,

we saw that the difference between polyamory and swingers is that there is a relationship there.” (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

In addition to Amy Lynn’s aversion to purely sex-based relationships, the veto is also important because additional relationships become a part of both her and her husband’s lives. This was another reason for her use of the veto in that instance. She did not feel that she could deal with this other woman on a long-term basis. “Anyone that is polyamorous is going to be involved in our family. Both people have to have a relationship of some type with this person.” (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

Amy Lynn’s husband vetoed one of her relationships after she had been involved with the man for awhile and the two of them had developed a love relationship. Amy Lynn’s husband began to feel threatened by the relationship because the other partner was extremely similar to him and he felt he could be replaced by this man. Amy Lynn and her husband both respected their promise to each other to adhere to the rules they had formed and ended these relationships.

After Anna and her husband decided to become polyamorous, they had many discussions about how it would work in their relationship. The process of discussing polyamory and relationships was very difficult for Anna because she and her husband never talked about the emotional or physical aspect of relationships, including their own. So for them, learning to discuss this was an essential step they had to take before opening up their marriage.

Anna and her husband eventually came up with a set of rules akin to the four bases in baseball, with each base being a different level of intimacy based on time increments for each base. Anna placed little importance on the sexual side of relationships; whereas her husband did see it as very important.

It became very clear very quickly that as much as I like the idea of one night stands, I have no desire to waste my time. Been there done that. So right from the beginning, polyamory wasn't about the sex. However, I'm logical enough to cross every bridge before I get to it. Realizing that if I am going to get that close to someone, it's going to happen. Where can it happen? What can happen? It never really was an issue as to how connected the heart was. Because it wasn't something we'd ever actually discussed, due to his own insecurities at the time he didn't see it as an important thing. And for me, I think I was just hungry to be more than the stay at home mom, and seeing a chance to connect with people, knowing my own nature that the physical intimacy wasn't that important to me. The rules were very much a time-based and how close to actual intercourse I could get. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

The time element in their four bases came about because Anna Lynn's husband felt that she would dive into polyamory full-throttle to the point of burnout. So the time limits were set that said what level of physical intimacy, such as touching, could happen on the first date, in first three weeks, after six months, etc, to ensure that the relationship was developing in line with the level of intimacy.

To me that was very limiting in a reigned in sense. Because when I do commit to getting to know someone I move very quickly... So having to wait three months before being able to say now you can touch between here and here. It was almost juvenile to my way of thinking. And yet understanding that any rules that had been set out had to be set out and agreed to by both of us. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

For Anna, the concerns about her husband did not centre on the physical aspect of outside relationships, but on time spent away from home, her, and their children.

My fear would be more and more if that individual started stealing him away from our social time, our family time, our friendship time, if I was hearing things third and fourth hand. I very much claim first wife right in a harem sense. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

In addition to these rules, the marriage is Anna and her husband's primary relationship.

### **Maintaining Polyamorous Relationships**

After Anna became polyamorous, her husband was basically polyfriendly (accepting of polyamory, but not polyamorous himself). On the other hand, Anna dived into being polyamorous to a much greater extent. At present, Anna has two long-term love relationships in addition to her marriage, while her husband is not dating anyone outside the marriage. While Anna believes that the disparity in outside relationships may bother her husband at times, she feels the fact that he understands that love is not a finite resource counters his jealousy. There was a sharp learning curve for them as she began her polyamorous relationships, and she believes that once he begins an outside love relationship, there will be more learning to deal with emotions.

One of Anna's biggest challenges in maintaining her polyamorous lifestyle is finding balance among her relationships. Balance, for her, does not mean equality in time spent with each partner or how she expresses her love for each partner.

While I love each one very, very much and on a level of intensity that's the same, how I express that to each one, how that manifests to each individual is tailored to the individual and the relationship we have... So balance cannot be defined as treating everybody the same. The balance comes in time... Theoretically, as things mature, and people's securities settle down and are good, there is the understanding that from week to

week, day to day, time to time, people will get different allotments of (time) as the needs arise, having the faith that when they need it, it will be their turn. The biggest challenge in maintaining that (balance), that I am not short-changing someone. That someone is not hard done by or settling for less. That they are honest to god happy in what they have. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

This balance is even more critical to Anna as she is in six relationships: her husband; her girlfriend; her boyfriend; and each of her three children. Her girlfriend and her boyfriend do not have children, so she has had to impress this fact on them.

It has only been recently that I've really hammered down that I am in a relationship with six people, and each one of my children deserves the same balance on an individual level as the adults do, that has been the hardest balance. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

She has had to remember that just because she and her husband are both at home or looking after the children, that does not necessarily count as time spent for the two of them together: they need to have their own "alone" time as well.

In addition, Anna is very aware of the fact that if she burns out, that will affect all of the people with which she has relationships. She knows that she also has to take time for and care of her own needs in order to maintain her mental, emotional, and physical health.

However the multiple relationships have provided her with a safety net as well.

The last three years in my life have been hard dealing with issues other than poly. Poly almost became the therapist couch, and having support mechanisms there to help me deal with the things that were coming up in my life. If someone believed in fates, it was put there so that I could get through what I needed to get through. This tribe that has come out of this is going to be there for me in the future where it is going to be needed. It wasn't put there as a party-girl experience, it was a realization that I needed a hands on support network that cared for me more than just as a friend. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

Being in multiple relationships has also allowed Anna to explore various parts of her personality that might have otherwise gone undiscovered.

It also facilitates the various facets of my personality. I do separate who I am in with one person very differently from how I am in a different environment. Having the different relationships allows me to be these different aspects in their full fruition without it being a lie. Being a leader versus a follower in a relationship—it's nice to be able to take turns. That's not always easy to live. It's been an awesome opportunity to explore all those different aspects without it creating confusion. If you have one partner, and you're the ruler..., and the next day you're all soft and mewy, it's jarring. Being able to explore each of those outlets, develop them, and how they work together... Poly has allowed that for me as I start to really analyze myself and explore who I am when I'm not trying to be something for someone else. These people don't really care who I am around other people. Every now and then, as we sit around together there's a bumping of dynamics where that doesn't fit in at all. And again the communication and maturing of these relationships has allowed us to chuckle and see how that goes. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

Also in regards to the maintenance of her relationships, Anna does wish that she could provide a formalized commitment to her other love partners.

That's the one downside of the poly community; there is no other form of recognizable commitment because you can't sign a second piece of paper. You can't go to hallmark and get a happy anniversary to number 3... I would also marry the other people I'm in love with. The marriage ceremony itself gives a turning point between where you are dating and a security that you have both committed wholeheartedly to supporting to the dynamic between the two of you and committing to its constant growth. It is the creation of something between the two of you. And you are both providing this oath that you will nurture and care and educate and promote the healthy growth of this new entity... Regrettably, there is no legal and formal way of doing that in a poly group. (Anna, February 10, 2009)

So while she is happy that she is married to her primary partner, she is unable to provide her other partners the same commitment (and vice versa).

