

Institute for Clinical Social Work

Sociopolitical Meanings of Polyamory

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Abstract

Normative monogamy has been largely unquestioned in psychoanalysis and social work as well as in larger society. Recent increases in visibility of non-monogamies and a burgeoning polyamory movement necessitate a critique of mononormativity including a consideration of the socio-political meanings of polyamory. This study explored the socio-political meanings of polyamory as conceptualized by participants using a case study methodology. Four participants who identify as polyamorous and as thinking about polyamory within its larger socio-political context were interviewed multiple times. The interview data was analyzed within each case for categories of meaning and then across cases for common themes and divergences. Negative case findings were also reported.

Seven common themes were found across the cases. Findings included that participants view polyamory as marginalized, but less so relative to other forms of oppression. Participants also noted intersectional links with other marginalized identities such as race, class, gender and trans issues, and sexuality. They all viewed challenging compulsory monogamy to be inherently political and for each of them the personal and the political were inextricably interwoven. Participants felt that raising consciousness of oppression is imperative and all spoke about the importance of community. Another major theme was about the vicissitudes of the discourse around polyamory. Findings were used to inform implications for how psychoanalytic clinical social work might engage with polyamory in theory, clinical practice, and in further research.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this psychoanalytic case study is to develop an in depth understanding of the socio-political meanings of polyamory to those who are living it and to use this understanding to inform a psychodynamic consideration of polyamory/non-monogamies that is inclusive of socio-political context. This was achieved through multiple interviews with four participants who identify as polyamorous and think about the socio-political realm as it pertains to polyamory. A case study method following Tolleson's (1996) pattern of analysis was used.

The term polyamory is a mélange of the Greek *polys* (many) and the Latin *amor* (love) (Klesse, 2007). There are discursive disagreements within the polyamory community around an accurate definition. For the purposes of this study, polyamory will be defined as follows:

“At its most basic, the concept of polyamory stands for the assumption that it is possible, valid, and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person” (Haritawarn, Lynn & Klesse, 2006, p. 58).

and

“Polyamorous people openly engage in romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships with multiple people simultaneously. Polyamory differs from swinging with

its emphasis on long term, emotionally intimate relationships and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygamy” (Sheff, 2005, p 2).

Significance for Clinical Social Work

Historically, clinical social work has been interested in the radical deconstruction of phenomenon and processes and has stressed the importance of viewing people, phenomenon, and processes within their natural environment and within socio-political context. It is important to view polyamory in this way to avoid de-contextualizing and de-politicizing the issue. The clinical social work and psychoanalytic fields have historically struggled between operating the margins and being agents of social change versus being tools of society, used to reinforce social norms. (Altman, 1995; Aron & Starr, 2013; Cushman, 1995; Layton, Hollander, & Gutwill, 2006; Tolleson, 2009). It is my hope that studying the socio-political meanings of polyamory within its socio-political context will encourage clinicians to keep this perspective in mind when encountering clients considering or living polyamory or other alternatives to monogamy.

Statement of the Problem to Be Studied and Specific Objectives to Be Achieved

The relational landscape in the United States has been undergoing a steady shift in recent years as evidenced by a decrease in marriage rates, an increase in divorce rates and increased support for gay marriage. While exact numbers are not known, there also

appears to be an increase in people practicing various forms of non-monogamy, including polyamory. Increasing numbers of people are choosing to live a polyamorist lifestyle, viewing it as a valid relationship choice with many potential benefits. However, mononormativity, the view that monogamy is inherently biological and what is “normal,” is deeply ingrained in our society, creating the strong possibility that polyamory will be viewed as indicative of pathology. Psychoanalysis and clinical social work have long struggled with a conflict between radical deconstructionism and understanding individuals and phenomenon in their socio-political contexts or, at times, enforcing social norms and viewing anything outside such norms as “perversion.”

History.

