

EXCHANGE, IDENTITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS: AN INTEGRATED
THEORETICAL APPROACH TO EXPLORING POLYAMORY

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation first to my amazing family and support system.

First, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband and best friend, Jim Hilving. Without his love and support, I would never have been able to complete this project. Jim, I thank you for your patience, for listening as I agonized over each decision and when I had to share every lightbulb moment with someone. You have helped me so much by being there to listen, by offering insight, and by understanding and encouraging me when I needed it most. I love and appreciate you more than you will ever know.

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ABSTRACT

REBECCA HILVING

AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL APPROACH TO EXPLORING POLYAMORY

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The purpose of this dissertation is to use an integrated theoretical framework combining elements of exchange and identity theories to examine the roles of identity conflicts, power, and trust in polyamorous relationships. A broad definition of polyamory is used including anyone who identifies with being in a consensually nonmonogamous relationship. Participants were recruited using Facebook and snowball sampling techniques. Qualitative interviews were used with 22 participants to gather information related to their experiences in polyamorous relationships. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and coded using eclectic coding methods. Results revealed that there were differences related to trust and power balances in polyamorous relationships as they compared to participants' past monogamous relationships. Additionally, commitment and satisfaction were reported to be high in polyamorous relationships compared to past monogamous ones. Participants did not report a sense of identity conflict due to their polyamorous lifestyle. However, this may be an issue that leads to polyamory. This dissertation provides mixed support for using a modified exchange/identity theoretical model. Limitations and areas for future research are also discussed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In American culture today, monogamy is often seen as the ideal and most healthy form of relationship for couples. Monogamy is defined as having only one sexual or romantic partner at a time. Polyamory, in contrast to monogamy, is defined by the possibility of multiple sexual or romantic partners simultaneously and openly (Sheff 2005:252). While this definition provides a simple explanation of how polyamory contrasts with monogamy, different researchers and individuals have different ideas about how to define polyamory. Anapol (2010) discusses how she distinguished polyamory from swinging by stating that swinging was only about sex and was not inclusive of an emotional connection. However, she tells a story of using this explanation at a conference and being confronted afterwards by swingers who claimed that this was not a good explanation of their lifestyle. Furthermore, they claimed that, while they identified as swingers, their lifestyle was much more similar to the polyamorous lifestyle than the swinging lifestyle without emotional connections that she had described. For the purpose of this study, polyamory is defined as any relationship that allows for more than one sexual and/or romantic partner simultaneously in a consensual and open way. This does not necessarily mean that everyone who is polyamorous has more than one relationship at a time, only that the structure of their relationship, in contrast to monogamy, allows for this option. This is an intentionally broad definition to include anyone who self-identifies with being in a consensually nonmonogamous partnership.

Given the cultural view of monogamy as the ideal and certainly the normative way for relationships to be structured, it is no surprise that polyamory and other types of non-monogamies are often explored through a deviance framework. Some research goes so far as to treat polyamory not only as deviant, but as pathological when compared to monogamy (O'Neil and O'Neil 2007). This perspective limits the understanding of polyamory to a deviant sexuality or relationship lifestyle. Additionally, much of the research is focused only on the sexual aspect of these relationships (Brewster et al. 2017). There is a lack of understanding about how these relationships work and function in society (Barker and Langdrige 2010).

Barker and Langdrige (2010) examine the literature on polyamory and find that the majority of it fits into one of two categories. On the one hand, there are articles, often from the psychological side of the issue, that are critical of polyamory, viewing it as a problem and examining it with that frame of reference in mind. On the other hand, some researchers, including some feminist researchers, offer a “celebratory” view of polyamory, viewing it as an alternative to monogamy, which they view as a structure that promotes male dominance and an imbalance of power in society (Cardoso, Correia and Capella 2009; Sheff 2005). Barker and Langdrige (2010) suggest a need for more neutral research and question the binary way polyamory vs. monogamy is sometimes treated, suggesting a need for more focus on the overlapping areas in relationships. Furthermore, Barker (2005) discusses the difficulties with understanding polyamory as something one does or something one is and discusses how relationship language is often more applicable to monogamous individuals. This creates a challenge for those living in

nonmonogamous lifestyles to discuss and attach meaning to their own relationship issues, allowing for a better understanding of how polyamorous relationships function and how people perceive the quality of their relationships.

There is a paucity of research on polyamory that is theoretically grounded. Much of the research has focused on the negative attitudes that people have toward polyamory and on encouraging therapists to be sensitive to this and to their own biases when working with polyamorous clients (Conley et al. 2013; Hemphill, Simon and Haydon 2017). There has also been some research from a feminist perspective suggesting the possible benefits of polyamory for women (Sheff 2005). However, this research does not address the experiences of men in polyamorous relationships. Additionally, there is a limited amount of research on polyamory from a queer theory perspective (Shannon and Willis 2010). However, research from this perspective is primarily aimed at celebrating polyamory as a choice rather than understanding how these relationships work. There is a lack of theoretically grounded research focusing on the commitment and satisfaction of people in polyamorous relationships and how this is impacted by issues of trust, power balances, and identity (Brewster et al. 2017; Conley et al. 2017).

Several books address the topic of polyamory (Anapol 2010; Easton and Hardy 1997; Taormino 2008). Some of these are resources for helping those individuals who are trying to navigate polyamorous relationships. Two of the more popular ones are *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy 1997) and *Opening Up* (Taormino 2008). Others provide a rationale for why people choose this lifestyle and also an explanation for why this lifestyle may not be as abnormal as some may believe given that they are surrounded by

monogamy as a norm. These include *Polyamory in the 21st Century* (Anapol 2010), *Sex at Dawn* (Ryan & Jetha 2010), *The Monogamy Gap* (Anderson 2012), and *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (Barker & Langdrige 2010). These resources may provide helpful information for those attempting to understand polyamory. However, the current research lacks theoretically driven studies.

To address these limitations, the goal of this dissertation is to contribute to the literature on how polyamorous relationships function using an alternative social-psychological lens with an integrated approach combining aspects of both social exchange theory and identity theory for analyzing polyamory. In this dissertation, the focus will be on using an integrated theoretical approach to examine polyamory through a more neutral lens in order to gain a better understanding of these relationships without treating them as either deviant or preferable to monogamous relationships, but by utilizing a social-psychological lens incorporating elements of social exchange and identity theories. The purpose of this dissertation is to use an integrated theoretical framework combining elements of exchange and identity theories to examine the roles of identity conflicts, power, and trust in polyamorous relationships.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Some authors have challenged the culturally held belief of monogamy as more natural and more healthy as a relationship style (Ryan and Jetha 2010). In *Sex at Dawn*, Ryan and Jetha look at relationships across different species and over time and assert that monogamy is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Anderson (2012) also postulates that monogamy is a goal that is not realistic in society and suggests that even those who

purport to be monogamous often are not monogamous in their actions. They may not be in openly nonmonogamous relationships, but they engage in covert extradyadic affairs.

Much of the research addressing polyamory has been focused on applied research for therapists, assessing attitudes towards polyamory, and some research justifying or celebrating polyamory as a relationship style (Cohen 2016; Conley et al 2013; Finn 2012; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2015; Hemphill, Simon and Haydon 2017; Hutzler et al. 2016; Johnson, Giuliano and Herselman 2015; O'Neil and O'Neil 2007; Ryan and Jetha 2010; Sheff 2005). The theoretical research has been limited primarily to understanding why people enter into polyamorous relationships and why it should be accepted (Anders 2015; Ferrer 2008; Smiler 2010). There has been very little attention to how people in polyamorous relationships develop trust, how people in these relationships face the challenges involved in their relationships, and how commitment and satisfaction are related to these topics. Conley et al. (2017) propose that there are existing social psychological theories that can shed light on polyamory. They suggest that both interdependence theory and self-expansion theory have relevance for these relationships. While exchange theory has been utilized by some theorists to explore monogamous intimate relationships, an integration of exchange theory and identity theory has not been used to examine polyamorous relationships. Furthermore, when exchange theory has been used to discuss intimate relationships, the focus has been on monogamous ones. An integrated theory including elements of exchange theory and identity theory will improve our understanding of polyamorous relationships, particularly with regard to the satisfaction and commitment aspects of the relationship. It can also help to illustrate some

specific challenges to maintaining a relationship and a relationship identity in the face of criticism when one chooses a lifestyle other than monogamy. This proposed study can contribute to the literature on polyamory, where there is a lack of theoretical research, as well as the literature on exchange theory and identity theory.

From a multidisciplinary perspective, this study can also provide insight for therapists and others who may work with couples who are not in monogamous relationships. O'Neil and O'Neil (2007) stress the importance of marriage counselors to be educated about these issues. Hutzler et al. (2016) found that exposure to and knowledge about polyamory contributed to more positive attitudes towards individuals in polyamorous relationships. Many still view polyamory as a problem that needs solving. However, this may not be the case and gaining a better understanding of these types of relationships may assist them in better serving their clients. Rubel and Bogaert (2014) found that, contrary to the negative evaluations of others, polyamorous individuals tend to have a similar level of satisfaction in their relationships as compared to monogamous couples.

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

Chapter Two of this dissertation presents a review of the current literature related to polyamory, with a specific look at the theoretical research that has been conducted on this topic. There is also a discussion of the literature related to social exchange theory and identity theory and an explanation of the approach utilized in this study which integrates aspects of both of these theories. Limitations of the available research, including the lack of theoretically driven research on polyamorous relationships, are also discussed. Chapter

Two provides insight as to how the theoretical approach used in this study is beneficial to the study of polyamory. Finally, the specific research questions are listed.

Chapter Three describes the methodology. The first section provides a detailed description of the data collected. This is followed by a discussion of the sample, the instrument that was used to guide the interviews, and the data collection process. The final section describes the data analysis, including a discussion of the coding method used in this study.

Chapter Four presents the results of this study. This chapter begins with a brief description of each of the participants. This is followed by a discussion of some emergent themes found during the interview process. The final section describes the results with reference to each of the research questions.

Chapter Five begins with a summary of the key findings. The second section discusses the implications of these findings as well as the relevance of these findings for the proposed integrated theoretical model. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of this study. The final section discusses some areas for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature concerning polyamory. The first section describes the literature specific to studies on polyamory, with a focus on the theories that have been used to look at consensually nonmonogamous relationships. The second section describes the literature on exchange theory and identity theory. Finally, there is a description of the research questions at the end of the chapter.

POLYAMORY

There are some differences in the way polyamory is defined in the literature. Robinson (2013) suggests that polyamory and monogamy can best be seen as forms of sexual expression, rather than identities. She suggests that they can be seen as sexual strategies chosen when the right situation calls for each one. In contrast, Smiler (2010) asserts “if you feel without reservation that the person who gets to choose how to structure your relationships is you, then no matter what choice you ultimately make, you’re poly.” For Smiler, being polyamorous is about self-determination. He contends that people who are strictly monogamous subscribe to the rules society has set, without really making a choice for themselves as to whether these rules are valid.

The literature regarding polyamory is characterized by a number of themes. One theme is related to public attitudes towards polyamory and the stigma attached to nonmonogamous relationships and individuals in these relationships. Another theme is research that suggests that polyamory is a superior type of relationship to monogamy,

particularly for women. The third theme is related to theoretical attempts to explore polyamory.

Perceptions and Stigma

Much of the current research focuses on public perception of polyamory as well as the stigma attached to these relationships. Johnson, Giuliano, and Herselman (2014) created a tool for measuring attitudes towards polyamory in light of the interest in this topic. Several authors have found that there is a general attitude that people in polyamorous relationships are less satisfied in their relationships compared to those in monogamous relationships (Cohen 2016; Conley et al. 2017; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2016). Hutzler et al. (2016) found that exposure and access to knowledge about polyamory creates more positive attitudes towards polyamory. Therefore, these attitudes are likely based on a lack of understanding of polyamory.

The notion that polyamory is not only deviant, but perhaps pathological can have consequences for those living this lifestyle, and is also a notion worthy of further examination as to its accuracy. Wright (2010) discusses the efforts made in the creation of the most current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)* to distinguish paraphilias from Paraphilic Disorders, as an effort to depathologize certain types of sexual behaviors. While the focus here is on consensual sado-masochism and fetishism, this could have relevance for polyamory as well, particularly in terms of how these individuals are viewed and treated when seeking counseling. O'Neil and O'Neil (2007) discuss the importance of couples' counselors' training to include sensitivity to polyamorous couples' lifestyle choices, so that therapy

can be useful for these couples without them having to first accept that their choice is pathological. Robinson (2013) also contends that a better understanding of polyamorous and monogamous as sexual identities would benefit therapists in their treatment of clients.

In a qualitative study of undergraduate, heterosexual men, Anderson (2010) conducted interviews examining these participants' views on monogamy (Anderson, 2010). An interesting finding in this study was the desire of these men to be identified as monogamous, regardless of whether or not their behaviors were monogamous. The participants seemed to view monogamy as the ideal and as the only morally correct option for how to structure their relationships. However, many of them admitted to engaging in sexual activities with people outside of their primary relationship. The participants expressed conflicting desires to be in a monogamous relationship (and in fact, even those who admitted cheating identified as monogamous) and also engage in sexual behavior with other people.

Miller (2013) asserts that consensually polyamorous couples are often judged as having inferior relationships that are less rewarding than monogamous ones. Conley et al. (2013) found that a halo effect exists around monogamous relationships, while polyamorous relationships are surrounded by stigma. There are some who view polyamory as deviant based on the assumption that nonmonogamy can lead to an increased risk of sexual transmitted diseases (Paik 2010). However, Conley et al. (2012) found that those who were in consensually nonmonogamous relationships were more likely to practice safer sex than those who were in monogamous relationships but were

unfaithful to their partners. This suggests that the risk of sexually transmitted diseases may not be a valid reason for stigmatizing these relationships.