One other way that Anna maintains her relationships is through constant communication. By nature, Anna tends not to talk about personal, emotional, or sexual feelings. She has had to work on this since she became polyamorous. In fact, Anna believes that becoming polyamorous actually saved her marriage. “The fact that hubby and I started talking to each other for the first time in our married life was impressive enough and encouraging enough for me to continue (with polyamory)” (Anna, February 10, 2009).

Communication is key to how Anna maintains her relationships and she is constantly improving on this skill in order to find the balance between her relationships. So through finding balance and through communication, Anna has been able to maintain her polyamorous relationships.

After Amy Lynn and her husband became polyamorous, she was the first of the two to begin having extramarital relationships. Amy Lynn found the highs and lows of new relationships exciting and because of the communication between her and her husband, he was not jealous in her initial relationships. All of Amy Lynn’s relationships began as friendships, and then progressed to romantic relationships. Most of these secondary relationships lasted between two and three years.

Finding relationships is not difficult for Amy Lynn. As she is still friends with her past lovers, newer friends become introduced to her polyamory largely through parties they attend at Amy Lynn’s and her husband’s house. Even though the sexual relationships have ended, they remain touchy-feely and newer friends see this and learn about their polyamory in this way. So when she tells prospective partners she is in an open marriage,

they're not shocked by the news having seen glimpses of it already. Most of the discussion from there centres on how it works, rules, boundaries, etc.

Amy Lynn finds it much easier to date someone who is in other relationships as well. She does not have enough time to spend with someone to fulfill them if they do not have additional partners because she is in a primary relationship, while for them she is primary. A few of her relationships have ended for this reason. So Amy Lynn is very upfront with prospective partners in terms of the time restraints she has and if they are single, she encourages them to see other people.

Once her husband found his first partner outside their relationship, the three of them began dating in a triangle formation. This relationship lasted approximately six years and was Amy Lynn's first sexual relationship with another woman. The three of them lived together until the other woman found a monogamous man that she was interested in and she left the triangle.

At the moment, Amy Lynn is experiencing feelings that her primary relationship is being threatened. Her husband is in a long-term love relationship, which began at the same time as Amy Lynn and her husband were dealing with other marital troubles and they have since been working through feelings of jealousy.

Having some other marital issues as well, and relearning to communicate was occurring at the same time as (my husband) developed a relationship with this other person. So already my relationship was feeling threatened without him starting another relationship. Then he goes and finds somebody else, then I was really feeling threatened. But over time, I've gotten assurances from not only (my husband) but also this other female that I do hold a special place in his heart. That he and I have something special and unique that he and this other female don't have, and the

history. So it was regaining that sense of security that I was special and unique and not replaceable. Those were really the big things in my mind that let me deal with the jealousy and come to terms with, okay, if I'm special, no, I can't be replaced so it's okay for him to have this other relationship because it's not to replace me, it's to augment his own personal life. And that's ok in my books, replacing not so much. (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

Communication has been key to Amy Lynn working through insecurity in her primary relationship. In fact, she and her husband had stopped talking about their emotions and issues with each other, which was the catalyst for their troubles in their marriage. The process they've gone through in relearning to communicate has been essential in helping them begin to work through the problems in their relationship and through Amy Lynn's jealousy.

When dealing with relationship troubles, Amy Lynn primarily deals with the problems directly with the party involved. She has found that most of her friends tend to demonize her partner if she vents to them, so she really only seeks the advice and support of a couple of her friends.

The struggles that John has experienced in maintaining his polyamorous relationships over the past fifteen years are mainly centred on jealousy and fear of abandonment. For himself, his jealousy tends to crop up when his wife dates someone similar to himself. These same fears are issues for his wife as well. John's wife has a reoccurring fear that he will leave her. John's wife's jealousy has become especially acute since he fell in love with another woman.

Your primary suddenly does feel threatened with the realization that you do love this other person. Not you like this other person, or are interested in this person, or you kind of love them, but you love them like you love me. And then you visit those doubts again. What is keeping you from leaving me for them? Why are you staying here? Then you start prodding each other for those answers. Why do you want to stay with me if you love them so much? (John, December 1, 2009)

John finds that communication is essential in quelling both jealousy and fear of abandonment, although it does not eradicate the feelings.

Mostly it's a matter of showing your partner that they are foremost in your life. Agreeing that you'll do less with your (other) partner until she's comfortable with it. Promises to back off that you make good on, things like that. Various shows of support. (John, December 1, 2008)

However, he and his wife continually have to work on keeping jealousy to a minimum, and finding the most effective way to do this is an ongoing concern for them.

The structure of John's relationship, that of a primary partner (his wife) and a long-term love partner, also presents challenges. John is in love with two women, yet one takes precedence in his life. At the moment, John is struggling with finding balance between ensuring his wife feels secure in their relationship and committing to his other love relationship and ensuring his girlfriend's security in that relationship. While he and his wife have agreed to a set of rules (that have evolved over the course of being polyamorous), he has found that defining rules on love in order to maintain his and his wife's security in their primary relationship difficult.

For the vast majority of society, the ultimate expression of intimacy is sex. And when you're allowed to have sex with other people, you start to realize that that is not the be all and end all expression of your commitment to someone. So you start to realize that there are other things

that are important to each other, that you do start to set limits on. It starts to be things like how many nights you spend with one partner as opposed to another. It starts to be events that you share with your partners. I mean you can have sex with another person, but if you go to their family's place for Christmas that feels like you're becoming more involved with their life and family than my life and family. You start to have discussions on those grounds. Yes, you can buy them a birthday gift, but if it's a birthday gift that's more expressive or more expensive than the ones you get for me, you can feed feelings of jealousy that way. It's an ever-shifting and undefined ground. It can be a lot more difficult, so you have to keep discussing things. (John, December 1, 2008)

John would like to be able to show more commitment to his secondary partner as part of the maintenance of his relationship with her, but he is not sure.

...we struggle with it, particularly these days, with my secondary relationship because the two of us would like to have some formal declaration that would speak to the rest of society, that would give an indication of our commitment to each other and our dedication to each other. But right now, the only commitment our society recognizes is marriage. And you can't be married to two people, not just legally, but culturally as well. Culturally our society doesn't accept that. They just don't see that that could possibly work. So when me and my secondary are out together even amongst our friends, we are just considered to be more of a casual thing, less committed to each other and less likely to have plans for the future, than I am with my wife. (John, December 1, 2008)

So in this case, John has difficulty maintaining his secondary relationship in terms of being able to show his commitment in a society that recognizes marriage as the ultimate expression of love.