Polyamory is a relatively recent term, being thought to have been created in the early 1990s. However, the practice of non-monogamies, open or otherwise, have been practiced for as long as monogamy has been practiced, including in Greek and Roman cultures. Some, to be discussed in the section on monogamy, contend that non-monogamies pre-dated the practice of monogamy (Ryan & Jetha, 2010) In the United States, non-monogamy has often been associated with religious or spiritual groups, communes, or community-oriented groups. The Oneida community was a Christian commune that practiced group marriage from 1848-1879. Polygamy was officially practiced in the Mormon faith until bigamy was outlawed in the 1960s after which it was only practiced by splinter groups.

Hippie culture of the 1960s and 1970s celebrated free love and sexual revolution as part of an ideology of community and cooperation. Communes and other counter-

culture groups practiced consensual non-monogamy or group marriages at this time, including the Kerista commune. Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse (2006) make reference to the feminist movement sparking, “polyamorist values”-- caring, intimacy, honesty, equality, non-exclusivity and relational autonomy. Non-monogamy was central to the ideology of sexual liberationism. Various social movements drew on “feminist, gay, and socialist critiques of the family, monogamy, and private property” (p. 58). They note that polyamory is a result of the meeting of several sexually emancipatory discourses.

In the 80s and early 90s there appeared to be a cultural backlash against non-monogamy and sexual liberationism. In part due to the AIDS epidemic and in part due to increased conservatism. However, there has been a resurgence of non-monogamy in the past 10 years. Because of stigma and isolation, much of the polyamory community interaction initially took place on the internet but many large cities now have active in person polyamory social and support groups. There is also an increased presence in mainstream media, both in print articles, documentary style television, and fictional film and television depictions. Along with this growing visibility has come an increase in self-help literature. In addition, some popular dating websites have included non-monogamy and/or polyamory as options in profile classifications.

Current statistics.

Due to a dearth of large scale quantitative studies, no reliable census, lack of a single definition of polyamory (who to count), and the fact that many polyamorists are closeted (making them hard to find), it is difficult to determine demographics of people

having polyamorous relationships (Sheff, 2014). Sheff cites Cookson for providing “the most reasoned estimate”:

It appears that sexually non-monogamous couples in the United States number in the millions. Estimates based on actually trying sexual non-monogamy are around 1.2 to 2.4 million. An estimate based solely on the agreement to allow satellite lovers is around 9.8 million. These millions include poly couples, swinging couples, gay male couples, and other sexually non-monogamous couples (Sheff, 2014, para 2).

Literature Description.

Despite growing cultural visibility and academic contributions from the fields of sociology, anthropology, gender studies, psychology, and family therapy, psychoanalysis and clinical social work have had little to say about non-monogamies, including polyamory. Contributions from therapists tend to be in the self-help genre or focused on working with issues such as jealousy in family therapy (Barker & Landridge, 2010). It is my assertion that psychoanalysis does itself and our patients a disservice by not considering polyamory and engaging in the larger discussion of non-monogamies. Samuels (2010) writes,

It is significant that sex outside of relationship is largely untheorized by analysts and therapists—or, if there is a theoretical position taken, it is invariably in terms of psychopathology, of an alleged fear of intimacy, problems in attachment (‘ambivalent attachment’) and relationship, perversion and so on” (p. 219).

The majority of the existing literature on polyamory comes from the fields of sociology, sexuality, and gender studies. The literature thus far has been largely celebratory or critical of polyamory, which misses the tensions and ambiguity inherent in struggling through a new discourse (Barker & Landridge, 2010). Many others point out that the literature thus far has been power evasive, de-contextualizing and de-politicizing polyamory. Wilkinson (2010) outlines how popular narratives of polyamory echo many of the sentiments of monogamy; the valorization of romantic love and the focus on individualism. She claims that by reducing non-monogamy to an issue of “private choice and individual freedom,” the personal has replaced the political (p. 245). Wilkinson (2010) states, “These popular definitions of polyamory are therefore easily appropriated and assimilated into existing narratives about love and hence are potentially easily marketed and commodifiable” (p. 246). Wilkinson parallels this with the gay marriage movement, “Both, it is argued, aim for inclusion and recognition into a system based on inequality and privilege. A more radical approach would aim to challenge the very system that these privileges are based upon” (p. 247).