Celebratory Views

Several authors have challenged the idea of polyamory as being abnormal or deviant. Finn (2012) challenges the idea of “romantic coupledness” as a universal and invariably occurring phenomenon. Also, Ferrer (2008:55) suggests that “social monogamy frequently masks biological polyamory.” He states that, while people often play the public role of someone who believes in monogamy, many people engage in sexual activities or experience arousal or emotional attraction to people other than their primary partner. Ferrer (2008:55) states that “the history of monogamy is the history of adultery.” Ryan and Jetha (2010) describe polyamory in many different cultures and species of animals to support their assertion that monogamy is neither universal nor is it the norm in any species or culture. They suggest that, given the high number of people who engage in “cheating” behaviors, our society is not an exception to this statement, but merely one more example of a nonmonogamous culture, in spite of the social norm of monogamy. Additionally, despite public opinion, researchers have found that those people in polyamorous relationships are equally satisfied in their relationships when compared to those in monogamous relationships (Conley et al. 2017; Rubel and Bogaert 2014).

Aguilar (2013) explored polyamory in communal living groups. She looked at people who lived monogamous lifestyles before entering these groups, but then started living polyamorous lifestyles when encouraged to do so within the group. The results of

this study suggest that circumstances play a significant role in choices about sexual behavior, which is far from the idea of monogamy as a universal phenomenon for all human couples. Aguilar (2013) points to how structural and cultural factors work together in different communities to impact what is seen as normal versus deviant. One suggestion as to why communal living groups lead to a polyamorous lifestyle is the availability and access to other partners. Another observation made by this author is that polyamory seems to be more in line with feminist ideals, rather than the possessiveness involved in monogamy, allowing women more freedom and more balanced power in polyamorous as opposed to monogamous relationships. These feminist values may be more prevalent in these groups.

Sheff (2005) distinguishes polyamory from polygyny, where men only are allowed to have additional partners, since both men and women have access to other partners. Sheff (2005) suggests that polyamorous women can change the power dynamics in traditionally male dominated relationships by becoming more of a subject than an object in sexual interactions. The assertion is that monogamy benefits males in our society by promoting possessiveness in relationships and the objectification of women, and that polyamory can help to create a more balanced coupledness, increasing women's power in sexual relationships beyond what there is in a monogamous relationship.

Wolkomir (2015) found that as people start to challenge norms related to monogamy, they also tend to challenge those related to gender. Wolkomir suggests that this results in more balance between men and women in relationships and less focus on traditional gender roles. Given the gender-based double standard when it comes to sexual behavior,

it would be interesting to know whether women truly experience more power in polyamorous relationships or whether they experience more challenges due to the greater expectation that they are monogamous in their romantic relationships.

THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Several theoretical approaches have addressed polyamory. A notable example is feminist research. Cardoso, Correia, and Capella (2009) adopt a feminist perspective to assert that monogamy is a system where women are treated as property. They suggest that monogamy serves to reinforce the patriarchal system and treats marriage as a system of ownership of women by their husband. It is also argued that polyamory may be a solution to this problem and a type of relationship structure where women become empowered and a subject rather than an object in their relationships (Sheff 2005).

Research utilizing queer theory has also been conducted to establish the benefits of living a polyamorous lifestyle (Shannon and Willis 2010). From this perspective, monogamy is too restrictive. Shannon and Willis (2010) also agree with the feminist arguments that it serves to preserve a system of dominance of men over women. One issue with the feminist and queer theory arguments is that, according to at least one study, polyamorous people do not appear to be concerned with the political nature of their relationships or with changing the status quo with respect to gender equality and freedom for women (Barker and Langdrige 2010).

Anders (2015) utilized a “Sexual Configurations” theory to demonstrate how and why individuals may choose the sexual partners and the number of partners that they do, which the author suggests is situational and dynamic. Additionally, Woodruff-Diaz

(2010) utilized psychological theories related to attachment and Freudian concepts to explore psychosocial well-being of individuals in polyamorous relationships as well as their children. Barker and Langdrige (2010:752) note that social constructionists have suggested that overarching societal norms defining relationship structures are less applicable today, as romantic relationships have evolved over time and relationship structures are more varied than they were in the past. However, they mention factors such as “choice of partner, whether to get married or cohabitate, and whether to have children.” They do not mention specifically the choice to have multiple partners simultaneously.

In one recent study, there is a suggestion that social psychological theories have relevance for studying polyamory. Conley et al. (2017) suggest that interdependence theory, whereby individuals measure satisfaction in romantic relationships, in part, on the basis of costs and benefits. They discuss the relevance of this with respect to the evaluation of the attractiveness of alternative partners. In monogamous relationships, deciding to engage in sexual or romantic activities with another partner creates a situation where one will have to do so covertly or end the current relationship. In polyamory, one could consider adding the alternative partner without risking or ending their current relationship, creating a much different evaluation of the cost and benefit associated with this new partner.

Additionally, Conley et al. (2017) note the relevance of self-expansion theory for polyamory. This theory suggests that people find satisfaction in relationships when they see their partner as becoming an expansion of their own selves (Ledbetter, Stassen-

Ferrara and Dowd 2012). Thus, they can grow as individuals through having intimate relationships. Conley et al. (2017) note that the option to have multiple intimate relationships also allows for greater self growth according to this theory.

A common theme in the theoretical research that has been conducted is explaining why one may enter into a polyamorous lifestyle and what the benefits are, particularly for women. However, there is a lack of research related to commitment and satisfaction in these relationships and how identity conflicts and challenges may impact those factors in polyamorous relationships. Conley et al. (2017) suggest the use of social psychological theories in exploring polyamory, particularly interdependence theory and self-expansion theories. Additionally, Barker and Langdrige (2010) mention the importance of understanding whether polyamorous people understand polyamory as an identity or a behavior, something they suggest could be further explored with identity theory. The integration of exchange theory and identity theory in this dissertation can add to the theoretical literature on polyamory and address this gap in the current research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is a modified exchange/identity perspective. More specifically, components from both of these perspectives are integrated to provide a framework for exploring polyamory. There are four basic components of social exchange theory: actors who engage in the exchange, resources that are exchanged, structures where these relationships take place, and dynamic processes (Molm 2006). According to identity theory, an individual can be seen both as an actor and as one who shapes meaning in society (Stets 2006). There are three main types of identities,

according to Stets. These are role identities, social identities, and person identities. Role identities are necessarily defined in contrast to others. Each person has a unique role in a given situation. For example, as student is only a student in contrast to the teacher, or a classmate to other students. Role identities are defined by what an individual represents within the group. Social identities have to do with which groups an individual is a member. For example, both the student and teacher are members of the given class, each having different roles within the group (the class). The final type, person identity, is more individual, and seems similar to the idea of personality used by psychologists. The following sections review the literature on exchange and identity theories as they relate to polyamory, followed by an explanation of the integration of these two theories.

Exchange Theory

There are four basic components of social exchange theory: actors, resources, structures, and dynamic processes (Molm 2006). Actors are those who are engaging in the exchange, and can be individuals or groups or even corporations. Resources refer to what is exchanged. These are subjective, as to be of any value in the exchange the resource must be valued by those involved in the exchange activity. The structures are those within which the exchange relationships take place and have an influence on the rules of exchange. Finally, the dynamic processes refer to the changing process by which the exchange relationship takes place.

Chibucos, Leite, and Weis (2005) describe three basic assumptions of social exchange theory. The first is that people are generally rational actors. The second assumption is that people will generally try to maximize their gain while minimizing their

output. Finally, the third assumption is that if there is a payoff for each party in an exchange, then a relationship of continued exchanges is likely to result.

Two important features of social exchange theory for examining relationship structure are structural power and the availability and value of alternatives (Molm 2006). The power of the structures within which relationships take place will help to determine the rules and procedures of the relationship. The availability of alternative avenues of exchange will influence the level of commitment one has in any given exchange relationship. In an experiment designed to measure the effect of perception of equity in a relationship on satisfaction and commitment to the relationship, Sprecher (2005:177) found that the comparison level for alternative partners was the most significant factor predicting commitment in a relationship and also in predicting satisfaction. Sprecher further found that the woman's commitment in a relationship was the strongest predictor of the stability of the relationship. Similarly, Collett (2010) discusses how relationship satisfaction is related to the availability of alternatives. She suggests that these alternatives are evaluated based on both societal norms and personal factors. Molm (2006:37) contends that commitment, as well as trust and satisfaction are emergent properties of exchange relationships.

Social exchange theorists initially focused on areas of power and more economic type exchanges. However, this theory has a great deal of relevance for explaining intimate relationships. Horan (2012) describes how the exchange of affectionate messages can enhance the bonds between intimate partners. He finds that the amount of received affectionate messages reduces the feelings of hurt from relationship

transgressions. Cohen (2012) also demonstrates that social exchange theory is valid for explaining the interactions between intimate partners in addition to its validity for economic relationships by explaining the role of exchange in creating a system of obligation and reciprocity between actors.

Reciprocity is a key issue in exchange relationships. Molm (2010:119) defines reciprocity as “the giving of benefits to another in return for benefits received.” Reciprocity is essential, as it is the mechanism by which each actor both gives and receives in the exchange relationship. Out of reciprocity, trust and solidarity can arise, which are also essential features of a lasting exchange relationship. At times reciprocity can involve an immediate exchange of resources. However, often exchange occurs as non-simultaneous exchanges, and this requires some level of trust on behalf of the actors in order for this to occur. Bravo and Tamburino (2008) found that reputation as a trustworthy actor was very important in building trust in these non-simultaneous exchange relationships. This could happen both from direct experience and also indirect reciprocity as well.

Collett (2010) suggests that trust is built through risk. The assertion is that trust is more likely to arise out of a situation where one has to rely on the other person to act without being formally obligated to do so. When the person acts without such an obligation, trust develops in the recipient of the action, since they see that the person will give on their own. Trust is a significant issue for intimate relationships regardless of whether they are monogamous or polyamorous.

Another important issue for relationships is power and dependence. Emerson (1962) discusses how power arises from dependence. He states that one can only have power if he or she possesses something that someone else wants and for which he or she is depended on by that other person. Emerson discusses how power can be balanced by the addition of alternative sources for the dependent person to get his or her needs met. He also notes that a power imbalance can remain in place as long as the person in power does not actually use their power. However, the imbalance may create a temptation to use the power, and once it is used, efforts may be taken to restore balance.

van de Rijt and Macy (2006) apply Emerson's exchange theory to sexual relationships. They find that sexual favors are indeed given in a reciprocal exchange manner. Furthermore, individuals offer more sexual favors to those partners who are generous sexually and less to those who are more emotionally attached. This suggests that the emotional attachment creates a power imbalance where less affection is offered to maintain the power imbalance. It seems likely that the introduction of alternative sexual partners can disrupt this power dynamic, though the authors do not explore that in this study.

While social exchange theory was not developed specifically to explain intimate or romantic relationships, it is clear that many of the features of exchange theory can be applied to these types of relationships. Exchange theory helps to explain why people initiate relationships with others for the exchange of resources, which can include companionship and affection. This theory can also contribute to an understanding of how people develop trust in their relationships and how power is balanced between romantic

partners. Furthermore, exchange helps to explain infidelity and satisfaction through a discussion of the availability of attractive others. Given the option to have affection and engage in sexual behavior with available others in polyamorous relationships, this theory can help to explore how the power balance may change and also commitment as a result. Finally, in light of the explanation of important relationship factors such as trust, power, and commitment, exchange theory may offer insight as to why some romantic relationships persist or dissolve. Some of the key features are trust, the availability of alternatives, commitment, and power and dependence. In the next section, there is a discussion of the literature on identity theory as well as a description of the features of identity theory that should be integrated into this theoretical framework. This is followed by a more specific discussion of how these two theories can be integrated to help to explain polyamorous relationships.

Identity Theory

Stets (2006:88) states that identity theory is derived from structural symbolic interaction theory. According to this view, identity must be more structural in nature; otherwise, it would be constantly changing with very little stability. According to identity theory, an individual can be seen both as an actor and as one who shapes meaning in society. There are three main types of identities, according to Stets. These are role identities, social identities, and person identities. Role identities are necessarily defined in contrast to others. Each person has a unique role in a given situation. For example, as student is only a student in contrast to the teacher, or a classmate to other students. Role identities are defined by what an individual represents within the group. Social identities

have to do with which groups an individual is a member. For example, both the student and teacher are members of the given class, each having different roles within the group (the class). The final type, person identity, is more individual, and seems similar to the idea of personality used by psychologists.

Conflict can arise when one's identity does not seem to match what he or she believes is expected of them in society. Burke (2006:96) suggests that when an individual is met with this type of conflict, he or she will attempt to conform to try to bring who they believe they are in line with what they believe they are expected to be. McCall and Simmons (1978:95) also suggest that individuals will make an effort to conform to cultural norms while preserving their person identity in order to meet the perceived expectations. Hopper (2005) provides an example of how people try to rectify this conflict in an article about divorced adults. He found that the individual who initiated the divorce would often justify their belief in the sanctity of marriage by saying that their marriage was not really a marriage. They would write it off as not really representing the institution that they assert is a sacred institution. This indicates an effort to maintain their own identity in spite of actions that suggest that they may not fit with the cultural expectations.

Stryker (2000:94) asserts that the meaning one attaches to a situation will affect behavior. This meaning comes from both the individual and from the interaction with others. For Stryker, shared emotions with others will lead to commitment. Therefore, commitment is a topic that is discussed in both exchange theory as well as identity theory. In identity theory, the issue of commitment is related to commitment to a given

identity, and in exchange theory, it relates to the commitment to a relationship. However, given that identity can mean your role identity (your role in the relationship) and your social identity (whether you are in the relationship), these ideas seem closely connected.

It is evident that some of the features of identity theory, specifically the way meaning is shaped for role identities through both subjective meaning and cultural meanings of what these roles represent, are relevant for understanding identity in the context of polyamorous relationships. This can impact a person's sense of moral identity as well as a sense of what it means to be an actor in a committed relationship. According to identity theory, individuals develop a sense of identity based, at least in part, on cultural expectations. Given the preference given to monogamy as a cultural ideal, it follows that when one is in a romantic relationship, there is an expectation of exclusivity. For polyamorous individuals, this is not the expectation, which can create a conflict between what is expected in society and what they are doing in their romantic relationships. This could have an impact on the satisfaction and commitment in a relationship if someone perceives that the relationship or lifestyle is causing them to be rejected by others with whom they have relationships. There may also be a difference in the impact on person identity and how one perceives oneself in light of these conflicts. Furthermore, it is possible that there are gender differences in the ways in which identity is impacted. As noted by Sheff (2005), polyamorous relationships may provide women with more power in relationships. However, it is unclear if men benefit in this way, or possibly lose some of that power. In the following section, a model that integrates elements of both exchange theory and identity theory is described.