For support in maintaining his relationships, John has sought advice in on-line discussion groups, but mainly he relies on talking with his partners and their partners. He finds that the inter-relationships can bring insights and point out where miscommunications are occurring. In addition, these people have a stake in a positive outcome for his problems.

In a polyamorous relationship you can have other people already involved who already know the background and the emotions involved and who have a second perspective outside the two of them but still fully aware of what the two of them think and are going through who can intercede and say no, the two of you aren't communicating. He's saying this and you're taking it as this. She's saying this and you're taking it as that. You both need to realign what you're saying. You already have a counsellor in place. (John, December 1, 2008)

John finds that the connections between himself and his partners, and their partners is invaluable in dealing with relationship problems in polyamory.

Mora has not maintained many long-term polyamorous relationships. While she did date one polyamorous couple for a time, the majority of her relationships have been with people who are not polyamorous. When she tells prospective partners that she is poly, usually on the first date, either they say they cannot agree to a relationship like that, or they do agree initially, but once they find another partner, that person is monogamous and will not consent to Mora's partner continuing to date her, so Mora and her partner break up. "It's hard to find somebody that wants it to be like that long term and not really go away." (Mora, February 3, 2009)

Mora is currently in a long-term relationship with a monogamous man. At the beginning of their relationship, Mora was dating other people as well, but after those relationships ended of their own accord, she has not started dating anybody new. Mora is uncertain about how her boyfriend would react if she started dating someone new because of his jealousy and insecurities, but she thinks it would really bother him. She is not sure what will happen to their relationship.

Mora has had her fair share of jealousy since she's been polyamorous, although it has not been an issue for her for awhile.

I think communication is the key to curbing jealousy. I think that's something that I've learned and still deal with. Jealousy is such a natural feeling for everybody and if you don't talk about it, it makes it grow into that little green monster. And you don't want that... But if you're open and honest then it should help and it should go away because you know that your partner is honest with you, so why do you need to be jealous? (Mora, February 2, 2009)

To avoid jealousy, Mora is clear upfront with prospective partners about being polyamorous and clearly states that if they are extremely jealous, the relationship is not going to work out. When her partners are jealous, she expects them to communicate that fact with her. She also discusses new prospective partners with her current partners before she acts on her feelings in order to avert feelings of jealousy.

In terms of support, Mora is not out as polyamorous to her mother. Her mother is extremely religious and Mora does not feel she could be accepting of polyamory. She is out to one of her sisters and to about half of the people at her work (those with whom she is friends). Mora also has some polyamorous friends, and she feels that this is important. While she can talk to her monogamous friends about her relationship troubles, she also finds it helpful to talk to people who have experienced the particular relationship problems she is going through.

You have different relationship problems than people that are monogamous. You have the same problems and you have different problems. When you can talk to somebody about what it's like, like they can say, 'oh I felt like that before and this is how I dealt with it.' They can offer those opinions and from your (monogamous) friends it's a lot more

difficult. So it's good to have those people (polyamorous people) to talk to. I think it is important. (Mora, February 2, 2009)

When Kierin and his wife began dating they were both polyamorous although neither were in a relationship at the time. After a whirlwind romance, they soon married. Despite being poly, both of them knew that they wanted to commit to each other in marriage because they wanted to have each other in their lives forever, while at the same time pursuing other relationships.

People don't have a finite amount of love in their hearts for people. It's not realistic to expect one person to fulfil every need you have. It just can't be done. If you choose to be monogamous, there's going to be compromises. There's nothing wrong with that. But you don't have to choose to make those compromises if both people are comfortable with other relationships where you don't have to choose. So you can actually explore everything about yourself rather than compromising some of it away for the sake of monogamy. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

They have been married for six years now, and Kierin has not yet had outside partners, while his wife has. Kierin has found that due to his time spent at work, having another partner has been impractical for him.

This six year period has been filled with an emotional learning curve for Kierin in that he has had to come to terms with his wife dating, being excited about new relationships (NRE—new relationship energy), as well as having fallen in love and being heartbroken when relationships ended. All these factors have required adjustments for Kierin.

They're in a new relationship and they're excited about it, and they may be a lot more excited about that relationship than the one they're having with you because things are settling down, you've been together for a number of years. And you get that kind of contrast, which can be really uncomfortable. You start wondering where did that spark go? Why is this person getting all this attention and we get to do laundry together. It can

be hard but, you have to step back and say, 'okay, we did have that, it's certainly possible to rediscover it again, it's just going to take some work, along with accepting the reality that as relationships get older, they mature and change.' So can we get back to those first couple years when it was honeymoon 24-7? Probably not, it's not realistic, but can we get it back to a point where we're excited to be with each other again? Definitely. You just hit uncomfortable spots along the way where you have to step back and take a look at it and see what you want out of it now. We knew what we wanted then, and maybe we need to go back and revisit what we've settled for and what we want to revisit again. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

At first, Kierin did not discuss his feelings of jealousy with his wife and he put up barriers to stymie or slow her relationships. He has since learned to discuss his feelings and he has gained a greater perspective of her other relationships. As long as he and his wife do not neglect their relationship and the time they spend together, he no longer puts barriers up to her relationships.

One of his coping mechanisms in dealing with jealousy is to ensure he does not sit at home and stew when his wife is out with a partner.

The first few times, I realized I'm not my own best company when I'm left on my own, and once I discovered that I said, 'I'm not going sit at home by myself when she's out on a date.' It's dumb. In a lot of ways you can end up with a lot of negative self-talk when you've got those doubts. It wasn't so much to distract myself as much as to get out of the habit of negative self-talk which was good. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

While Kierin and his wife are not out as poly to their families (they are not close with their families so it is not really an issue), or to their co-workers, they are out to the vast majority of their friends and are friends with about twenty polyamorous people. In his friends, he finds support.

A lot of our friends are poly or friends with people who are poly, so it's very open that way, which is nice. It's really good to have people who are

poly as a support network or people who are familiar with it who are not going to give you the stink eye or a bunch of attitude when you raise the topic. It's never a lot of fun hiding portions of yourself. So being able to have a circle of friends that you're that close with and that comfortable with where you don't have to hide parts of yourself, it's very freeing. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

Another difficulty for Kierin is that his wife does not have a network of people she discusses her other relationships with, so she goes to him for advice and support.