Wilkinson advocates for placing non-monogamy into a broader queer political agenda, one that challenges mononormativity rather than viewing it as a personal sexual preference. She discusses how an assimilationist strategy, while understandable, de-politicizes non-monogamy and limits its potential to be an agent of structural change. Wilkinson suggests that a critique of mononormativity is necessary, as well as a distinction between those who simply reject monogamy but may still practice normative lifestyles and those who reject mononormativity. She further suggests that any

discussion of ‘understanding’ polyamory that fails to critique mononormativity risks othering polyamory by placing it as something that must be explained and excused.

Current literature and discussions of polyamory are deficient in regards to this topic. The societal pull to de-politicize and de-contextualize has led to a discussion about every aspect of polyamory except the political, thereby rendering it powerless as an agent of social change. If the focus remains on relationship issues such as “jealousy” (something polyamorists claim to be not near as serious an issue as monogamists and those practicing monogamy would like it to be) and the specifics of the day to day workings of polyamory then polyamory is easily commodified and superceded into a mononormative, capitalist society.

Objectives.

I studied people who are polyamorous and view it, at least in part, as a subversive social movement, rather than as solely a personal choice. Put another way, I wanted to talk to polyamorists who consider the politics and social construction of intimacy and wish to subvert mononormativity, not just assimilate.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To understand the socio-political meanings of polyamory from the perspective of those who are living it and view it in these terms.
2. To contribute to and expand upon the existing literature on polyamory from a psychodynamically informed, clinical social work perspective that is non-pathologizing.

3. To engage in a critique of mononormativity, as summarized by literature and as conceptualized and lived by participants.

It was my aim to explore the socio-political meanings of polyamory as conceptualized by those living it; “expert” perspectives, so to speak, on what considering polyamory in this way looks like and how it is lived. I chose participants who specifically identified as thinking about their polyamory within a socio-political context in the hopes that their perspectives could connect socio-political discourse with psychodynamic thought and practice. The data from interviews was analyzed for themes within each individual case and across the sample with the objective to use common themes to inform psychodynamic thinking and practice in a useful way that is inclusive of the socio-political context. To be clear, the field of psychodynamic clinical social work and the larger context of normative monogamy were the objects of my analysis. Subjects’ conceptions of the socio-political meanings of polyamory and their lived experiences were intended to inform the analysis.

Research Questions to Be Explored

I was specifically interested in the distinction that Wilkinson points out, “between those who simply reject monogamy but may still practice normative lifestyles and those who reject mononormativity,” and aimed to obtain a better understanding of this distinction from the participants. In taking up a consideration of the socio-political meanings of polyamory and how that might inform psychodynamic thought and practice. I felt it important to start with an understanding of if and how people living polyamory conceptualize it socio-politically. I wanted to learn about the socio-political meanings of

polyamory to those who are living it. I wanted to talk to people who are living polyamory and view it, at least partly, as socio-political resistance, a push back against normative social practices, specifically mono-normativity. More specific questions are: Do some polyamorists conceptualize polyamory as political resistance? If so, how do they conceptualize it and what does it mean to them? What does it mean to them to reject or challenge mono-normativity? How do they live those values? What are the tensions inherent in such a discourse? How do they navigate in a world intent on de-contextualizing and de-politicizing?

Definitions of Major Concepts

Polyamory: See p. 1.

Monogamy: The state or practice of being married to only one person at a time or the state or practice of having only one sexual partner during a period of time (2016 in Merriam Webster.com)

Mono-normativity: “The dominant discourse of monogamy which is reproduced and perpetuated in everyday conversation and saturates mainstream media depictions.”

(Ritchie and Barker, 2006).

Social Construct: an idea or notion that appears to be natural and obvious to people who accept it but may or may not represent reality, so it remains largely an invention or artifice of a given society (encyclopedia.com, 2016).