As previously stated, monogamy is widely considered the cultural norm in our society. Additionally, many people believe it to be the most universal and natural type of relationship structure among human beings (Conley et al. 2013; Hutzler et al. 2013) . However, several researchers have challenged this view and offered evidence that monogamy may not be as natural or universal as it is perceived to be (Aguilar 2013; Ferrer 2008; Robinson 2013; Ryan and Jetha 2010). Therefore, it may be more useful to examine alternative types of relationships or non-monogamies from a theoretical perspective other than deviance. In the following section, social exchange theory is integrated with some elements of identity theory to offer an alternative explanation for polyamorous relationships.

One issue with polyamory is the idea of it being a non-normative and perhaps morally wrong type of relationship, which may cause conflict in an individual who generally views him or her self as a moral and included member of a given society. Identity theory would predict that individuals who view their own behavior as not fitting into the role that they believe that they fill will find themselves in conflict and attempt to resolve this conflict through a modification of their behavior or the meanings that they attach to the behavior. They will also use other people's reactions to them to help them determine whether their behavior is morally correct.

There is an exchange relationship involved in the development of identity. People are constantly exchanging when they interact with each other, affectionate messages, approval, nice gestures, and on the other side negative sanctions. These exchanges help to determine whether the relationship will continue and how an individual views their own

identity. For polyamorous individuals, there may be a conflict between the perception that monogamy is the only ideal way to live and their own beliefs about their lifestyles. They will need to negotiate this within themselves and also with others in their role and social identities. The assertion that the person identity is the most salient suggests that their polyamorous preferences will not be altered by their social interactions. However, they may experience conflict and discomfort if perceived as immoral or unnatural by others. It would be interesting to ask about this in interviews and try to examine further how polyamorous people cope with these identity disturbances if they do occur as might be expected within this theory.

An example of the struggle within identity seemed to be present in the undergraduate males who were interviewed about their relationships (Anderson, 2010). These males strongly desired to be seen as monogamous; this was an important part of their identity. However, they did not actually behave as if they were in monogamous relationships. It would be interesting to further explore this using the ideas from identity theory about the need to fit the perceptions of the specific role and social identities involved with being in a relationship.

Trust and reciprocity are important concepts in any intimate relationship whether monogamous or nonmonogamous. However, trust may mean something different in each type of relationship. For monogamous relationships, there is an element of trust that each partner will share sexual and romantic activities only with each other, while in polyamorous relationships (Wolkomir 2015), this is not necessarily the same arrangement, although trust that each person will be honest about their activities or

feelings could be important. One important finding in the literature on the topic of trust is the idea that it develops more from non-binding agreements than from formal binding agreements (Collett, 2010; Malhotra and Murnighan, 2002). It would be interesting to find out how trust develops and is maintained in monogamous versus polyamorous relationships. In monogamous relationships, there seems to be this element of a binding contract stating that the only way one can know that his or her partner really loves him or her is if the partner is obligated to be romantic or sexual only with them. This is absent in polyamorous couples, which could lead to more trust if the findings about the lack of contract are applicable here. One study suggests that polyamorous have more trust and less jealousy than monogamous couples (Conley et al. 2017).

Power and dependence are also important in intimate relationships. One important feature of Emerson's (1962) theory was how the availability of alternatives affects the balance of power in a relationship. This is especially interesting for polyamorous relationships, given the inclusion of alternative partners in the relationship. Some researchers have already explored how a polyamorous lifestyle can lead to more power and subjectivity in sexuality for women (Robinson 2013; Sheff 2005). Mitchell, Bartholomew, and Cobb (2014) found that for individuals in nonmonogamous relationships, need fulfillment with a secondary partner was not related to less commitment to their primary partner. In other words, having one's needs met with an alternative partner did not result in feeling less committed or satisfied in their primary relationship. Therefore, it is possible that the introduction of another partner, rather than threatening the primary relationship, may instead result in a situation similar to that

described by Emerson (1962) where the individual simply has more than one source for exchange rather than abandoning the first one for the second.

It would be interesting to further explore the power dynamics within polyamorous couples and the idea of dependency as compared to those dynamics in monogamous couples. Are these couples truly less patriarchal and more balanced? The research by van de Rijt and Macy (2006) suggesting that greater sexual favors are bestowed on those partners who are less emotionally attached may have some interesting implications for polyamorous couples. According to the principles of power and dependence offered by Emerson, the availability of attractive others should lead to less dependency, and therefore, less emotional attachment or neediness.

All of these factors combined (identity, trust, reciprocity, power, dependence, and alternatives) contribute to commitment, which is essential to the stability of any relationship. Sprecher (2005) and Molm (2006) both discuss how commitment is derived from relationship satisfaction. Stryker also discusses how emotion can lead to commitment to a given identity. A significant factor, according to Sprecher (2005) in determining whether or not one is committed to their relationship is the comparison of alternatives, and the woman's commitment was key for the stability of a relationship. All of this has important implications for polyamorous relationships.

First, the comparison of attractive alternatives will be a very different phenomenon when the relationship structure does not force a choice between these others and the primary partner. Therefore, this factor, which can be of serious consequence in monogamous relationships, may actually benefit polyamorous couples by leading to a

greater level of commitment when no choice has to be made to sever the relationship due to an interest in an attractive other. However, it could be the opposite, and free comparison of attractive others may lead to less commitment. It would be interesting to research further how this plays out in actuality for polyamorous couples. Sheff (2005) noted the greater level of freedom and power for women in polyamorous relationships. Given the finding that it is the woman's level of commitment, which is driven by relationship satisfaction, that is essential in the stability of the relationship, perhaps polyamorous couples may fare better. If women truly feel more empowered and satisfied in these situations, and it is their commitment that is more likely to hold a couple together, it would be interesting to know if the result is more stability in polyamorous relationships due to a greater level of commitment by the women in these relationships.

Identity theory also has relevance here in that, if Stryker is correct and positive shared emotion leads to more commitment to an identity, it seems that polyamorous couples who find others similar to them and can experience the shared emotion would be more committed to polyamory as an identity. It also explains the finding of Aguilar (2013) that sexual behavior and identity can be more situational, as it may be an outcome of shared emotions, such as those present in communal living groups.

It is clear to see that exchange theory and identity theory both have useful constructs for explaining intimate relationships, and in particular nonmonogamous relationships. It is also evident from the research that monogamy may not be as normative or natural as is accepted by many who write on relationships. The integration of social exchange theory and identity theory can provide an interesting avenue to further

explore this topic in a more neutral way than some of the celebratory or critical theorists have done to this point.

Integrated Theoretical Model

The theoretical model to be explored in this study combines elements of social exchange theory and identity theory. The literature from exchange theory indicates the importance of trust and power in intimate relationships. There is also an emphasis on the role of alternative others and commitment. Identity theory discusses the idea of identity conflicts which can arise when one is confronted by challenges to their own identity in their exchanges with others in their environment.

The model argues that trust and power will be different in polyamorous relationships than in monogamous ones. In monogamous relationships, trust is defined, at least in part, by the exclusion of other romantic partners. Given the opportunity to have multiple romantic partners, this may be different in polyamorous relationships. The argument from exchange theory that trust is developed better through voluntary rather than obligatory exchanges is relevant for polyamory since one's partner is not obligated to be affectionate only with that one person. Therefore, trust is expected to be developed differently and have a different meaning for polyamorous people.

In polyamorous relationships, power is balanced differently. Emerson's (1962) discussion of power and dependence is relevant here. If someone must rely on only one romantic partner to meet their needs for affection, then there may be a power imbalance, particularly if this attention is more important to one than the other or if one is engaging in covert extradyadic relationships. In polyamorous relationships, power may be more

balanced by the opportunity to have these affective exchanges with others. Additionally, some feminist research suggests that the power may be more balanced between genders in polyamorous relationships than in monogamous ones (Sheff 2005). This integrated approach predicts that power is more balanced in polyamorous relationships and gender roles will be less traditional. This is due to the possibility of obtaining a resource, in this case affection or sexual attention, from more than one source and not having to solely rely on one partner to fulfill these needs.

Commitment is impacted by satisfaction in the relationship as well as in exchanges with others. If trust is more readily given and power is more balanced, then commitment may be greater in polyamorous relationships. However, there may be more identity conflict for people living in polyamorous relationships given the preference for monogamy as the ideal relationship type in this culture. Therefore, when polyamorous individuals are confronted by those who believe their relationship to be deviant, this may impact their commitment to their relationship and lifestyle. It is expected that these identity conflicts arise more for those in polyamorous relationships due to the cultural norm of monogamy.

Identity may impact the salience of a person identity of being polyamorous. The more one identifies with being polyamorous as being a part of who they are, the more they may be inclined to persist with these types of relationships. However, if this is not a strong part of their person identity, then they may be more influenced by negative reactions from others in their social environment causing them to change their lifestyle or abandon their relationship due to a resulting lack of commitment and satisfaction.

Furthermore, identity could impact the social network of polyamorous people, where they may only interact with those who accept them, or they may interact in more shallow ways so as not to reveal their status and avoid rejection. Finally, having a polyamorous identity may have different consequences for men than women, and this may be impacted by their social exchanges with others and the reactions that they get when people are aware of their polyamorous relationships.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are several research questions in this study.

1. First, do individuals who practice polyamory experience identity conflicts related to their polyamorous lifestyle? Is this different for men as compared to women? If so, what coping mechanisms do they use to deal with these conflicts when they arise?
2. How important is trust in these relationships? How is it developed, and what does it mean for these individuals? If they have been in monogamous relationships in the past, how is trust different in their polyamorous relationships compared to their monogamous ones?
3. What is the power balance like in these relationships? Specifically for women, is there a difference in their sense of empowerment between their polyamorous relationships and their monogamous ones, if they have practiced monogamy in the past? How does a sense of empowerment impact their commitment to the relationship?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology. First, there is a description of the data. Next, the sample is described, followed by a description of the interview schedule. The next section describes the data collection process. Finally, there is a description of the data analysis techniques including the coding method utilized in this dissertation.

DATA

This study utilizes a qualitative approach. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who self-identify as either polyamorous now or as having been polyamorous within the last ten years. This helps to ensure that their experiences are recent enough for them to recall and share their thoughts. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer has a list of questions. However, there was an opportunity to ask follow-up or new questions as appropriate during the interview process (Peters and Halcomb 2015). Data were collected concerning the perceptions of individuals who have been involved or are currently involved in polyamorous relationships. They were asked about the benefits and challenges that they have seen in these relationships. They were also asked about the reactions of others and, if negative, the challenges that this has posed to them and their relationships.

Participants were also asked about trust and power in their relationships. They were asked about how important trust is to the relationship and what it means to them.

They were also asked about their perception of the balance of power in their relationship and the emphasis on traditional gender roles. Participants were also asked about their perception of the differences in trust and power in polyamorous relationships as compared to those in past monogamous relationships, if they have had monogamous relationships at some point. Participants were also asked about any negative experiences or discrimination that they may have encountered as a result of their polyamorous lifestyle. They were asked, if they have had such experiences, how they have impacted their identity and their relationships and how they cope with these challenges.

SAMPLE

The goal was to conduct a minimum of ten interviews or until saturation is achieved, with individuals who self-identify as polyamorous either presently or within the past ten years. In total, twenty-three individuals were interviewed. The sample included 23 participants who agreed to participate in an interview. There were 27 individuals who made contact via email to volunteer for an interview. However, one was out of state and unable to return the consent form before the interview. When a follow up email was sent, this individual did not respond. Three others did not respond to attempts to schedule an interview. Of the 23 participants, one male participant was excluded, as it was determined that he did not match the research criterion of having been in a consensually nonmonogamous relationship.

With respect to gender fifteen were female, seven were male, and one participant identified as non-binary. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling procedure. When more than one member of a relationship

agreed to be interviewed, they were interviewed separately. This occurred for three different sets of partners. Facebook was used to recruit potential interviewees, and then participants were able to refer acquaintances who may be interested in participating in the study. A recruitment post was published on my Facebook timeline inviting anyone interested in participating in the study or referring someone to do so to contact me for further information. Additionally, a private message was sent to the administrators of two Facebook groups created for polyamorous people to request permission to post the invitation to participate on the group pages as well. One of the administrators agreed to post the message on the group site and also reported that she posted the message on fifty other groups on Facebook that were related to polyamory. Several volunteers responded within the next couple of days. All interviews were scheduled and completed within two months time.

INSTRUMENT

An interview schedule was developed to use for this study. There was a list of open-ended questions with the option to ask follow-up questions as needed throughout the interview. Some participants answered more than one question while responding to one question. When this occurred, they were not asked the question again to avoid being repetitive and rigid. The schedule was developed using the integrated theoretical approach as a guide as well as adapting items from interview schedules that have been utilized in previous dissertations (Franceschi 2006; Tahler 2014). There were a total of thirty questions on the interview schedule. Questions were open ended so as to provide a rich look at these relationships with respect to the research questions.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study were collected through interviews with polyamorous participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in public locations that were chosen by and convenient for the participants and recorded with their consent or via phone. Participants were welcome regardless of location, provided they were able to participate either in person, via Skype, or via telephone. Nine participants were interviewed face to face in local coffee shops and private offices in the DFW area. The remaining fourteen were interviewed via phone, as some were not local to the area, and others preferred this method for convenience.

There was a cover letter presented to each participant along with the consent form for them to sign. The shortest interview lasted approximately thirty minutes, while the longest was a little over two hours. The average length of time for each interview was approximately one hour. Prior to the beginning of each interview, a discussion of informed consent and a request to record the interview was addressed. For those participants who were unable to meet face to face, the consent form and cover letter were sent via email. They signed and returned the consent form in email and we discussed them on the phone before beginning the interview.