There were things going on in her outside relationships that were bothering me that she would talk to me about and I'd be like that's totally not cool. So it can be hard sometimes to be supportive when they bring back some of the problems from an outside relationship to hash them out with you. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

So he has had to learn to be supportive and try to keep his feelings out of the situation, remaining as impartial as possible.

Kierin also follows a few on-line community discussion boards of polyamorous people.

There tends to be a lot of people bouncing ideas around, where someone's running into a problem in their relationship and are looking for some feedback from other people who are polyamorous or specifically in their situation... in the really real world, like not online, it is very hard to find people who are in similar or the same circumstances, so a community like that is really valuable cause they can reach out and are fairly likely to find someone who if they're not in their situation now, they have been. So it's pretty valuable and eye-opening in a lot of ways because you see a lot of different forms of polyamory and how it's practiced and can take away from that. (Kierin, December 14, 2008)

Kierin follows the discussion and will offer his advice to others, but when he needs advice on his relationship, he tends to go to his polyamorous friends, because they are people he knows and trusts.

## **Interview Synopsis**

All five interview participants envisioned, created, and maintained their polyamorous relationships in individual ways, yet common themes can be found in how they have all lived outside of the norm of monogamy.

Before they thought of living a polyamorous lifestyle, all but one of the participants had come across some disconnect in their lives—a situation or situations for which living monogamously was unable to provide an acceptable solution. For John, it was the fact that his wife had never had a sexual partner before him and he wanted her to experience that for her own self-growth as well as for his own piece of mind that she would not cheat on him because of it in the future. Amy Lynn realized that she did not mind if her partner had sexual relationships outside of her marriage for his own satisfaction and growth, although this was against societal expectations of monogamy. Anna had discovered that she had created rules and expectations for herself as a monogamous wife that made her unhappy, yet she did not know how or why she had come to them. She also felt claustrophobic within her relationship, although she loved her husband very much. Mora found that she was unable to live monogamously. She felt guilt about her infidelities and did not want to lie about them so would break up with her partners. She would then be disappointed that she had to end her relationships and lose people she loved because she could not stay monogamous. It was these instances in which monogamy failed to mesh

with the participants' lives that made the ground fertile for a change when they learned of another way of being in relationships—polyamory.

All the participants learned of polyamory before they began living polyamorously, although the amount of information on it and the sources varied. Kierin's girlfriend brought polyamory up to him and although he had never experienced any problems with monogamy, loving more than one person at a time made sense to him on an intellectual level. John read about polyamory on the Internet. Excited that it could solve the problem of his wife never having had another partner, he brought the idea back to her. Likewise, Anna heard about polyamory from an acquaintance and took the idea back to her husband. Amy Lynn heard about polyamory from her husband, who had read about it on the Internet. The only participant that differed from this pattern was Mora, who began living non-monogamously before she had heard much about polyamory other than knowing the actual word and its definition. The lifestyle came about more organically for her, although once she read about it, she was more at ease with her choice and found her lifestyle easier to express to her partners. In addition, John said that he now knows approximately twenty polyamorous people personally. None of these people were polyamorous before him, but after hearing about polyamory from him and his wife, they too ended up becoming polyamorous. He also knew other people who tried it after hearing about it from them, but who found it was not the relationship style for them. So in the cases of these participants and their friends, it appears that the catalyst in envisioning polyamory mostly stemmed from actually learning about it or seeing it.

The process of creating polyamorous relationships for the interview participants (with the exception of Mora, who did not have a steady partner) focussed on information gathering and discussion. The Internet, books, and personal experience from people who were already polyamorous were the sources of this information for the participants. They would take this information back to their partners and theorize how it would play out for them on a personal and practical level—how they would incorporate it into their everyday lives. These discussions and negotiations resulted in rules they would follow in order to protect the integrity of their “primary” relationship (all the participants but Mora had a primary relationship). At this point, the participants began practicing polyamory.

In the maintenance of their relationships, the participants found that they needed to renegotiate their rules as they went along. Some of the parameters they had set out did not work for them right off, while others were changed on a case by case basis depending on the other individuals involved with them romantically. All of the participants sought advice and support from other polyamorous people in person or via on-line discussion groups about polyamory. They took the advice they received and adapted it to their particular situations.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions**

Loving more than one person romantically at the same time is a taboo in western society. In our culture, people are only allowed to love one person at any given time or face people's judgement personally or even legally. But many people do love more than one person at a time. When this happens, most people hide it. If they act on it, they lie about it and feel guilty about it, or they leave one of the people they love. Polyamorous people refuse to accept that love is confined in such a way, despite living under the same societal influences as the rest of their culture. How they decide to live outside the norm and live their own version of relationships can speak about how people construct relationships in general.

### **Social Construction of Polyamorous Relationships**

The social constructionist perspective view relationships as being continuously redefined by people as they live their lives. While heterosexual monogamy is the most prevalently seen relationship model and is in fact idealized by people in western society, some people have chosen to redefine how they approach love relationships. Instead of loving only one person at a time, they have chosen to go with what their hearts and their circumstances dictate; the option to love more than one person at once in an open and honest manner. In doing so, they are redefining what relationships are to them and are constructing their own reality, which then becomes available for others to see as an alternative.

Polyamorous people grow up under the same societal influences as others of the time period; however, they choose to live relationships differently from the vast majority of people. In the case of the interview participants, there were two factors which led to their choice to redefine what love relationships are to them. The first factor was that they came upon a situation for which heterosexual monogamy could not provide an adequate solution. This problem left participants dissatisfied with monogamy but unable to see another alternative.

The second factor that led the polyamorous participants to seek a new way of living relationships was discovering that there was an alternative way of being in relationships. They found there was a way of experiencing relationships other than monogamy. Whether through acquaintances, the Internet, or books, the participants heard of the practice of polyamory and very soon after began to incorporate it into not only their philosophy of relationships, but into their practice of relationships. As Barker (2005) and Burr (2003) state, people construct their relationships from what they see around them in society. Before hearing of polyamory, the participants were stuck. They had a problem with heteronormative monogamy, but that was all they saw around them in society, that was how relationships were “supposed” to be. They did not seek an alternative way of relating. However, once the participants learned of a form of relationship that had the potential to satisfy them in ways that monogamy could not, it created an option for them, and they took it and became polyamorous. By doing so, those around them saw the alternative way of being in relationships. As Ho puts it,

Participants experience their multiple relationships as personal, special, and even unique; and often do not see themselves as part of a social

phenomenon. They are not aware that they are at the same time part of a movement involving the transmission of information, demonstration, and facilitation... This article suggests that their performances will almost inevitably become known to other people, and therefore serve as demonstration of alternative practices and options. (Ho 2006:561–2)

From the social constructionist perspective the participants in my study took a critical position against the taken for granted assumption in western society that monogamy is the “natural” way to be in a relationship. All of the participants, once they learned of an alternative way of relating, chose an option that denaturalized heteronormative monogamy. In essence, they incorporated the philosophy of polyamory that went directly against what they had seen around them in their culture from the time they were young.