Philosophical Framework

The philosophical framework of this study is social constructivist. A social constructivist paradigm argues that there is no objective reality, that reality is instead socially constructed, that “facts” are theory and value laden. The epistemology of constructivism is subjectivist and interpretivist (Guba, 1990; Ponterotto, 2005), meaning that subjective interaction is the only way to uncover a person’s subjective reality. Methodologically, constructivists proceed with hermeneutic and dialectical process of subjective inquiry, meaning that the aim is to produce the most accurate, informed, and sophisticated constructions possible (Guba, 1990). Additionally, my interpretive perspective is influenced by critical theory which, “...highlights ways in which actors come to terms with and struggle against cultural forms that dominate them (Creswell citing Morrow and Brown, p. 28). I am also influenced by the interpretive perspectives of contemporary relational psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theories.

Foregrounding

I contend that polyamory is a valid relationship choice with as much potential for fulfillment or defense as any other relationship choice, including monogamy. The psychoanalytic and clinical social work fields have been largely silent on the topic thus far. I believe both fields are at their best when they operate from the margins and, as such, I am interested in taking up polyamory (itself marginalized) and considering it without de-contextualizing or de-politicizing it and without collapsing either into pathology or valorization. I decided to approach this by studying how polyamorists themselves conceptualize it socio-politically.

I embarked on this project as someone skeptical of mononormativity and the many constraints and qualifiers place on love and intimacy. While these questions have always been in my mind to one extent or another, a change in my personal circumstances vigorously reignited such questions for me personally. It was my curiosity towards my own initial reactions to polyamory that caused me to take up my own beliefs about monogamy and normativity; where those beliefs came from, and if they really were my beliefs, in fact, or simply my own unconscious normativity at work. I was also aware of my client's struggles with such issues and began to listen to them in a different way. In the course of this theoretical exploration, I have also explored polyamory personally to varying degrees.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

Exploring polyamory, or the broader umbrella of non-monogamies, necessitates the deconstruction of normative monogamy. Furthermore, the discourse on non-monogamy intertwines with many other themes and discourses including; morality, power structures, mental health, sexuality, feminism, pleasure, fidelity, and perversion. Because the related themes are so expansive, I have only chosen a few to be explored in more detail here. I will be using critical social constructivist theory, gender/gender queer theory, and psychoanalytic relational therapy (inclusive of both the former) to explore the discrete ideas in this study. My goal is to shed some light on the issues inherent in exploring normativity and raise questions regarding normative monogamy.

This literature review has four main parts. As this is a social constructivist project, I will first briefly discuss social constructivist theory and how it frames the project. I will then review the current literature on polyamory, the majority of which comes from sociology, gender studies, and queer theory. Next, I will explore the history of mononormativity and how psychoanalysis has nearly unquestioningly perpetuated this discourse. Finally, after accounting for the small body of psychoanalytic literature that questions or even considers monogamy, I will look at how postmodern feminist and relational psychoanalytic theorizing each provide helpful lenses through which to

consider polyamory. These theories are specifically useful in that they acknowledge and uncover the existence of normative processes and how such processes are created and perpetuated, therefore lending themselves to problematizing mono-normativity.

Social Constructivist Theory

It is my contention that normative monogamy is a social construction. At its most simple, this means considering that, rather than being inherently biological, our belief that it is 'normal' for humans to be monogamous is a complicated social construction that has been so powerfully interwoven into our psyche that it is rarely questioned.

Constructivism rejects the positivist belief that there is an objective reality that can be observed and known outside of the observers influence. Part of the postmodern movement, constructivism views reality as socially constructed and informed by a person's culture, gender, background and experience. Lincoln (1990) describes the constructivist paradigm as being, "interactive and subjectivist" (p. 78), meaning in part that reality is seen to be subjective and co-created. Guba (1990) also discusses the constructivist paradigm, asserting that facts are inherently theory and value laden so, therefore, there is no way to discover "how things really are" because, "Reality exists only in the context of a mental framework (construct) for thinking about it" (p.25). Therefore, many constructions of reality are possible. There is no single "reality." Reality itself is a social construction. He further explains that if reality can only be viewed through a theoretical lens then it cannot be free from values as a positivist paradigm suggests.