All of the participants agreed to have their interview recorded. The recorder was turned on prior to the signing of the consent form, and a copy was offered to each participant. Phone interviews were recorded by putting the phone on speaker setting in a private office and then recording with the same device used to record face to face interviews. Given that this is a sensitive and stigmatized topic, care was taken to ensure

that participants felt comfortable and respected. A description of the study was discussed to help them understand that the goal is not to criticize or judge their lifestyle. There was time allowed for them to ask any questions before we began and again at the end of the interview, and they were offered the opportunity to know the results of the research should they wish to do so. They were asked to include either their email or home address if they chose to know the results. Additionally, early questions focused on topics that were not sensitive, such as demographic and simple getting to know the participant better items.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. After interviews were transcribed a brief analytic memo was written for each interview. This allowed for an opportunity to reflect on what each participant said and highlight anything that stood out in their narratives (Saldaña 2016). These memos were used to assist in choosing a coding technique as well as creating codes for emergent themes in the data.

After the memos were written, they were coded to determine themes and explore the information in light of the research questions. Research questions were addressed by assigning predetermined codes related to each research question (Stuckey 2015).

Additional codes were created based on the memos and emergent themes in the data. Eclectic coding was used combining aspects of descriptive, in vivo, and emotion coding (Saldaña 2016). Descriptive codes were assigned primarily to highlight specific topics related to the research questions as well as some other questions on the interview schedule. In vivo codes were assigned where the exact language used by the participants

seemed particularly striking as well as when several participants used very similar language. Finally, emotion coding was included to highlight the emotional importance of some topics for the participants.

Attention was given to whether these themes were relevant to the integration of social exchange and identity theories for examining polyamorous relationships. Furthermore, identification of these themes helped to answer the research questions of this study. The data were explored specifically for themes related to trust and power in polyamorous relationships. There was a focus on exploring how these are different in these relationships. There was also an emphasis on how this is related to participants' identities in their relationship and in their environment, and whether there are conflicts that arise related to their lifestyle choice.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this dissertation. In the first section, there is a brief description of each of the 22 participants who were included in the data analysis. Next, there is a discussion of some of the emergent themes from the data. Finally, the results are addressed with respect to the original research questions.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 23 individuals agreed to participate in an interview for this study. However, one participant did not meet the research criteria of having been in a consensually nonmonogamous relationship or relationships. Therefore, this interview was excluded from this study. The following is a brief description of each of the remaining 22 participants.

Participant number one, Lisa, is a 40-year-old, bisexual female from Texas. She is a graduate student and works at her university. Her relationship structure is a primary dyad, and she is married to her male partner. Neither Lisa nor her husband currently has other partners. However, they have engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with other people together during their relationship and consider the option open to do so again in the future. Their sexual activities with other partners have primarily occurred with both Lisa and her husband present. However, Lisa did have a romantic relationship with another man where she would see him alone as well. She was in a monogamous

marriage previously and shared that she cheated on her husband during that marriage. Lisa has two children, and she is very committed to her relationship with her husband.

Participant number two, Olivia, is a 33-year-old female from Texas, who identifies as either pansexual or bisexual, which means that she is open to relationships with other people regardless of their gender. She also considers herself demi sexual, which means that she does not experience sexual attraction to someone unless she feels a strong emotional connection with them first. She is working on her Bachelor's degree while working as a cashier in a grocery store as well. Olivia is in a primary dyad that she calls a "committed open relationship with her queer platonic life partner." She and her partner are emotionally intimate and share their lives together. However, they have discovered that they are not sexually compatible. Therefore, sexual intimacy is not a part of their primary relationship. Olivia indicated that her relationship is very committed and shared that she and her partner have a ten year life plan together.

Participant number three, Steven, is a 42-year-old, straight male from Texas. He has a Bachelor's of Science degree and works as a project manager. Steven has two children from his previous marriage. He is in a primary dyad and is married to his female partner. Steven was in a monogamous marriage previously, and after leaving his church and losing some relationships as a result, he and his wife decided to explore having a polyamorous relationship. He and his ex-wife both had other partners individually, and they also spent some time together with a couple of his female partners as well. When he and his current wife decided to marry, they both agreed that it would be an open marriage

from the beginning. They are not currently seeing anyone else, but the option is open for both of them to do so. Steven is very committed in his relationship with his wife.

Participant number four, Brenda, is a 37-year-old, straight female from Texas. She is a graduate student and works at her university. She is in a primary dyad and is engaged to her male partner, Bobby, who was also a participant in this study. Brenda currently identifies as monogamous, because neither she nor her partner is involved in a relationship with anyone else. She shared that she is not interested in seeing anyone else, but her partner has expressed the interest and is free to do so if he chooses. Brenda was in a monogamous marriage previously, and she shared that her husband cheated on her during that marriage. Her current relationship began with the understanding that it would be open. She has had experiences as a single person involved with more than one partner without a primary and also with a primary male partner and other partners. She has three children from her previous marriage. She is very committed to her relationship.

Participant number five, Bobby, is a 46-year-old, bisexual male from Texas. He has had some college experience and works as a massage therapist. He is in a primary dyad and is engaged to his female partner, Brenda, who was also a participant in this study. He considers his relationship to be “monogamous by default” currently due to several factors that make it difficult to find the time and energy required to be involved in other relationships. However, he shared that the option is open for each of them to see other people. Bobby was in a monogamous marriage previously, and his wife cheated on him. After discovering her infidelity, he began cheating as well, and they continued this

until opening their marriage at his ex-wife's suggestion. His current relationship has always been open. He is very committed to his relationship.

Participant number six, Carl, is a 46-year-old, straight male from Texas. He has some college experience and currently works in customer service. Carl is in a primary dyad and is married to his female partner, Carrie, who is also a participant in this study. He and his wife talked about the kind of relationship they wanted to have when they first met and agreed that they wanted an open relationship. They both have separate sexual and romantic relationships with other people separately and have also shared some of those experiences as a couple with others as well. Carl was in a monogamous relationship previously and felt that there was too much pressure to change and conform to what his partner and her family wanted from him. Carl has one biological child with Carrie and two step-children. He is very committed to his relationship.

Participant number seven, Carrie, is a 45-year-old, bisexual female from Texas. She has a high school diploma and currently works as a logistics coordinator. She is in a primary dyad and married to her male partner, Carl, who is also a participant in this study. Carrie was in a previous monogamous marriage, and found out that her husband had cheated on her. She suggested opening their marriage, but he was not open to the idea. At that point, she began cheating on her husband as well, and they continued this pattern until they eventually divorced. When she met her current husband, they discussed what kind of relationship they wanted and decided that they wanted to have an open relationship. They both have separate sexual and romantic relationships with other people and have also shared some of those experiences as a couple with others as well. Carrie

has three children, two from her previous marriage, and one with her husband, Carl. She is very committed to her relationship with her husband.

Participant number eight, Hayden, is from Connecticut. Hayden is 25 years old and identifies as nonbinary. Hayden identifies as queer with respect to sexual orientation. They have “oodles of lovers” and no primary relationship. Hayden is a poly activist and has dealt with stigma surrounding sexuality and gender, which they believe has been similar in some ways to the stigma of being polyamorous. They have been in monogamous relationships in the past and found that each of their monogamous partners cheated during the relationship. Hayden defines commitment as a decision to be in long term relationships that are positive and feels committed to their romantic relationships.

Participant number nine, Jasmine, is a 39-year-old female from Texas. She has had some college experience and she works as a nanny. She identifies as either bisexual or pansexual. She is a poly activist. Jasmine is involved in several long term romantic relationships and does not consider any of them to be a primary relationship. She said she would call her oldest relationship a primary in that it has been the longest, but not in the way that it takes precedence over any other relationship. Jasmine shared that all of her previous monogamous partners have cheated on her, and she has decided that she is not interested in having a monogamous relationship in the future. Her grandparents were polyamorous, and she discussed the benefits of having extra loving adults around as caretakers and family when she was growing up. She has two children. Jasmine shared that she is very committed to her relationships.

Participant number ten, Sandra, is a 62-year-old female from Texas. She is a graduate student and works for her university. She identifies as straight, but bi-questioning. Sandra has a primary dyad and lives with her male partner. She also has other regular sexual partners and a close male friend who was a sexual partner until recently. She started considering polyamory when her current male partner suggested it. Sandra has one adult child from a previous relationship. She is very committed to her primary partner and has various degrees of commitment in her other relationships depending on how close they are.

Participant number eleven, Franklin, is a 36-year-old, bisexual male from Texas. He is a graduate student and works for his university and as a caregiver. Franklin is in two committed romantic and sexual relationships and one relationship where the sexual part has recently ended. One of his partners, Fiona, is also a participant in this study. He has participated as an educator in poly workshops and spoken about polyamory to help educate others. Franklin shared that for him, commitment refers to a commitment of time. His two committed partners have first priority with how he spends his time, and he is very committed in his relationships.

Participant number twelve, Fiona, is a 48-year-old female from Texas. She has a Bachelor's degree and currently works as a long term care surveyor. She identifies as straight, but is bi-questioning with respect to sexual orientation. Fiona is in an open relationship with her male partner, Franklin, who is also a participant in this study. She does not consider this a primary dyad. She was in a previous monogamous marriage where she shared that she felt trapped and unhappy for much of the time she was married.

After her divorce, she decided that she would like to explore polyamory. Fiona has two adult children from her previous marriage. She is very emotionally committed to her partner.

Participant number thirteen, Mark, is a 49-year-old, straight male from Texas. He has some college experience and currently works as a computer systems administrator. He is in a primary dyad and is married to his female partner. Mark has been in a previous monogamous marriage where he became dissatisfied and cheated on his partner. After his divorce, he decided that he did not want to be in a monogamous relationship, and his current marriage was open from the beginning. He and his wife have had primarily sexual relationships with other people as well as engaged in sexual activities with others together as a couple. While they have not been as actively involved in nonmonogamy for a while, he shared that they still consider their marriage open and the option is there to pursue. Mark has one child with his wife. He is very committed to his relationship with his wife.

Participant number fourteen, Rose, is a 36-year-old pansexual female from Texas. She has some college credit and currently works as a retail manager. Rose is in a polyfidelitous triad with one male and one female partner. Polyfidelity is a form of polyamory where each member is considered equal, and the members of the group agree to be sexually and romantically involved only with other members of the group. She has one child with her male partner. Rose defines commitment in this way where each person in the relationship is committed to being romantically and sexually involved only with the members of their triad, and she is very committed to her partners.

Participant number fifteen, Karen, is a 30-year-old, pansexual female from Texas. She has a Master's degree and she works as a midwife. She is currently married to one male partner and engaged to another male partner. She noted that, while she and her fiancé plan to marry, this marriage will not be a legal one, as the law currently prevents marriage to more than one partner simultaneously. At this time, she and her fiancé are not seeing anyone else. However, her husband is involved in other relationships. She is currently living with her fiancé and her two children, while her husband is working in another state. She has always been more comfortable with polyamory than monogamy but has considered practicing monogamy out of fear of the stigma and concerns over legal issues that could arise and impact her family. Karen is very committed to her relationships.

Participant number sixteen, Magnus, is a 65-year-old male from Texas. He has a doctorate degree and is retired. Magnus identifies as mostly straight but shared that he has had bisexual relationships in the past. He is in a primary dyad with his female partner. They are currently not engaging in sexual or romantic relationships with other people, because their relationship is fairly new and they are working together to determine what boundaries they will have when they are open. He is committed to his primary partner.

Participant number seventeen, Debra, is a 48-year-old female from Texas. She has a Bachelor's degree and works as a social worker. Debra identifies as hetero-flexible with respect to her sexual orientation. She has a primary dyad and is married to her male partner. She has two children with her husband. She also has a relationship with a man she calls her boyfriend and a male friend with benefits. Her current marriage began as a

monogamous relationship, and they decided together to open it. Debra is very committed to her husband and to her boyfriend.

Participant number eighteen, Grace, is a 42-year-old female from Virginia. She has an Associate's degree and works as a web designer. Grace identifies as bisexual, but she is primarily lesbian with respect to her sexual orientation. She is in a committed relationship with her female partner. She considers this to be a secondary relationship, and she would like to find a primary partner. Grace is very committed to her partner.

Participant number nineteen, Erica, is a 49-year-old female from New York. She has a Master's degree and currently works a variety of jobs including a book reviewer and a doula. Erica identifies as bisexual or pansexual. She is currently married to her male partner and engaged to her female partner. Erica is not planning to divorce her spouse. Therefore, she understands that, while they will have a marriage ceremony, her marriage to her female partner will not be a legal marriage. Each of these relationships is a primary dyad, with a V triad structure, where her partners are not romantically or sexually involved with each other. She also has another male partner who she is in a relationship with as well. Erica participates in training and educating people about polyamory. She has one child with her husband. She is very committed to her relationships.

Participant number twenty, Lana, is a 56-year-old, bisexual female from California. She has a doctorate degree and works in the chiropractic field. Lana is in a registered domestic partnership with her male partner, and she considers this a primary

dyad. They each have other relationships and are open to meeting new people as well. Lana has two children. She is very committed to her relationship.

Participant number twenty-one, Natalie, is a 25-year-old female from Arizona. She has an Associate's degree and currently works in an occupation where she travels much of the time. Natalie identifies as queer and/or pansexual with respect to her sexual orientation. She is in several romantic relationships with no one considered primary. Natalie is very committed to the people that she is in relationships with. For her, these commitments transcend the type of relationship. Therefore, if the relationship changes or transitions from a romantic or sexual relationship to something else, she is still very committed to be in some kind of relationship with her partners.