Secondly, the social constructionist perspective posits that people construct ways of understanding between themselves in daily interaction. The participants in this study certainly demonstrated this theory. They learned of polyamory either through face-to-face interaction, by reading books written by people, or through information disseminated on the Internet by people. At this point those participants with long-term partners talked about polyamory. They constructed rules and collectively decided how polyamory would best work for them. Between them they constructed how they would live out this new relationship form in practice and have continually reworked it as time progressed.

The fact that social action goes hand-in-hand with people’s constructions of the world was also apparent in my study. The participants have struggled against the power implications inherent in the dominant construction of relationships as heteronormatively

monogamous. Through hiding their relationship style from family and co-workers as well as wishing that there were socially recognizable ways to formally validate their additional partners standing in their lives, the power derived from social actions protecting monogamy in western culture affects the participants' lives as polyamorous.

In the social constructionist perspective, language is an integral part of how people construct their understanding of the world around them. Hearing the term polyamory and then becoming polyamorous shortly after certainly lends weight to this perspective.

However, language remains an issue for polyamorous people. The language of relationships is the language of monogamy. While the Internet community of polyamorous people is creating their own lexicon to describe relationship structures and feelings unique to those who love more than one person, this language remains known only to those polyamorous people accessing the Internet. Indeed, even the word polyamory is not widely known, although it is now included in standard dictionaries.

The interview participants indicated struggles with this lack of language. Often they said they did not bother to tell people they were polyamorous because doing so entails a long, drawn out explanation.

There's been the odd occasion when I've been out with a secondary at a play or something and you run into someone that you're acquainted with, someone you kind of know but doesn't know about you and they may be kind of surprised that you're out with somebody else and clearly very familiar with them. Those situations are kind of awkward because you don't have a lot of time to explain all the details and nuances and there's no common culturally understood language to explain the situation. If you said 'she's my secondary,' they wouldn't understand that. You could say 'well she's my friend' but they would see we're acting like more than friends. You could say 'she's my girlfriend,' and they would say 'what

does (your wife) feel about that?' 'Well she knows about it and is okay with it.' And then you get into a very long discussion. So there are no handy labels that everyone understands and explains what the situation is. So that does kind of get awkward. (John, December 1, 2008)

So while within the on-line polyamorous community creating language is a focus, this has not spread to wider society. As long as this lack of common language exists, knowledge of polyamory as an alternative relationship form will remain negligible other than to those who seek the knowledge out or those who meet polyamorous people firsthand and are actually aware of it.

### **Polyamory as a Pure Relationship**

Polyamory could fall within certain aspects of Giddens' vision of a pure relationship. Polyamory requires mutual satisfaction in the relationship and is focussed on intimacy, sexuality, personal growth and self-actualization of all participants. Like pure relationships, polyamory strives to meet these conditions and the longevity of the relationships hinges on the fulfilment of them.

Like pure relationships, polyamory is entered into not for tradition, economy, or a controllable future, but for love, intimacy, sexuality, and personal growth. The interview participants all stressed the importance of personal growth when speaking of their choice to become polyamorous and their reluctance to ever try being monogamous again. The participants found that being in multiple love relationships enabled them to grow as people in ways that they simply could not when only in a relationship with one other

person. In addition, they felt that what they brought back into their relationships because of this growth enriched all of their partners as well. "I think polyamory has allowed both of us to explore new ideas, new philosophies, and new perspectives and to be able to bring it back to our relationship which enriches our own marriage," (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009). This thought reinforces O'Neil and O'Neil's statement,

The open marriage... encourages growth for both husband and wife. Therefore their union thrives on change and new experiences. With change, new constellations of behaviour, new ways of relating, new knowledge of the self, and an increased dynamism of interaction between the two becomes possible. Even falling in love with the other can become a cyclically reoccurring event. As each becomes more attractive to the other by means of their individual growth and their developing knowledge of one another, their union grows in strength, constantly revitalized, constantly expanding. (O'Neil & O'Neil, 1972:40)

This self-actualization is integral to Gidden's pure relationships as it is to the polyamorous people.

Another factor that pure relationships and polyamory have in common is mutual sexual satisfaction. With multiple partners, polyamorous people are able to explore and express themselves sexually in numerous ways. For example, this can be the assumption of different roles in relationships, such as dominant/submissive, and for bisexuals, it affords them the opportunity to experience their attraction for both males and females. While sexual expression can be achieved in monogamous relationships, the participants all felt that having multiple partners facilitated this self-growth to a much larger extent.

### **Power Relations in Polyamorous Relationships**

The power dynamics in polyamorous relationships are complex and change over time. There are numerous avenues for power inequality in polyamorous relationships.

### **Gender**

One potential site for power inequality in polyamory as well as monogamy is gender relations. However, polyamory is often seen as a potential site for gender equality in relationships, or at least much more so than heterosexual monogamy (Robinson 1997).

“The community has a decidedly feminist bent: women have been central in the creation, and ‘gender equality’ a publicly recognized tenant of the practice,” (Bennett, 2009:2).

Heterosexuality itself is often considered an avenue for patriarchy and oppression of women due to its history (Coontz 2005). As Jackson argues,

Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) entails both keeping women *down*, as the subordinate gender, and in keeping them *in*, within the confines of relationships with men. Where the policing of these boundaries are concerned, gender divisions and normative heterosexuality are mutually reinforcing. (Jackson 1998:141)

One such demonstration of the sexual agency afforded the participants through polyamory is found in the cases of Anna and Amy Lynn. Before becoming polyamorous, neither woman had ever been sexually involved with another woman. However, once married and afterward polyamorous, both women began having sexual relationships with women and both are currently in love with a female partner in addition to their other partner(s). Without polyamory, “I wouldn't be able to explore the lesbian side of my

personality. Being able to share that other female perspective in my life, I really value that,” (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009).

As well, in Kierin’s case and in the case of Anna’s husband, the woman in the primary relationship is the one that currently has additional partners: Kierin and Anna’s husband have not participated in having relationships to the extent that their wives do. Since marrying his wife, Kierin has not had an outside relationship while his wife has had several. Similarly, Anna is currently romantically involved with two people in addition to her husband, while he has no other partners. This would tend to lend credence to the fact that women in polyamory have as much sexual and emotional agency as men.

Monogamy as well is seen by many to reinforce tradition and unequal gender roles.