Layton (1998) makes the important point that while postmodernism and relational psychoanalysis may conceptualize the subject differently, they are interdependent, meaning that culture impacts psychology. Culture and subjectivity are mutually reciprocal in their construction—norms are constructed and in turn construct the self. Normative constructions are often created, perpetuated and maintained by those who hold power in societies, to which institutions serve as a tool. Put another way, our ideas about what is normal or good regularly take hold because they serve the interests of those who hold more social power. These ideas are institutionalized, taken for granted, and therefore largely unquestioned. However, as I will attempt to show, when questioned and examined more in depth, normative monogamy seems to fall apart or not exist outside of these constructions. (Dimen, 2001, Flax, 1994, Layton, 1998).

Polyamory

I provided a lengthy definition of polyamory in the introductory chapter of this study (see pages 1-2) and the history of polyamory. However, it is worth mentioning that the polyamory community, as evidenced in the literature, is split regarding whether other forms of non-monogamy such as polygamy and swinging are encompassed within a polyamory umbrella (Klesse, 2006, Sheff, 2005). Many authors feel that the power imbalance and patriarchy inherent in polygamy are in direct conflict with polyamorous ideals of equality and that it therefore does not fit into the umbrella of polyamory (Sheff, 2005). Swinging is often thought to be separate from polyamory because encounters are generally more transient and casual in nature. There appears to be a large consensus that what separates polyamory from other forms of non-monogamy is the emphasis on

equality, honesty, emotional intimacy and longer term commitments. These discursive delineations can be problematic in other ways, as will be discussed in a later section.

The majority of academic literature about polyamory and non-monogamies comes from the fields of sociology and gender and sexuality studies. Barker and Langdrige (2010) review the literature on non-monogamous relationships, specifically polyamory, swinging, and open gay relationships. The authors categorize the literature into those that are ‘celebratory’ of non-monogamies and those that are ‘critical’ of it. They note that there has been an increase in interest in non-monogamies both in popular media and in the academic literature in the past 10 years. They begin by considering the sociocultural shifts implicating the interest in consensual non-monogamies and criticisms of mononormativity. Citing Foucault, they note that key arguments in the critique of mononormativity include that monogamy is isolative and oppressive of women and keeps all from wider social engagement. They quote Robinson (1994) writing that monogamy, “‘privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance’” (p. 144). Much of the literature presents non-monogamies as, “‘potentially liberating, cooperative and empowering alternatives to the ownership, possession, and even violence which is located within traditional monogamy’” (Mint, cited in Barker & Landridge, 2010, p.8).

Critics of non-monogamies demonstrate how normative discourses are also prevalent in non-monogamies. Others have criticized the self- help literature as ‘setting up new regimes of normativity’ and ignoring the social construction of emotions and desires. Others point out the neglect of intersectionality in non-monogamous texts. The

authors importantly point out the limitations of strongly celebratory or critical analyses, noting that in many studies, participants present ambiguous views as they contend with the tensions inherent in working through a new discourse.

Much of the research on non-monogamies focuses on rules, contracts and boundaries employed to manage relationships (p. 18). “Generally the aim of such arrangements is to ensure the stability and security of the relationships and to minimize painful emotions notably jealousy” (p.18). Examples are boundaries around specific types of sex activities or other ways of demonstrating some form of specialness of the (primary) relationship with an idea of keeping some things sacred. Early research focused on how couples in such relationships presented themselves. Recent developments in research have included polyamorous families and the ‘cross-over between consensual non-monogamies and other identities/communities’ (bi sexuality, asexuality, goths, geeks, pagans, differently abled individuals) (p. 19).