Participant number twenty-two, Elsa, is a 31-year-old bisexual female from Texas. She has a Bachelor's degree and works as a program coordinator. Elsa is in an open triad with her husband and another woman. They are all romantically and sexually involved with each other and they are open to have relationships with other people as well. She lives with her husband and considers this a primary dyad due to the time they have been together and their living situation. Elsa also has an online kink partner with whom she is involved primarily in an online setting, as he is not local to her area. She has travelled to meet him with her partners in her triad, but they do not spend time together face to face outside of that trip. She also has a play partner, which is a partner she sees primarily for sexual activities. She is very committed to her relationships.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Gender	Age	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Education
Female	40	Bisexual	Married	Graduate Student
Female	33	Pansexual/Bisexual/ Demi sexual	Committed Open Relationship	Bachelors Student
Male	42	Straight	Married	Bachelor's Degree
Female	37	Straight/Demi sexual	Engaged	Graduate Student
Male	46	Bisexual	Engaged	Some College
Male	46	Straight	Married	Some College
Female	45	Bisexual	Married	High School
Nonbinary	25	Queer	Oodles of Lovers	Bachelor's Degree
Female	39	Bisexual/Pansexual	Multiple Relationships	Some College
Female	62	Straight/Bi- questioning	Primary and other relationships	Graduate Student
Male	36	Bisexual	Two committed relationships	Graduate Student
Female	48	Bi-questioning	In an open relationship	Bachelor's Degree
Male	49	Heterosexual	Married	Some College
Female	36	Pansexual	Polyfidelity Triad	Some College
Female	30	Pansexual	Married and Engaged	Master's Degree
Male	65	Mostly straight/Bisexual at times	In a relationship	Doctorate Degree
Female	48	Hetero-flexible	Married	Bachelor's Degree
Female	42	Bi-sexual	In a relationship	Associates Degree
Female	49	Pansexual/Bisexual	Married and Engaged	Master's Degree

Female	56	Bisexual	Domestic Partnership	Doctorate Degree
Female	25	Queer/Pansexual	Multiple relationships	Associates Degree
Female	31	Bisexual	Married and triad and other relationships	Bachelor's Degree

EMERGENT THEMES

The first theme that stood out in these interviews was the consistency in the definition of polyamory. While researchers use different definitions, there was some variation on how it was worded. Some of the examples of how these participants defined polyamory include:

“Consensual nonmonogamous relationships.” Olivia

“The desirability and inclination to love more than one person romantically simultaneously.” Steven

“Having a romantic outlook where you want to form meaningful relationships with more than one person” Bobby

“Freedom to love many through authentic honesty and transparency with all of the quote unquote partners you may engage with” Jasmine

Participants included several common factors in their attempts to define polyamory: ability and/or desire to have more than one relationship, sexual and/or romantic, simultaneously and honestly. Some adhered to a more strict definition, excluding those whose primary focus was on sexual relationships, while others were broader in their definition. However, the overall theme seems to be that polyamory is the ability and

desire to have more than one romantic and/or sexual relationship simultaneously with the knowledge and consent of each partner. Furthermore, those who identified as open but not poly did seem to have a great deal in common with the other polyamorous participants. Trust was developed and maintained in similar ways, and though they reported that their focus was on sexual outside relationships rather than emotional ones, all admitted having experienced at least some degree of emotional connection and ongoing relationships with at least one of their secondary partners at some time. Therefore, the distinction between swingers and polyamory may be a bit overstated for some as one researcher pointed out previously.

Manley, Diamond, and Anders (2015) suggest that sexual orientation is more fluid for polyamorous individuals, particularly polyamorous women. There was a resistance to labels for many of these participants, which seems to be related to the feeling of needing a new script or needing to operate without one. Natalie was uncomfortable defining her sexual orientation with traditional labels and also defining her relationships with titles. When asked about sexual orientation, she said “I guess queer if I was going to, because queer can be pretty much anything I want it to be.” When asked about his sexual orientation, Franklin stated “I haven’t found new words for it. There for a while, I was using anti-masculine.” Other participants used terms such as bi-questioning and heteroflexible. With respect to the term Natalie uses to describe her own relationships, she said that she usually uses “ethical nonmonogamy, because that forces people to ask questions.” She later shared the difficulty with labels and titles and how

they are useful but many are based on monogamous situations and seem less applicable for her relationships:

“I find that it’s really difficult not to have some form of title, just because it’s good for the people involved and it’s helpful to describe to other people. And it’s good for the people involved, because that way you can set up your boundaries and what you want out of the relationship and how the relationship functions, but I also find that using monogamous terms like boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, fuck buddy, you know, those are just not applicable.”

Other participants also used different language to describe these things, not wanting to utilize the language of monogamy to describe themselves nor their relationships. Franklin shared:

“For several years, I was using girlfriend, and then I switched more to lover, because I felt like it was more sex positive, and in recent years, I’ve used more loves, my love, because it’s simple and it sort of begs for clarification, because it’s so broad.”

There were also some differences in the way commitment was defined. Some defined commitment as a commitment to being in the relationship at all. Franklin defined it as a commitment of his time, “I am in two serious relationships. I consider them committed, which to me is a commitment of time. They get first dibs on my time.” In the polyfidelity triad, Rose defined commitment as only engaging in sexual or romantic relations with those in the triad. All participants expressed a high level of commitment to their relationships. However, this meant something different to some.

Several participants mentioned religion, though this was not a focus in this study. A few participants reported that they are Pagan, and they believe there to be an overlap with polyamory and the Pagan religion. A few mentioned leaving their church before considering polyamory. Also, a few mentioned being involved in churches that were open to the LGBT community and to varying degrees the polyamorous community as well. A few did comment on receiving some negative reactions from the LGBT community due to political reasons. There is a belief by some in this community that polyamory could complicate or impede their goals. Likewise, there seems to be some overlap between the BDSM community and polyamory, and some who are polyamorous worry for similar reasons about the blending of these groups as well.

These participants engaged in far more activism and had more of a sense of community than prior research had predicted. All of the participants had friends who were polyamorous, and many belonged to groups or found community online in the form of facebook groups or other online groups for support. Several of the participants were engaged in activism and education about polyamory. Therefore, the suggestion in previous research (Noel 2006) that polyamorous people do not seem to form community or engage in activism may be outdated or inaccurate based on the input of these participants.

The most common benefits mentioned to a polyamorous lifestyle were: support, economics, companionship, and acceptance of oneself and others. The participants talked about support in a variety of situations. Fiona had lost her job, and her partner and her metamores (her partner's partners) were there to help comfort her and keep her spirits up

as she looked for other employment. She shared “I felt like they were a large part of what was holding me together at that time, and that was support I wouldn’t have had if I wasn’t in that kind of lifestyle.” Elsa talked about being in a lot of physical pain due to some health issues and being held by both her husband and their female partner, stating “she and Jason both held me, and talk about being surrounded by love and fully supported.” Grace talked about her marriage ending and how her girlfriend was there to help get her through that.

“The other advantage is that if one of your partners breaks up with you, I don’t think you fall quite as hard when that happens, because you’ve got your other partners to catch you. Because, like the break up with my husband, I’ve got Cathy [her girlfriend] to cushion that blow.”

Elsa also talked about an experience where she and her husband proposed the idea of a romantic relationship with a couple with whom they were friends. This couple did not share their desire to take their relationship to that level, and as a result there was a sense of rejection. Elsa said:

“So, afterwards being able to recover from all of that emotional upheaval, being able to recover with my partner was amazing. It was relieving. It felt safer than I ever thought it could have felt.”

Some were living in a poly family situation where financial obligations and child rearing were shared. Rose shared that she has “two extra people to help raise [their] son.”

Similarly, Karen shared that her husband currently works in another state, and she and her fiancé are living together and caring for their children. Carrie indicated that she

believed communication with her children was more open due to their awareness of her polyamorous lifestyle. "...it's made them, I think, more open about talking about sex in their relationships with us. It's more open than I was in my relationship and my mom was pretty open." Lisa shared that her teenage daughter is the only family member that knows and that she "think[s] she feels privileged that she knows this secret."

Companionship was another benefit. When one partner is away or busy, there are others with whom you can spend time if you choose to. Lisa said "I never have to be alone if I don't want to be alone." Mark shared "we do have kind of a general rule that if one of us is out of town, then we couldn't be with that person anyway, so being with somebody else is okay." Natalie talked about needing a lot of time alone. She shared that she has found far more acceptance for this in a polyamorous framework, as her partners can be understanding of her needs while still getting their own needs met if they choose more time with someone.

"I require probably 70% of my time I want to be alone. I've always found it really difficult in monogamous relationships to have my needs met in the sense that I feel loved when I have partners that support and encourage my needs, and part of my needs are being alone for extended amounts of time, and I've found in poly relationships I've been in, even if my partner and I aren't seeing other people, there's still this respect for each other's time, space, and life."

Several participants also mentioned how they can accept themselves and their partners for who they are without trying to ask that any one person be everything. When the option is open to have other relationships, no one is left with the burden of trying to

be everything to anyone else. Rose talked about the differences between her sexual experiences with her male partner and her female partner. She said, “I like the softness and caresses, like with her, I get the extra love and affection...with guys, I like somebody to be more dominant than me.” When asked about how polyamory impacts her satisfaction in her relationships, Sandra said, “It only adds to them, because I’m not expecting each person to be everything and all to me.” Additionally, she shared, “It makes me wonder how I ever thought and how people think that one person is going to be the physical, mental, and emotional be all and end all for anyone.” Bobby stated:

“I don’t know if it’s possible to be a perfectly complete match for each other...there’s going to be some hobby or interest that’s not shared or maybe some sexual fantasy that the person can’t fulfill for whatever reason, maybe they’re the wrong gender or something, but then you can add somebody else into the mix, and assuming everybody’s on the same page and being honest, and there’s no huge personality conflicts, you can kind of like diversify your relationship portfolio.”

Similarly, Carrie talked about times where Carl may want to do something sexually that she may not want to do:

“I can say I don’t want to give that part to you, but I can give you the other parts. I let you have the option of going to somebody else for these things. You are welcome to find someone else to fit that position for you. You know if we’re not open, it would be like what the hell am I going to do? Do I have to be somebody I’m not to make up this thing to make him happy so that I don’t feel like I’m not providing that to him? I’m providing it to him with another person.”

Furthermore, this idea of accepting others for who they are seems to extend to the acceptance of others who may not understand polyamory well. Natalie shared that several people have made some “backhanded comments about it or just implied that [she’s] a whore or that the relationships aren’t real.” However, she expressed an understanding and an acceptance for the people making these comments, saying:

“Well, I find them funny, they’re super negative and I understand that the way they were raised in a culture where monogamy is the only option, like, of course you’re not going to be able to totally understand and accept somebody else’s lifestyle.”

Brenda shared that her parents are “so fundamentalist” and that she has not shared with them about her polyamory, stating,

“I don’t feel like it’s personal, and I don’t feel ashamed and I don’t think I would feel ashamed if I told them that, but I know that my mom would cry, my dad would be upset, my mom wouldn’t sleep for a week. I just seems like why would I do that to them?”

Jasmine mentioned that she comes from a strictly religious family, and some of her family members tell her that they will pray for her because of her polyamory. She recognized that this is due to a judgment about her lifestyle. However, she said, “But I don’t like disrespect them, and I know that their prayers are coming from a place of love even if I don’t like the judgment that’s attached to it.”

There seems to be an additional benefit related to health and safety, and particularly women’s safety. First, with respect to health, several participants mentioned getting tested for sexually transmitted diseases regularly and stated this as a requirement

if they were to choose to fluid bond (have sex without protection) with a committed partner. Hayden stated, “I like to get tested and use sexual protection or if I’m going to fluid bond with someone we get tested together.” Furthermore, there is an openness with their other partners about any sexual activities with new partners, which allows for the other partners to be aware and make decisions about their own health and testing. If someone is in a monogamous relationship and is unfaithful to their partner, they are less likely to be open about this infidelity and thus, less likely to allow their monogamous partner the option to get tested if they choose to do so. When asked about trust in her relationships, Debra shared that one important aspect of trust was “...trust that if they are going to have another partner that we talk about STDs and testing and you don’t mess around with your health.”

With respect to safety, several female participants mentioned that they provide their primary partner or another long term partner with information about any new partners who they meet or even have their primary present for new meetings. This information includes phone numbers, name, where and how they met the new partner, where they are going, and in one case, one participant shared that she took a picture of her date’s license plate and sent that to her primary partner. This would certainly not be possible in a situation where she is monogamous and seeing someone new covertly. Lisa mentioned that one her rules for her relationship is that her husband is present or in the vicinity when she meets another man. Carl shared that one of their guidelines is that Carrie keep him informed of some basic information so that he knows she is safe:

“Like if she goes out, I don’t have to know where she’s going or who she’s gonna be with, but I ask her to text when she gets there, text me when she’s leaving, so I know where she is. I know when she’s on her way home, so I know she’s safe.”

Sandra shared that she always texts her primary partner and another partner with information when she meets someone new. She said, “I text the information where I’m going, how I contacted them and what their user name or phone number was to my primary and the other gentlemen who is now about my best friend.” Therefore, the openness of this lifestyle may allow for an added layer of safety and protection for women when meeting new partners.

The most common challenges were time and energy. It takes time and energy to be involved in one relationship. Therefore, it obviously is going to be a challenge to make that time for more than one partner. Erica shared that time is a challenge and also doing the emotional work involved in any relationship. She stated, “Sometimes you do have the option to kind of be escapist when something’s going well and something’s not going well.” Carrie also mentioned how you have to be careful to “not let the side dishes consume you” when referring to secondary relationships.

Another challenge is jealousy, though as several participants noted, jealousy is not exclusive to polyamory. Monogamous couples also deal with jealousy, though they may focus on avoiding it, and in polyamory it is more important to find a way to cope with it, as avoidance is unlikely to be a good long term strategy. Steven referred to polyamory as a “varsity level relationship” and discussed the importance of being able to deal with issues like jealousy that you may be more likely to ignore or avoid in a monogamous

relationship. Olivia stated that “you have to be willing to both be vulnerable and to learn to be resilient at the same time.” Another challenge includes the lack of a script for how polyamory works. Hayden stated:

“With monogamy, you learn the skills to deal with the things that are difficult about monogamy all over the place, but there’s a different skill set for dealing with nonmonogamy.”

A related issue is the social stigma and legal concerns that these individuals may face.