...institutionalized monogamy has not served women’s best interests. It privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness, and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance. (Robinson, 1997:144)

By affording all partners in polyamorous relationships equal sexual and emotional agency, there is hope that gender inequality could be minimized at the very least. “It could be argued that, non-monogamy can (potentially) allow for a radical re-working of gendered power relationships (even if such a re-working is fraught with contradiction and contestation),” (Robinson, 1997:144).

When gender roles and equality were brought up with the participants, all felt that their relationships were equal. Role reversal was apparent in some cases. John was

unemployed at the time of the interview, and his wife was the sole breadwinner. John's wife also had more interest in home and yard renovations, so she typically took on that traditionally masculine-identified role.

Amy Lynn and her husband do not follow traditional male/female roles.

I've pretty much always done what I want to do. One of the things that attracted me to John was that he was accepting of me being who I am. I guess nowadays, do traditional roles exist? I do a lot of the cooking but that's just because I like cooking and he doesn't. He was pretty self-sustaining before I met him so he does everything. My life is pretty crazy and scattered and lots of interests so I just go about doing my thing. Not traditional at all. (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

Anna is college educated, but currently raises her children full time. To her becoming polyamorous reminded her that because she was married did not mean that she was 'owned.' "The other thing that poly has brought to my marriage is this realization that just because he's my husband does not give him a right to me as a person. And it has reconfirmed that I am a gift to him and he is a gift to me," (Anna, February 10, 2009).

Gender relations was not a focus in this research. When I brought the topic up, the participants said that they were not bound by traditional gender roles. In their opinions, polyamory seems to have afforded the participants interviewed gender equal and mutually fulfilling relationships as far as it was discussed. Further probing would be necessary in order to delve deeper into the gender relations in their relationships.

### **Number of Partners**

Another reason that one partner in a relationship could have power over another is the number of partners a person has. Should one member of a relationship have two or more partners at a given time while the other member only has one, time and attention could become leverage to oust one partner above the others. According to the participants in my research, women often have more opportunity for additional relationships than men. Amy Lynn stated,

It would never be hard for me to get another relationship, but it's do I want another relationship? So the times that (my husband) has been in an additional relationship and I haven't it's been a personal choice of mine not to have a relationship at that time. (Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

Sheff's research also confirmed that it was perceived to be easier for women in polyamorous relationships to gain additional partners. She stated,

Shifts in the base of relational power may have endowed polyamorous women with greater power because their ostensible greater ease in finding additional partners translated to greater capital within the relationship. (Sheff 2005:279)

### **Primary/Secondary Structure**

Intrinsic power relations in four of the five participants I interviewed in my study was found in the primary/secondary structure of the relationships. In this structure the primary relationship (in the case of my participants the legal spouse) is the focus and carries a greater importance than secondary relationships. This leaves the person or persons outside of the primary pairing at a clear disadvantage and on an unequal footing in regards to power. For some of my participants, from the outset of becoming polyamorous, rules were set into place stating that one partner could "veto" any of the

other's potential partners. The unequal power relation continues if that potential partner passes the "veto" stage and is allowed to become a romantic partner. The participants interviewed all had rules regarding maintaining their primary relationship before considering the secondary relationships. Obviously, this undermines the power an additional partner has in the relationship. This becomes an even great disparity especially for those who do not have other relationships of their own.

Amy Lynn tries to address this issue of inequality in relationships by encouraging her single partners to date. Since Amy Lynn became polyamorous after already being married, she has always had a primary partner and found that dating single men or women was difficult because of lack of time to dedicate to a secondary relationship.

...dating a single person is definitely harder because you're the focus of their life. That's the only relationship they have so it becomes a big time demand. They want to be with you and there's nothing to distract them... So mostly it's a time commitment conflict and that's where most of the relationship issues stem from. They want more time than I can give them.  
(Amy Lynn, January 29, 2009)

### **Societal Norms**

Another form of power inherent in polyamorous relationships is the power that societal norms and culture hold over any alternative sexuality. This power relation was apparent in two ways for the interview participants.

One way this power dynamic manifested itself for the participants was that they were not “out” as polyamorous to co-workers or to their families. This is indicative of a clash with societal expectations. Some participants admitted to fearing for their jobs or for the welfare of their children. Other’s felt it was none of their co-workers’ or families’ business or that they just wouldn’t understand. For whatever the reason, this is a part of themselves that they hid which they would not do were they monogamous.

Secondly, the participants felt that marriage laws, a form of social action in the constructivist perspective, curtailed their relationships. Four of the five participants in my study were married; three of which were married prior to becoming polyamorous. All stated that they were glad for their marriages, saying that they wanted to be able to commit to their partner for life that way and to have it recognized by society at large. So with the value they placed on the institution of marriage, three of the participants who had long-term love partners outside their marriage said they wished that there was also some way to commit to their other partner in a comparable fashion. How to do so when legally unable to marry additional partners was an instance in which they felt at a loss.

### **Choice**

Bound closely with the concept of power is choice. The ability to choose to reject societal norms depends largely on social positioning. Social position includes such indicators such as social class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability. In my study,

power of choice in regard to race and physical disability were not addressed as all the participants who responded to me were Caucasian and had no physical disabilities.

Social class figures into the power to choose alternative relationships in that there are barriers to living polyamorous lives that are constrained by a low social class. Time (away from the workplace) and financial resources to maintain multiple relationships are two of these inhibitors.

Our perceptions and practice of non-monogamy are therefore partially dependent on our class and financial situation, as well as the amount of freedom we are able to exercise in other areas of our lives. (Robinson 1997:155)

The participants in my study were a mix of blue and white collar workers with some form of higher education or training. While one participant was unemployed at the time of the interview, he did have an employed spouse. So financially, most were lower-middle to middle-class people who worked but had enough time and capital to engage in multiple relationships.

Regarding gender, the majority of the issues have been addressed in the previous section; however one fact that would limit a woman's ability to live polyamorously was brought up by Robinson. As she states, "If relationships take time (gendered) time and energy, then furthermore, non-monogamy may not be a pragmatic choice for a women who works and has responsibility for domestic work and childcare," (Robinson, 1997:155).

The same would hold true for men with the same responsibilities.

Polyamorous people live relationships in a way that is not common in our overwhelmingly heteronormative monogamous society. It remains largely invisible due to lack of language and awareness. However, with polyamory's increased visibility on the Internet, in the media, and through academic research, it is becoming better known as a viable option to infidelity or to lifelong or serial monogamy. When people see that there are alternative ways of living relationships, they have the choice to either accept that option or reject it for their own lives.