Karen shared her heartfelt concern over these issues:

“I can’t imagine giving up my loved ones just to have the benefits of more acceptance, but there’s definitely been points at which I seriously considered limiting myself to monogamous relationships because of the impact, especially because I have children and it scares me. It scares me horribly when I see or hear some of the things people say about poly relationships and poly families and some of their assumptions and see where that filters down into, and there are quite a few cases of parents losing custody of their children out of concerns that are based on ignorance and misinformation.”

Additionally, another challenge is the difficulties with managing expectations and day to day issues that may come up in relationships with others. Magnus mentioned:

“It’s hard to work out issues between two people, working out issues between three people becomes geometrically more difficult, and each time you add a person to the mix, it becomes exponential.”

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first three research questions for this dissertation were related to identity conflict. Research question number one asked: Do individuals who practice polyamory experience identity conflicts related to their polyamorous lifestyle? Question number two asked: Is this different for men as compared to women? Question number three asked: If so, what coping mechanisms do they use to deal with these conflicts when they arise? While most of the participants did say that they were aware of a stigma attached to polyamory, and that they either knew of people getting a negative reaction or had received one themselves, none of these participants seemed to have an identity conflict related to these experiences. This is discussed further below.

The participants suggested a couple of different reasons for the negative reactions and stigma associated with polyamory. A significant factor is the way monogamy is seen as not only the normal and healthy way to have romantic relationships, but for many it is seen as the only acceptable way in our culture. This makes it difficult for anyone to imagine and respond positively to other options when they have been raised with this understanding of relationships. Carl stated that “monogamy was kind of looked at as the only way to live your life with someone you find because of religion and that’s unfortunate.”

Another factor is religion. Several participants noted that they had friends or family that would not understand or that have a difficult time with their lifestyle because of their religious beliefs. While some did report that they were at times uncomfortable due to the stigma or have been confronted by some inappropriate comments, no

participant reported those reactions having a significant impact on their own comfort with being polyamorous. Bobby shared that he would like to be more open with his family just for the sake of being more genuine with them. However, he said that, “My family would react poorly to it. They’re pretty conservative Christian...They would be embarrassed and angered at it. So, I don’t talk to them about it.”

Furthermore, the participants seemed accepting of their friends and family given that they understood that their friends’ and families’ understanding of relationships caused them to misunderstand their polyamorous relationships. Carrie said that her parents do not know about her open marriage. She said, “I don’t want them to be confused and think it’s something they have to worry about. I just want them to know I’m happy and don’t worry about the details.” Karen said that she had considered being monogamous when she was in only one relationship out of fear of the legal ramifications of her polyamory for her family and her children. However, this was a fear of legal consequences, such as the potential of losing custody of her children, and not an issue with identity conflict that caused her concerns.

All of the participants in this study had been practicing polyamory or some kind of consensual nonmonogamy. It is possible that the question of identity conflict may be more appropriate for someone who identifies as polycurious or monogamous but is engaging in nonmonogamy in a more covert way. Perhaps these individuals have not chosen polyamory due, in part, to such identity conflicts. However, this would be a question for future research, as the participants in this study all identified as polyamorous or consensually nonmonogamous at the time of the interview or previously.

Another possibility is that some of the participants experienced a sense of identity conflict that led them to polyamory, rather than identity conflict after becoming polyamorous. One participant stated:

“It feels like when I am monogamous, if I’m a bright shining light, I’m dim, I’m really dim, it’s like my light is dying. When I’m allowed to just be me and be polyamorous and date other people, when I allow myself to do that, I don’t feel dim, I don’t feel like something’s missing. I feel complete and whole and extra bright.”

A few others suggested that monogamy did not ever feel like the right path for them. Lisa stated “I’ve always struggled with monogamy.” Olivia declared, “I’ve dated monogamously or pseduomonogamously and I just don’t fit well that way.” Karen stated that as a teenager, she was very confused by her feelings, because she only knew monogamy, but she always knew that she could love more than one person at the same time.

“I’ve really never been monogamous. I didn’t really have a name or any terminology early on, but even as a teenager my first relationships, there were two people that I was very closely involved with and that was wildly confusing when I had no example outside of standard monogamy.”

Some of the participants were in monogamous relationships by title only, as one or both members of the relationship had other secret relationships. Mark admitted to cheating on his first wife after becoming dissatisfied with the relationship. Several participants shared that either they or their partners or both were unfaithful in their monogamous relationships. Jasmine stated:

“I can’t remember a single one of my monogamous partners being monogamous...I’ve had enough of the monogamous heartbreak chain. So, that’s why in 2011, I decided, you know what, every person I’ve ever dated in a monogamous relationship has cheated on me, so fuck monogamy, it’s not a part of my life anymore.” Therefore, perhaps the sense of identity conflict comes before polyamory and not as a result of this lifestyle if it is there at all.

Research questions four through six are about trust, how it is developed, how important it is to the participants, and how trust was different in monogamous relationships if it was. Question number four asked: How important is trust in these relationships? Question number five asked: How is it developed, and what does it mean for these individuals? Question number six asked: If they have been in monogamous relationships in the past, how is trust different in their polyamorous relationships compared to their monogamous ones? The most important factor in the development and maintenance of trust was open communication. Every participant mentioned the importance of communication at some, or several, points in the interview. Some examples include:

“Open communication is absolutely crucial.” Olivia

“It’s all about communication.” Carrie

“The big thing is we talk to each other. We don’t hold back.” Mark

“...communicate, because oh my god, I can’t say that word enough.” Grace

There were differences in how much sharing was appropriate. Some wanted every detail of their partner’s experiences, such as Brenda who expressed the need for “complete and

total honesty,” while some just wanted to know a minimum amount of detail, but everything about feelings about other partners, such as was the case for Carl and Carrie. However, all of this was openly negotiated and discussed regularly. Additionally, there was an emphasis on a need to be flexible and dynamic in the making of agreements and boundaries, as there is an awareness that relationships and people change over time.

Steven touched on this stating:

“The other big thing I’ve learned is that you can theorize it and plan it all you want, but once you’re in it, you can’t, you’re not going to know how you’re going to feel until you feel the feelings. You need to have a loose stance I think, because if you’re rigid, it’s going to hit you, it’s going to knock you over.”

Another important aspect of developing trust and communication was the ability to say and hear difficult things. Olivia said “you need to be able to be both vulnerable and resilient.” Hayden made an interesting point about this need for open communication.

They stated:

“I know there are some polyamorous people who have difficulty understanding social signals, and they like it because it is nontraditional and that means people have to communicate everything.”

This suggests that for some people who struggle with subtle social cues, this style of relationship works better, as there is no script for polyamory, therefore, everything must be clearly discussed and communicated, and there is less reliance on implicit social cues.

Trust was very important to the participants. They stated the need to trust for health and safety reasons and also emotional ones. When asked about the importance of

trust, responses included terms such as: paramount, absolute, essential, and very important. It was also very important to them that they are trusted by their partners as well as able to trust them. Brenda noted that she goes out of her way to do things to build trust including making her cell phone and any passwords available to her partner. She said that she believes that “people in monogamous relationships sometimes take trust for granted.” Natalie mentioned that some of her relationships are with people who have always been monogamous in the past. She said that it is difficult, at times, for them to know they can trust her and to be able to open up to the idea of open communication, particularly about other lovers. When asked the importance of trust in her relationships, she stated “Very important. I can’t commit to somebody if I don’t trust them and vice versa.”

Participants also shared that trust in their polyamorous did not required perfection. They expressed awareness that mistakes happen, and they are able to build trust with this knowledge. Steven said of his wife “I trust her not to hurt me intentionally” and said it’s “not a trust of perfection on her part, it’s a it’s going to be okay. I trust it’s gonna be okay.” Fiona shared:

“This is the first relationship I’ve ever been in where I feel like we can both screw up and neither of us are going anywhere because the other one screws up. I don’t think trust has to do with behaving perfectly for us. If it did, there wouldn’t be any, because we both have screwed up so many times and in so many different ways. I think a lot of it has to do with we’re not going anywhere, we’re gonna work it out. Even if we talk about it

and decide, ok we need to end it, no one is going to abandon the other one. It's gonna be something that we agree on."

Both Franklin and Carl stated that trust was very important, however, they don't think about it as much. Franklin compared trust in his relationships to air, as it is something that you take for granted. He stated:

"Trust is very important but it's irrelevant. We're trying to get to this deeper functional level where it's not even something that you have to question or articulate. It's like the air you breathe on a football field. You don't think about the air you breathe playing football. You think about the environment, the players, and the rules, the equipment. You don't think about the air. The air is just there and you can't play football or any other sport without air, but it's taken for granted. It's so basic to what you're doing that it doesn't need a lot of accommodation or attention."

Carl said about the importance of trust "it's important, but it's something that I don't think about anymore." He said that it was essential early in the relationship, but now it is so understood that he trusts his partner completely, but does not really think about it. However, Brenda stated that she believes that trust is sometimes taken for granted in monogamous relationships, but in her relationship with Bobby, she is constantly working to actively create and maintain trust.

Of those participants who had past monogamous relationships, several stated that trust was much more difficult in those monogamous relationships. Lana stated that she and her husband have "exponentially more trust and communication and honoring than in any other relationship [she's] been in previously." She also said that she believes that

“polyamorous relationships by their very nature have health built into them because of the transparency.” Several shared that this was due to the covert nonmonogamy that occurred in those relationships. A few said that they have never had a monogamous relationship where their partner was truly monogamous.

Fiona shared that trust for her was about feeling safe emotionally, and she did not have this sense of emotional safety in her monogamous relationship, and therefore felt that she did not have as much trust. She said:

“I didn’t trust him, because I felt like because he was so conflict avoidant, if I had a problem, and I went to him, and I was upset, he’d just shut down. So there wasn’t a lot of trust, because I felt like I was having wounds ripped open over and over again.”

Furthermore, she shared that trust in her current polyamorous relationship was enhanced greatly by the emotional openness in contrast to her monogamous marriage.

Several participants also shared that trust was easier, because the need to hide other attractions or romantic partners is not a feature of their relationship as it is in monogamous relationships. Karen shared, “I think that’s one of the number one appeals to me about polyamory that there’s not a whole lot of reason to lie or to deceive.”

Similarly Sandra stated, “trust issues are cut in half at least, because there’s not that elephant in the room always.” They stated that having the option to have other partners eliminated the reason that many people are dishonest in their relationships, making trusting their partner much easier.

Some also mentioned having a sense of security that their partner did not feel trapped or obligated to them, and therefore, any time they spent together was truly

something they could know their partner wanted, which provided a sense of security.

Fiona stated:

“I think I have a sense of security from the fact that I’m not trapped and my partner is not trapped, and everyday we’re together is a choice, and that we both want to choose to not disappear on each other. That gives me a lot of security.”

Similarly, Karen shared:

“I feel like there’s something about polyamory that, when somebody is spending time with me in a monogamous committed relationship, there’s always the thought in the back of my mind of are they with me at this point because they are obligated to be with me, and in my polyamorous relationships, they’re never really obligated to be with me. So, if somebody’s with me, I’m just left to assume that they’re with me because they just want to be with me, and I find that far more satisfying.”

An interesting aspect of trust is the idea of transitioning in relationships. Several participants discussed how when monogamous relationships end, the individuals tend to go their separate ways and cease to have any relationship at all. However, in polyamory, there is room for a relationship to shift into something else. Hayden discussed having several relationships that ebb and flow and sometimes change, but always are maintained as committed friendships. Natalie also expressed a strong commitment in her relationships, but stated

“I can’t promise that our relationship’s always going to look this certain way romantically, because I believe people change and they need to change, but what I’m committing is that even if that changes, or we can’t be a romantic entity, I will always

commit to giving them priority and importance in my life, and that's worked out really well.”

Perhaps only the sexual component ends or perhaps there is more ebb and flow and it is tolerated well, in part, due to the connections that each person may have with others.

Franklin mentioned that one of his romantic relationships has recently transitioned from a romantic and sexual relationship to a friendship. For some, this seems to provide an added layer of trust and security, because knowing that the relationship can change without the abandonment and ending gives them more security that they will not be abruptly left alone. Elsa stated that it was an adjustment to learn the idea of transitioning, but it has given her greater security in her relationship with her husband, knowing that “relationships don't always have to end, they can kind of transition into something else.”

Both Grace and Fiona expressed an appreciation of the security of knowing that the ending of a relationship would be a conversation and mutual decision, rather than something that they may feel blindsided by or abandoned by their partner.

Research questions seven, eight, and nine were about the balance of power in these relationships. Question number seven asked: What is the power balance like in these relationships? Question number eight asked: Specifically for women, is there a difference in their sense of empowerment between their polyamorous relationships and their monogamous ones, if they have practiced monogamy in the past? Question number nine asked: How does a sense of empowerment impact their commitment to the relationship? There was a focus on whether women felt more empowered, as was suggested by some of the previous research (Sheff 2005; Wolkomir 2015). The women in

this study did seem to feel empowered. They were strong women who felt that their role in their relationship was equal and they did not seem to feel any sense of identity conflict when dealing with negative reactions or stigma related to their polyamory. Brenda described an incident of sexual harassment in her workplace, and the confrontation that she had where she told her boss directly that this was unacceptable, which resulted in cessation of this behavior. It is unclear from this study whether strong women are drawn to polyamory or if polyamory empowers these women. However, Lisa did talk about how she has “found [her] voice” since she started engaging in polyamory. She discussed being taught while growing up that she should be submissive to men, and since entering this lifestyle, she has learned to stand up for herself and say what she wants and doesn’t want. She also gained confidence from using her own voice as well as the positive attention she receives from others. It seems for her, this may have been empowering.

Wolkomir (2015) found that individuals in nonmonogamous relationships were less likely to prefer traditional gender roles, as the challenging of monogamy norms may lead to the challenging of gender norms as well. She found this to be true of both men and women in nonmonogamous relationships. The results of this study support this assertion, as the men in this study seemed to prefer relationships with strong women and did not have a preference for traditional gender roles. Both Franklin and Bobby self-identified as feminist, and they all seemed to understand that women who were polyamorous preferred men who were more open minded when it comes to gender roles. Bobby did share that when a couple is involved with swinging only, versus polyamory, that gender roles are sometimes more traditional. In these situations, the couple is often

looking for only one other female to engage in a sexual relationship with as well. However, in polyamory, there seems to be an expectation of more equality. Magnus stated he prefers “strong, bright women” and these women, as he put it, would not put up with traditional gender role expectations. Carl and Mark both discussed ways in which they felt gender roles were even reversed at times in their home. Neither of these men felt this was any indication of a problem or any need to assert their masculinity through traditional gender roles.

When discussing gender roles, most of the participants reported flexible or less traditional gender roles in their relationships. Even when the roles were somewhat traditional, it was clearly by choice and circumstances and not due to societal rules about how relationships are supposed to work. This was true in household responsibilities, decision making, and dating as well. Karen talked about the differences between going on a date with a man who is monogamous and one who is polyamorous. She said with the former, there are assumptions that he will pay and that he will initiate any physical contact if it is to happen, whereas with the latter, these things are discussed openly, rather than assumed. She reported that she thought she “put off” some monogamous men by initiating physical contact, as they understood this as their role and not hers.

One exception to this was a female participant in a polyfidelity triad. Rose reported that gender roles were more traditional, and it seemed her expectations of her male and female partner were more in line with traditional roles as well. She shared that her female partner, and “girls in general,” were gentle and nurturing, and that her male partner was more dominant. Other than in this situation gender roles seemed very

flexible. Additionally, several of the female participants shared that gender roles in their past monogamous relationships, when they had them for comparison, were more traditional than in their polyamorous ones.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a discussion of the results. The first section includes a summary of the key findings. The next section is a discussion of the implications of these findings. Following this is a discussion of the limitations of this study. In the final section, suggestions for future research are presented.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

There were a total of 22 participant interviews included in the analysis for this study. There were fifteen women, six men, and one participant who identifies as nonbinary. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 years old. Most had some college education. There were several emergent themes in the data. The following is a discussion of these themes as well as a discussion of the results relevant to the research questions.

While there was some difference in the exact language used to define polyamory, there was a great deal of consistency in the definition offered by the participants whether they stated that they used the term for their own relationships or not. The key components are the desire and/or ability to have multiple relationships of a romantic and/or sexual nature with honesty and openness with each partner. The participants were resistant to traditional labels. Several mentioned how they did not believe that the language used for monogamous relationships were appropriate for describing their own relationships.

Commitment was high for all of the participants in this study. However, there were some differences in how commitment was defined. Most participants seemed to define commitment as the idea that they are planning to stay in their relationship. Nonetheless, a few of the participants used different definitions, which included a commitment of time, an emotional commitment, and for one participant in a polyfidelitous relationship, commitment referred to romantic and sexual exclusivity within her triad.

Religion was a topic mentioned by several participants. A few of the participants mentioned that they are Pagan, and they also stated that they believe there is an overlap between this religion and polyamory. A few other participants mentioned coming to polyamory after leaving the religion in which they were raised, which led to questioning of some of the values that they believed to be a part of the religion, including monogamy as the only way to have romantic relationships.

There appears to be a substantial polyamorous community, and most participants are a part of the community in some way, whether it be online or in face to face groups. Furthermore, a few defined as poly activists and discussed their efforts to educate others about polyamory. Therefore, the research that suggests that polyamorous people tend to lack community and activism does not seem to be relevant for these participants (Noel 2006).

Some benefits of polyamory that these participants shared were more support including emotional support, help raising children, and sometimes financial support, and companionship. There also appears to be benefits related to health and safety with

openness about sexual activity and regular testing and discussions regarding safer sex. Additionally, some female participants discussed added safety measures of keeping a primary or well-known partner informed when they go to meet someone new. The biggest challenge seems to be time and energy, as it takes more of each to maintain additional relationships. Another challenge is dealing with the jealousy that someone in a monogamous relationship may be able to ignore or try to avoid due to the lack of alternate partners. Finally, a significant challenge for some of the participants is the impact of the stigma. While this does not appear to impact their own sense of self or confidence in their relationships, it does raise concerns including legal concerns with respect to family and concerns about how others may react.

With respect to the research questions, the first three questions were related to identity conflict. The first question was: Do individuals who practice polyamory experience identity conflicts related to their polyamorous lifestyle? The second question was: Is this different for men as compared to women? The third question was: If so, what coping mechanisms do they use to deal with these conflicts when they arise? The question of identity conflict seems to be more complicated than was suggested prior to the interviews. None of the participants expressed identity conflict that has come out of negative reactions causing them to doubt themselves. However, several mentioned aspects of identity conflict when they tried to be monogamous in the past. It is possible that identity conflict is something that occurs prior to moving into polyamory rather than is created by interacting with others while living a polyamorous lifestyle.

Several participants suggested that trust in their polyamorous relationship was stronger than in their monogamous relationship. There were several reasons for this including the openness and transparency in polyamory, the security of knowing that other attractions and relationships were not something that had to be hidden, and the ability to be honest with their partners. With respect to power balance between genders, there do not appear to be traditional gender roles in these relationships, with the one exception of the polyfidelitous triad. Some discussed some traditionally gendered activities, but even when these were present, it was a decision rather than due to tradition.

IMPLICATIONS

The integration of exchange theory and identity theory provides a useful framework for looking at intimate relationships, and particularly, consensually nonmonogamous relationships. There are elements of both theories that are relevant and useful in this approach, and the integration of these elements may offer a valuable approach for understanding polyamory.

With respect to exchange theory, there are several components that are relevant to intimate relationships. The focus in this study is on trust, power balance, particularly with respect to the balance of power as it relates to gender roles, and reciprocity. It was expected, based on research on exchange theory, that trust may be built in these relationships based on the lack of obligation and the willingness to reciprocate without the rule to do so (Collett 2010). Also, it is expected that power may be more balanced in a situation where available alternative others are a component of the relationship. Finally, factors such as trust, reciprocity, and a balance of power can impact satisfaction and thus,

commitment in a relationship. According to some research, this may be especially true for women, who may be more empowered in polyamorous relationships than in monogamous ones (Sheff 2005).

Identity theory also offers valuable insight into intimate relationships, particularly consensually nonmonogamous relationships. According to this theory, there are three main types of identity: role, social, and person identities. Role identity relates to who you are in contrast to another. For example, you are only husband to wife, or teacher to student. Social identity refers to the groups to which one is a member. Person identity is similar to the concept of personality. Identity conflict is an experience that occurs when one believes his or herself to be something and then receives feedback from others that they do not see him or her this way. For example, you think you are a good and moral person, yet your friends or family tell you or react to you as if they think you are not. This can cause confusion and conflict for the individual, as we rely on others in helping to understand our own identity.

Given that identity, particularly role and social identity, is developed in context with others, these identities are formed and maintained in exchange relationships with other people. It is likely that those who are closer to an individual have more impact on their sense of identity than strangers. Furthermore, identity conflict may cause distress and a reaction of trying to avoid this distress could lead to less satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships. Therefore, the integration of features of these theories can provide a useful approach when attempting to understand romantic relationships.

The findings of this study suggest some mixed results for the proposed modified exchange/identity theoretical approach. There were several predictions based on this model. First, with respect to trust, it was predicted that trust would be different in polyamorous relationships compared to monogamous relationships, since trust is defined primarily in monogamous relationships by sexual and romantic exclusivity, which is not required or expected in polyamorous relationships. It was predicted that trust may be stronger and easier to build in polyamorous relationships than in monogamous relationships. This prediction was supported by these interviews. Several participants stated that trust was different in their polyamorous relationship compared to past monogamous relationships. Additionally, these participants also suggested that trust was stronger and was based on much more than sexual exclusivity.

Another prediction was that power balance, particularly power related to gender differences, was expected to be different in polyamorous relationships. It was predicted that gender roles would be less traditional and power would be more balanced in these relationships compared to monogamous relationships related to the opportunity to seek out resources such as affection and companionship with alternate others in addition to the primary partner. This prediction was supported by these findings. Participants reported much more flexibility with respect to gender roles in their polyamorous relationships when they were different from their monogamous relationships. Power with respect to chores, decision making, and initiation of sexual activities was balanced for these participants in their polyamorous relationships.

As a result of the greater level of trust and power balance, commitment was expected to be higher in polyamorous relationships due to a higher level of satisfaction related to these factors. This prediction was also supported, as all of the participants reported a high level of commitment to their partners, particularly their primary or committed partners. Additionally, the vast majority of the participants reported an increase in the satisfaction they have in their relationships related to being polyamorous.

Finally, it was predicted that polyamorous individuals may experience more identity conflict based on the stigma attached to polyamory. It was suggested that this may be minimized by a greater sense of polyamory as part of one's person identity (more of polyamory being something one is rather than one does). Additionally, it was predicted that there may be a difference between men and women with respect to the level of identity conflict experienced based on negative attitudes towards women with respect to sexual behavior. This prediction was not supported by the findings. It does not appear that being polyamorous results in a sense of identity conflict for these participants. This appears to be consistent for both men and women.

When examining the issue of trust, it was expected that trust may be more easily developed in nonmonogamous relationships, where exclusivity was not a requirement, and therefore, reciprocity was more voluntary. Participants who had monogamous relationships to compare reported more trust in their polyamorous relationships for a variety of reasons. Some referred to the lack of fidelity in their monogamous relationships, others referred to open communication and its impact on emotional safety, and others referred specifically to the availability of other opportunities for affection

creating a sense of security. There was some fear on the part of some participants in a monogamous structure that their partner may feel the need to lie about other attractions or partners. Polyamory helped to alleviate those concerns, since there was room for dialogue about these things. It is true that some people who are polyamorous still like their partner but may still break the trust of their partner. However, the structure does not require secrecy around issues of outside attractions or relationships in the way monogamy does.

Another benefit to trust in polyamorous relationships was related to the idea of transitioning. Participants reported feeling safer in their relationships, because they did not believe they would be blindsided by a decision to end the relationship out of a desire for a different partner. Relationships could change form or could change structure to include other partners. There were other options rather than simply ending the relationship, and this provided security for some of the participants. Two female participants also commented on the security that came with knowing if someone was with them, it was out of choice rather than obligation, which gave them greater trust.

These findings support the ideas of exchange theorists about trust being built more effectively out of voluntary reciprocity than obligation or contract. Trust is a significant factor in the satisfaction that people have in their relationship, and is thus related to commitment in the relationship as well. Additionally, all of the participants reported a high level of commitment in their committed relationships, which could be related, in part, to the high level of trust they are able to experience.

It is possible that the openness and option to engage in relationships with other partners is a feature of this difference in trust. One participant who reported being in a

polyfidelitous triad, which means that neither she nor her partners have the option to see other people, discussed having some issues with trusting her male partner. She stated that she trusted her female partner completely, but she had concerns that her male partner may be less likely to turn down an opportunity to have a sexual relationship with another woman if such an option presented itself. Given that this was different from the other participants in their discussion of trust, perhaps there is a difference for those who have agreements about fidelity. Overall, the prediction about trust being stronger and easier to develop in polyamorous relationships was supported by the findings of this study.

With respect to power balances in these relationships, there seems to be a good deal of balance. Gender roles were quite flexible. In some cases they were more nontraditional and all were negotiable. Therefore, power did not seem to be related to gender. In the example of the triad, there did seem to be a bit of an imbalance in that the participant seemed to be very committed to each of her partners and them to her. However, there was more difficulty in her partners' relationship with each other. Because of this, she seemed to find herself somewhat in demand with both of them wanting time alone with her, and this caused some of their conflicts in their relationship. Again, this is a situation where the option for other partners is not there. Therefore, it is possible that some of the difficulties with power balances in monogamy are also present in polyfidelitous relationships as well.

In addition to less traditional gender roles, participants expressed a great deal of choice and freedom in their relationships. This suggests that power is balanced between the individuals in polyamorous relationships, as no one seems to experience a sense of

being stuck in a relationship or any fear that their partner feels this way. In fact, some participants suggested this as a benefit of polyamory, the sense of not feeling trapped in a relationship. These results support the prediction that power, and in particular power between men and women, is more balanced in polyamorous relationships.

With respect to commitment, it was predicted that commitment would be high due to the satisfaction that would result from a higher degree of trust and power balance in polyamorous relationships. All of the participants expressed a high level of commitment in their relationships. Given the opportunity for relationships to transition when necessary, individuals in polyamorous relationships are able to maintain relationships even if the romantic or sexual component is no longer a part of their dynamic. This seems to also contribute to a higher level of commitment. Therefore, the prediction about commitment was supported by these findings.

While no participant reported having any identity conflicts that result from being polyamorous, some reported a sense of identity conflict within monogamy. They did not feel as though they fit into a monogamy framework well, and for some, this was confusing given their lack of exposure to any other type of relationship structure at the time. It is possible that this concept is more prevalent for those considering polyamory or those who are monogamous in title but unfaithful in those relationships than it is for those identifying as polyamorous.

There was an emphasis by some of the participants on a need to be self-aware. Furthermore, there was a sense of accepting other people where they were and relationships for what they were. Expectations were not rigidly set for how people or

relationships should be, which seemed to give them some peace when dealing with people who might react negatively to their choices. Some participants were quite uncomfortable with traditional labels and had found new ways of communicating about their relationships. Given the impact of a label on one's sense of identity, this makes sense for people who feel they live in a culture where their love style is not only the wrong one, but is perhaps not even a real style or real relationship.

While most participants stated that others' reactions had little to no impact on their comfort with being polyamorous and many were open about it with all of their friends and family, there were some who reported the need to keep it a secret at times. Some reported keeping it a secret at work out of fear of losing their job, and some reported having actually had negative consequences at work after sharing in the past. Others reported keeping it secret from family, and some from anyone who they did not feel would be accepting. This does not necessarily indicate an issue with identity conflict, as they did not report any sense of shame or low self-esteem about their polyamory. However, a couple of these participants did express that they wish they could be more open with some people, particularly family, as it may enhance those relationships to do so if they would be more accepting.