This thesis was based on data obtained in five semi-structured interviews with polyamorous men and women. The objective of the research was to learn how they had envisioned, created, and maintained polyamorous relationships in a culture of heteronormative monogamy. The results from the interviews led to the following conclusions:

1. After experiencing a crisis in their relationship views for which heteronormative monogamy could not provide an adequate solution, the participants did not look for alternatives to monogamy.
2. It was only after learning of polyamory that the participants saw they had a choice in how to engage in relationships and they chose an alternative to monogamy—polyamory.
3. This transformation in their relationship style was not seamless. Rules were made and renegotiated by those with primary partners. All participants remain in the closet as polyamorous to their family and co-workers, indicating a struggle with societal expectations.

This research has demonstrated that people coming from diverse backgrounds, having grown up with diverse models of relationships as a starting point of their conceptions of relationships, have a crisis for which monogamy cannot provide an answer, and an alternative is presented to them, in this case polyamory, some do try it. They try living relationships in a way that goes against the norms of society and all they have known about relationships to this point in their lives. However, without the knowledge of this alternative relationship style, the choice would never have been there for them to make. These findings expand sociological understanding regarding the formation of alternative relationship types in a predominantly heterosexual monogamous culture. More generally, it can be applied to all relationships. In addition, it may encourage polyamorous people to more strongly identify as polyamorous to those around them, thus making the knowledge of their lifestyle more widely available so that others are aware of the choice of this alternative to heteronormative monogamy that they have discovered.

### **Directions for Further Research**

There are several topics of interest to a social constructionist perspective to relationships open to researchers on polyamory. Following are a few examples of further areas to research.

The virtual invisibility of polyamory limits those who are unable to see it as an alternative to monogamy. While the participants I interviewed were 'out' as poly to close

friends, most were not to workmates or family members. One avenue of research could be to determine why polyamorous people are not out, how this impacts their lives, and the similarities/dissimilarities to gays or lesbians in the closet historically as well as today.

Another area of research relating to a social constructionist perspective could deal with language creation. Barker and Ritchie (2005, 2006) have examined this facet of polyamory in the United Kingdom, especially in regard to web communities; however further studies could deal with how it affects the day-to-day lives of polyamorous people and their willingness to share information about their relationships with others outside the poly communities.

Additional research could be conducted on the support mechanisms used by those considering polyamory as a relationship style as well as those already actively polyamorous. On-line communities, support groups, and social activities organized by and for poly people such as play parties, clubs, conferences, and friendship networks play an important part in envisioning, creating, and maintaining a polyamorous lifestyle. How poly or potentially poly people use these resources and what needs remain unfilled could be examined.

The social and legal ramifications regarding polyamory and its relationship with marriage or childrearing is another topic in need of study. Many poly people with children are acutely aware of the danger of losing custody of their children due to ‘unconventional’

and ‘socially unacceptable’ lifestyles. This is evidenced by a court ruling to remove a child from a polyfidelitous vee on their grandmother’s request (Emens 2004). In light of this, many poly people with children remain ‘in the closet.’

The question of identity, and whether people living polyamorous lifestyles chose to label themselves polyamorous as part of their identity, rather than as just something they ‘do,’ is another important question. Related is the question of the fluidity of polyamorous identities and how people move between being monogamous and polyamorous and back again depending on partners and circumstances.

The reason for and place of marriage (to one partner or the desire to marry more than one partner) could be addressed in research. In this study, all but one participant was married before becoming polyamorous, and none felt that marriage was a mistake. A few did, however, express the wish that there was some way to recognize additional long-term love relationships that was socially and legally recognizable.

Polyamory research would also be informed by further study of gender dynamics in polyamorous relationships. While the current literature discusses the emancipating potential of polyamory for gender inequality in traditional relationship forms, whether or not this occurs in practice in polyamorous relationships could be examined.

Finally, a quantitative study on the number of polyamorous people, including their social economic status, age, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and format of

their relationships would be extremely helpful. It is often assumed that polyamorous people are generally Caucasian, middle class, and well-educated, and a large-scale survey could confirm or deny this and raise more questions regarding the characteristics of the majority of polyamorous people.

These are a few of the topics centred on polyamory that could be the basis for further research. As the topic and the lifestyle garners more attention, many more areas of interest will undeniably become evident.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

### **General SES**

- 1) To begin with, I'll just ask you a few general questions. In what year were you born?
- 2) Where do you live? Where did you grow up?
- 3) What is your current relationship status? (married, common law, single, involved with one or more people)
- 4) How would you describe your sexual orientation?
- 5) What level of education have you completed?
- 6) If you've taken any post-secondary education, what field was it in?
- 7) What is your job at present?

### **Family Questions**

- 1) Now I would like to talk with you about your family and your influences growing up. Who were you raised by? (mother and father? Single parent (male or female)? Step-parents?)
- 2) Could you talk about your memories of the relationship between the people that raised you. (If raised by a single parent, about relationships/significant others, if any, in your parent's life.) How would you characterize the relationship between the people who raised you? (Probes: Did they get along? Did they express affection for each other? Did you consider them happy in their relationship? Did you admire the relationship of your parents or guardians while you were growing up? What aspects of your parents' relationship did you like? What aspects of your parents' relationship did you not like?)
- 3) Were your parents/guardians monogamous? Did you ever suspect that either had sexual/emotional relationships outside of the marriage?
- 4) When you were young, how did you envision your future relationships? (Probes: Did you want to be married? What did you think about divorce?)
- 5) In junior high/high school/college did you have monogamous relationships?
- 6) Did you ever encounter any difficulties with monogamy, for example, were you ever in love/lust/attracted to more than one person at a time? Did you ever act upon those feelings? Did any of your partners?

### **Exposure to Alternative Relationships**

- 1) I would like us to now discuss your exposure to alternative relationships. When was the first time you remember encountering non-monogamy? (Explain the situation – cheating, open relationship, polyamory, serial monogamy) What was your reaction to it? (Feelings, responses, questions) How did your family or friends respond to non-monogamous relationships? (Comments, opinions, expressions) How did you feel about this?
- 2) When was the first time you remember hearing about or seeing a non-heterosexual relationship? (Explain the situation) What was your reaction to it? (Feelings, responses, questions) How did your family or friends talk about non-heterosexual relationships? (Comments, opinions, expressions) How did you feel about this?