Being polyamorous certainly impacts both role and social identities. With respect to role identity, instead of being your partner's one and only partner, you may be a primary partner, or you may be a secondary partner, or you may even be one of many other types of partners depending on the structure and dynamics of your particular relationship. This is clearly very different from monogamous relationships where if you

are the girlfriend, there is one boyfriend, or if you are the wife, this is to one husband. Without a script for how this works, this can be a challenge to navigate, hence the need for excellent and open communication among polyamorous partners. Additionally, social identity is altered by the groups to which one is a part. Most of the participants had, at least, a group of polyamorous friends. Some had changed their religion, and many belonged to polyamorous communities either online or face to face or both. These are groups that you would only belong to if you are in consensually nonmonogamous relationships, and therefore, this part of your identity is certainly impacted by polyamory in this way.

It is possible that person identity is also impacted by polyamory. One participant reported not feeling as good about herself or as “bright” when she was in monogamous relationships, and several others reported that monogamy never really fit them. Therefore, it is possible that engaging in polyamorous relationships is freeing for some or perhaps even alters their person identity in some ways as it seems to have done for the female participant who claimed to have found her voice and become empowered in this lifestyle. However, participants were mixed fairly evenly between stating that polyamory was something that they did or something that they are.

The availability of community support both online and in face to face groups may help to counter any sense of identity conflict that arises early for those engaging in polyamory. It is also possible that, while identity conflict does not occur as a result of being polyamorous, it may be something that leads some people to polyamory. Future research is needed in this area. However, the prediction that people engaged in

polyamorous relationships would experience more identity conflict as a result of this lifestyle was not supported by the findings.

These results suggests some support for utilizing this modified exchange/identity approach to looking at polyamorous relationships. Identity is formed, at least in part, through interactions and exchange relationships with others. Given the importance of issues such as trust and power balance on the satisfaction and commitment of individuals in their relationships, these are important features in understanding any relationship. An important theme that emerged from these interviews was in the way polyamorous partners are very actively engaged in their relationships. Some described feeling like they were on “autopilot” in monogamous relationships. This was seen as due to the fact that there is an understood script for how monogamous relationships work that is lacking in polyamory. Therefore, the only way to be polyamorous successfully and happily is to be very engaged and communicate about everything. This communication is essential in an exchange relationship where everyone needs to be aware of expectations and agreements and feelings that their partners are having. This approach helps to emphasize the importance of this feature of consensually nonmonogamous relationships.

It may also be useful to integrate elements of feminist theory into this approach as well. Sheff (2005) suggested that polyamorous relationships may be more balanced with respect to power between men and women. This is supported by these interviews. The women in this study seemed to feel empowered in their relationships, and some of them discussed how this was different from their previous monogamous relationships.

Additionally, the men in this study also stated that they preferred more balance with respect to gender roles and power in their relationships.

In addition to the theoretical implications of these results, there are some practical implications as well. From an interdisciplinary perspective, these results are useful for couples and family therapists who may work with people in polyamorous relationships. Understanding how commitment may be defined differently is useful when working with individuals in alternative romantic relationships. Additionally, understanding how relationships transition and how the structures are varied is also helpful. Finally, appreciating the impact of the stigma and how this may impact children in poly families is an important topic for family therapist. Efforts should be made to help poly families to deal with this stigma and understanding their own family dynamics given that it may be different from what they hear at school or see on the television.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study is in the development of the questions. There was a focus on a structure of relationship that consisted of a primary relationship with secondary relationships based on limited literature related to the possible structures. There are an infinite number of possible configurations and structures and it is possible that the questions were limited in their scope missing some important themes due to this focus.

A related limitation is the lack of focus on religion and family and children. First, several participants mentioned religion at some point. This is clearly a topic of importance and there were no questions related to this topic. Some participants discussed

leaving their church before becoming polyamorous. Some discuss their current religion and the religious preferences of some of their friends and family. Future research should include questions about religion and its importance for polyamorous individuals.

Another topic that was mentioned by several participants was the raising of children. Several participants had children who were aware of their polyamorous relationships and some were very close to their partners. Participants were asked about their awareness of available resources to help them navigate the challenges in polyamorous relationships, but a specific question about any available resources for helping children to understand their family structure and more also how to manage stigma when confronted with negativity from others outside of their family. This may be an important issue for poly families. Many discussed the benefits of having extra loving adults to help with child rearing. Some had some serious concerns, however, over the potential legal consequences or the possible shaming of their children by other people.

Other limitations are related to methodology. First, the interview process may produce a social desirability limitation, where participants wish to present themselves and/or their relationships in a favorable light. This may be particularly relevant for people who are in relationships that they believe have a stigma attached to them, as they may wish to avoid contributing to the negative attitudes towards polyamory. Second, there is the potential for researcher bias. The preconceptions of the researcher of polyamory as a relationship style for couples with extradyadic romantic and/or sexual relationships may have limited the questions in the interview. Additionally, as a married mother with an

educational background in clinical psychology, it is possible that the focus of follow up questions was impacted by researcher bias and understanding of romantic relationships.

Additionally, while this process provided an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of how these relationships function and allowed participants to share information that otherwise would have been missed in a survey method, the results are not generalizable to all polyamorous individuals. This is due to the relatively small sample size. It may be useful to attempt a larger survey study asking about some of the specific emergent themes. It may also be useful to conduct a study comparing polyamory to monogamy with respect to some of these topics.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As stated previously, future research should address religion and children of poly families. There were also a number of other emergent themes that could be explored in future research of polyamorous relationships. First, it seems possible that polyfidelitous triads may have structures that share more in common with monogamous couples than some other polyamorous groups. Rose mentioned that she has had trouble finding community. She said she finds groups that say they are for committed polyamorous relationships, but then she finds that they are open to other partners. For her, commitment meant fidelity, which could be different from the way other polyamorous people are using the term. She also said a few times that her relationship was “just like any other hetero, monogamous family.” Other polyamorous participants did not seem to share the view that their relationships were similar to monogamy. Finally, some of her concerns about trust stemmed from the agreement about exclusivity, which is similar to an issue

that monogamous couples may have. It would be interesting to know if this was an isolated difference or if those in closed poly relationships do share more in common with monogamous couples.

An important area for future research is to conduct further testing of this integrated theoretical model. This study demonstrates its utility in studying polyamory, and perhaps intimate relationships in general. Further studies should be conducted to determine its value in studying romantic relationships.

Another area for future research is in the overlap with polyamory and certain other groups. A few participants commented on the overlap with the Pagan community. Several participants mentioned the overlap with the BDSM community, which some find problematic, while others, particularly those who also overlap in their personal interests, discuss it in a more matter of fact way. One other group with whom polyamorists overlap is the LGBT community, and some reported feeling unwelcome by some in this community for political reasons. It would be interesting to know the extent to which these groups overlap and whether there truly is this dissonance between them or if this is a perception that may be exaggerated.

Language and definitions are very important in understand other people and their perspectives. It is interesting that many were resistant to labels and traditional titles, and there were several words that seem only applicable for polyamory. It is important to understand this language and allow people to self-define and self-identify with things in order to truly hear their experience. A more thorough discussion of linguistics and

development of a polyamorous vocabulary would be useful for future researchers to explore.

Finally, the topic of the empowerment of women in polyamory is an interesting one in need of more focus. The women who chose to participate in this study did seem like strong women with a strong sense of self and equal standing in their relationships. It is unclear which comes first, polyamory or empowerment, but there does seem to be a relationship. As mentioned, one female participant did discuss feeling empowered by polyamory, but the others did not talk about such a transition, so it is unclear if this was the case for them as well.

One other possible direction for future research would be to limit the study to one type of structure and learn more in depth information from those individuals. This study was intentionally broad in its inclusion of anyone identifying as polyamorous or consensually nonmonogamous. However, there is a significant amount of variety in the different types of relationships represented by these participants. It may be helpful to focus in a bit more narrowly in selection criteria in future research. In particular, it may be useful to look at polyfidelitous relationships in a separate study, as there seemed to be some differences in this relationship compared to the other relationships in this study. However, there was only one such relationship, so it would be useful to look further into this to see if this differences actually exists.

Future research should examine some of these issues with a focus on race or ethnic differences. It is possible that identity conflict and stigma may be experienced differently by those in other minority groups, such as minority racial groups. It would

also be interesting to know if there are any differences based on geographical location. Most of these participants resided in Texas. Some mentioned the differences in where they currently live and where they grew up related to how conservative the areas were. Perhaps there are some challenges specific to certain groups related to geography.

Polyamory, as defined by these participants, is an ability and desire to have more than one romantic and/or sexual relationship simultaneously with honesty and consent from all of those involved. It is important to note that not all of these relationships have a sexual component. One participant shared that one of her long term relationships was with an asexual female partner. There can be romance and intimacy without sex, just as there can be sex without romance or intimacy. Utilizing the modified exchange/identity approach to examining these relationships can provide a good framework for understanding how consensually nonmonogamous relationships function. This integrated theory can also help to understand trust and how identity is developed and maintained in relationships. This understanding is useful for researchers as well as those working with individuals in polyamorous relationships.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
<http://www.twu.edu/irb.html>

DATE: June 3, 2016
TO: Ms. Rebecca Hilving
Sociology & Social Work
FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: *Approval for An Integrated Theoretical Approach to Exploring Polyamory (Protocol #: 18971)*

The above referenced study has been reviewed and approved by the Denton IRB (operating under FWA00000178) on 6/3/2016 using an expedited review procedure. This approval is valid for one year and expires on 6/3/2017. The IRB will send an email notification 45 days prior to the expiration date with instructions to extend or close the study. It is your responsibility to request an extension for the study if it is not yet complete, to close the protocol file when the study is complete, and to make certain that the study is not conducted beyond the expiration date.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Celia Lo, Sociology & Social Work
Dr. James L. Williams, Sociology & Social Work
Graduate School

APPENDIX B
Interview Schedule

Early Experiences

1. How do you define polyamory?
2. When did you start to think that monogamy may not be the only choice of relationship style for you? How did you think others would react to these thoughts?
3. Please talk about what alternatives you saw to monogamy at the time.
4. Please describe when you first started engaging in polyamory.
5. When did you first identify as polyamorous? Do you see polyamory as who you are or what you do or both?
6. Please talk about the reactions of those with whom you have shared about your polyamorous relationships. Are there people in your life to whom you have not shared that you are polyamorous?
7. Please talk about what, if any impact others' reactions have had on your decision to be polyamorous. Please talk about how their reactions impact your comfort with being polyamorous.
8. Please talk about what impact polyamory has had on your relationships with your friends. What about with your family members?
9. Please talk about your first experience in a polyamorous relationship and how you transitioned from monogamy to polyamory.

Current Relationship

1. Describe your current relationship(s). Is there a primary dyad? If so, what is your role in it?
2. Please talk about any specific rules and/or guidelines that you have in your relationship(s) with your partner(s).
3. Please talk about how your significant other engenders trust with you and vice versa. Please talk about any differences in trust in your polyamorous relationship(s) as compared to your monogamous relationship(s). How important is trust in your relationship(s)?
4. What do you see as some of the benefits of a polyamorous lifestyle? What are some of the challenges?
5. How do you cope with the challenges? Please talk about any available resources that you are aware of to help navigate relationship challenges for nonmonogamous partners.
6. Please talk about how differences in the availability of partners impacts the quality of your relationship.
7. Does polyamory ever come up in your conflicts with your partner as a source of conflict? If so, please describe how this comes up during conflicts.
8. Please talk about the gender roles in your relationship(s). Please talk about how these are similar or different from gender roles in your monogamous relationships.
9. Please talk about any differences in level of desire for sexual intimacy between you and your partner(s). How does this impact your or your partner's satisfaction in your relationship? Please talk about how the availability of alternative partners impacts the satisfaction of your relationship when there are different levels of desire for sexual intimacy between you and your partner.

10. Please describe how being polyamorous impacts your and your partner's satisfaction in your relationship(s)?

11. Please describe the level of commitment that you perceive you and your partner have in your relationship(s).

Demographics

1. In what year were you born?

2. Please tell me about where you live currently. Please talk about the area in which you grew up.

3. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If so, how many?

4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

5. What is your current occupation?

6. What is your current relationship status?

7. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

APPENDIX C
Informed Consent

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: An Integrated Theoretical Approach to Exploring Polyamory

Investigator: Rebecca Hilving, MS rhilving@twu.edu 940-898-2052
Advisor: James Williams, PhD jwilliams2@twu.edu 940-898-2051

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study for Ms. Hilving's dissertation at Texas Woman's University. The purpose of this research is to explore polyamorous relationships and the roles of trust, power, and identity in commitment and satisfaction in these relationships. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as someone who has been in a polyamorous relationship within the last ten years.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study you will be asked to spend one to two hours of your time in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask you questions about your relationships. You and the researcher will decide together on a private location where and when the interview will happen. You and the researcher will decide on a code name for you to use during the interview. The interview will be audio recorded with your permission and then written down so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said. If you do not consent to the audio recording, notes will be taken during the interview instead. In order to be a participant in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age or older and be (or have been) involved in a polyamorous relationship.

Potential Risks

The researcher will ask you questions about your engagement in polyamory. The researcher will also ask you questions about how polyamory has affected your relationships with your family and your friends. A possible risk in this study is discomfort with these questions you are asked. If you become tired or upset you may take breaks as needed. You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to talk to a professional about your discomfort, the researcher has provided you with a list of resources.

Another risk in this study is loss of confidentiality. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. The interview will be held at a public location that you and the researcher have agreed upon. A code name, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will know your real name. The tapes and the written interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher and her advisor will hear the tapes or read the written interview. The tapes will be erased and the written interview will be shredded within 1 year after the study is finished. The results of the study will be reported in scientific magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.

Initials

1 of 2

Another risk in this study is the loss of anonymity. A code name, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will know your real name. The results of the study will be reported in scientific magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.

An additional risk is the risk of coercion. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are welcome to withdraw your consent at any point, in which case we can stop immediately at any time.

An additional risk of this study is your loss of time as a result of your participation. The interview will take a maximum of two hours and will take place at a time most convenient for you. If you feel tired or need to stop the interview early, you can withdraw from the study at any time without question or penalty.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Participation and Benefits

Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you would like to know the results of this study we will mail them to you.*

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

Signature of Participant

Date

*If you would like to know the results of this study tell us where you want them to be sent:

Email: _____

or

Address: _____