### **Initial Exposure to Polyamory/Ethical Non-Monogamy**

- 1) When did you first begin thinking that monogamy was not the only choice for you? (Describe the circumstances) What was your reaction to these thoughts? How did you think others would see this? Did you talk about these thoughts with anyone? What was their reaction?
- 2) What alternatives did you see to monogamy? Did you feel the alternatives were viable?
- 3) Now I would like to talk to you about your views on non-monogamy. Did you feel that the alternatives to monogamy were ethical? (Probes: When did you first begin thinking that ethical non-monogamy/polyamory was a possibility that you might consider actually being involved in or participating in? When and how did you first hear about the term or practice of ethical non-monogamy/polyamory? What was your initial reaction? How did your feelings about it progress? Did you discuss ethical non-monogamy/polyamory with anyone? What transpired in those conversations? (What were your reactions? Theirs?) What questions, concerns did you have about ethical non-monogamy/polyamory? How did you address these questions and concerns?)
- 4) When did you start being ethically non-monogamy/polyamorous?
- 5) When did you start identifying as polyamorous?
- 6) How did the transition transpire? Who did you tell? (why some and not others)
- 7) How did people react to your decision? (partners, family, peers, co-workers)
- 8) How did you respond to these reactions?
- 9) Over the years, how have people's responses changed?

### **Polyamorous Relationships**

- 1) If we could move on now to talk about the structure of your polyamorous relationships. Please describe your evolution of polyamorous relationships.
- 2) What rules or guidelines do you follow? (number of partners, sex of partners, primary/secondary/etc. hierarchy?, closed or open)

- 3) What problems have you encountered?
- 4) How have you dealt with these problems? (on your own and with partners)
- 5) Where do you go for support/information/role models? (Probes: Do you read books on polyamory? Do you use Internet sites for information or support?)
- 6) Do you feel that there is enough information or support available for you? If not, in what ways is it lacking?
- 7) Do you believe you will always be polyamorous? Could you ever live monogamously? Why/why not?
- 8) Describe how you envision your future in terms of relationships.
- 9) Is your ideal different than what you suspect your reality will be?

#### **Additional Questions**

- 1) Male/female wise would you consider your relationship egalitarian?
- 2) Did you ever believe in the traditional male/female roles?
- 3) How/when did you overcome them?
- 4) Disparity in outside partners affect the equality in your relationship?
- 5) Structure in relationships
- 6) How do children figure in?

## Appendix B: Consent Form



University  
of Victoria | Department of  
Sociology

## *Participant Consent Form*

### **Polyamory: Constructing Relationships Outside of Monogamy**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Polyamory: Constructing Relationships Outside of Monogamy that is being conducted by Krista McLuskey.

Krista McLuskey is a graduate student in the department of Sociology at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by email at [mcluskey@uvic.ca](mailto:mcluskey@uvic.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Helga Hallgrimsdottir. You may contact my supervisor at (250) 472-4723.

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this research project is to explore how polyamorous people imagine, create, and maintain their relationships within a culture that idealizes and is dominated by monogamous relationships. In this study, polyamory will be defined as a form of relationship that is openly and honestly non-monogamous.

#### **Importance of this Research**

Research of this type is important because it will further understanding of how relationships are formed in general and how polyamorous relationships are created and maintained in the absence of strong cultural role models.

#### **Participants Selection**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you replied to a request for polyamorous people to be interviewed about how they became polyamorous and how they maintain their polyamorous relationships without widespread societal support. You have indicated that you are 21 years of age or older and have identified as polyamorous for three or more years.

#### **What is involved**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an audio-taped interview that is approximately three hours in duration. This interview may be split into two one hour and a half sessions. There may be additional questions asked for clarification after the interview has been transcribed. The location of the interview will be determined by you – either at your residence or at a public location such as a coffee shop or restaurant.

#### **Inconvenience**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including time spent in the interview and time spent answering possible follow-up questions.

#### **Risks**

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include emotional discomfort in discussing your past or current relationships with someone other than a friend or

family member. You may also experience possible stigmatization if you reveal the subject matter of the interview to people other than the researcher. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken: the interview will be conducted in a non-judgmental manner; you need not discuss the subject matter of the interview with anyone you do not want to and the interview will be conducted at a time and place of your choosing so that you do not need to explain to others where you are or what you are doing; names and contact information for a psychologist and psychiatrist will be provided if you feel you need to speak with a professional counselor during or after the interview. In addition, you have the right to refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer or to stop the interview at any time without consequences or explanation. You also have the right to withdraw data collected from you in the interview at any time.

### **Benefits**

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include: providing society and the state of knowledge an academic understanding of how polyamorous people have created this particular relationship form from within a predominantly monogamous culture. It may benefit you by giving you a chance to reflect on your relationship choices and how you arrived at these choices.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be removed from the study (audiotapes destroyed, transcription deleted) unless you give written permission to use data up to the time of your withdrawal.

### **On-going Consent**

As indicated above, I may contact you via email and ask a series of follow-up questions after the interview. As a way of obtaining on-going consent for this post-interview follow-up, I will ask you to provide email consent to use this additional information in my study. To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research or if you decide you do not want the interview data obtained used for future journal articles or research studies by Krista McLuskey, you have the option of contacting her at [mcluskey@uvic.ca](mailto:mcluskey@uvic.ca) at any time.

DO YOU GIVE CONSENT FOR KRISTA MCLUSKEY TO USE YOUR INTERVIEW DATA FOR FUTURE JOURNAL ARTICLES OR RESEARCH STUDIES?

Yes  No

### **Anonymity**

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name will not be used in the research project, rather a pseudonym will be used.

### **Confidentiality**

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by destroying the audiotape of the interview after transcription and storing the coded transcription on a password protected private computer and backup stored in a locked cabinet. However, due to the relatively small population of polyamorous people, and the fact that the population intermingles (on-line or in person), it is possible that your identity may be guessed by others in the population, especially if you discuss the fact that you were interviewed with others. In addition, if the researcher does not find enough participants when sending out requests through on-line forums or through posting requests at organizations, participant referrals may be requested. If these risks to your confidentiality worry you, you may withdraw from the research at any time.

**Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: thesis (made available to participants, University of Victoria, and on-line; as presentations at conferences; and possible journal articles.

**Disposal of Data**

Data from this study will be disposed of in the following ways. The audiotapes from the interviews will be physically broken immediately after transcription. The transcription will be kept for ten years in locked computer files and backup discs in a locked cabinet at my home residence for ten years for the purpose of writing journal articles with the data (with your permission) then the computer files will be deleted and backup discs will be physically destroyed.

**Contacts**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher, Krista McLuskey and her supervisor, Helga Hallgrimsdottir. Contact information found above at the beginning of the consent form.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

---

*Name of Participant*

---

*Signature*

---

*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## **Appendix C: Invitation to Participate**

### **Polyamorous?**

A sociology Master's student writing her thesis would like to interview you about how you heard of polyamory, how you became polyamorous, and how you maintain your relationships without widespread societal support. If you're 21 or older and have been polyamorous for three or more years, please contact Krista at [mcluskey@uvic.ca](mailto:mcluskey@uvic.ca) to learn more!