The authors cite new research and imagine future directions of research being focused on the distinction between monogamy and non-monogamy and if the distinction is even meaningful or useful. They note also note pulling from queer theory, post-structuralism, Buddhist, anarchist, and existentialist philosophies to consider relationships as fluid rather than fixed, static selves to multiple subjectivities

In their introduction to a journal issue focused on polyamory, Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse (2006) consider the political contexts in which polyamory arose from an “intersectional perspective,” a concept, “that draws on black, postcolonial and anti-racist feminist theories, which highlight the need to examine different axis of oppression, especially gender, race/ethnicity and class, as inter-related rather than separable divisions

or contradictions (p. 56). The authors make note of the importance of positionality in theorizing intersectionality asking, “How are sexual subjects such as people in non-monogamous relationships positioned along multiple axes of oppression?...How, in other words, the politics of difference and the body play themselves out in non-monogamous relationships?” (p. 57).

They make reference to feminism, stating that the movement sparked, “polyamorist values” of caring, intimacy, honesty, equality, non-exclusivity and relational autonomy. Non-monogamy was central to the ideology of sexual liberationism. Various social movements drew on “feminist, gay, and socialist critiques of the family, monogamy, and private property” (p. 58). Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse (2006) note that polyamory is a result of the meeting of several sexually emancipatory discourses and state:

These new narratives of emotional and sexual abundance and collective care may provide real alternatives to capitalist and patriarchal ideologies of personal ownership and scarcity. Polyamorist writing and activism contribute to the expansion of the languages and skills that are necessary for realizing cultural change in our emotional and sexual lives (p. 59).

They point out that that the literature thus far has been “power evasive,” not examining how, for example classist ideology has constructed the sexuality of the working class woman, ‘bodyistic representations of race, disability, gender, etc.,’ how dominant identities that have thus far defined polyamory. They note the majority of the literature thus far has been self-help or esoteric. They point out three problems with the self- help genre; setting up their own ‘regimes of normativity,’ endorsing abstract

individualism over critiquing the structural power relations around race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class and thirdly, they posit a universalistic model that, ‘ties in with an imperialistic narrative as the West as sexually and emotionally advanced and superior’ (p 59).

Wilkinson (2010) outlines how popular narratives of polyamory echo many of the sentiments of monogamy; the valorization of romantic love and the focus on individualism. She claims that by reducing non-monogamy to an issue of “private choice and individual freedom”, the personal has replaced the political (p. 245). Wilkinson (2010) states, “These popular definitions of polyamory are therefore easily appropriated and assimilated into existing narratives about love and hence are potentially easily marketed and commodifiable” (p. 246). Wilkinson parallels this with the gay marriage movement, “Both, it is argued, aim for inclusion and recognition into a system based on inequality and privilege. A more radical approach would aim to challenge the very system that these privileges are based upon” (p. 247).

Wilkinson advocates for placing non-monogamy into a broader queer political agenda, one that challenges mononormativity rather than viewing it as a personal sexual preference. She discusses how an assimilationist strategy, while understandable, de-politicizes non-monogamy and limits its potential to be an agent of structural change. Wilkinson suggests that a critique of mononormativity is necessary as well as a distinction between those who simply reject monogamy but may still practice normative lifestyles and those who reject mononormativity. She further suggests that any discussion of ‘understanding’ polyamory that fails to critique mononormativity risks othering polyamory by placing it as something that must be explained and excused.

Monogamy

So, what is monogamy, anyway? On its face it seems so simple, yet whenever it is examined, a cohesive definition seems to be elusive. Furthermore, how did monogamy come to be such an ingrained unquestioned norm (and often a moral imperative)? In this section, I will look at the conventional definitions of monogamy and how they are problematic. I will then present a history of monogamy and one theory of how monogamy was socially constructed.

Simple definitions of monogamy include:

- the state or practice of being married to only one person at a time
- the state or practice of having only one sexual partner during a period of time

(Webster's dictionary)

More complicated definitions discern between marital (includes all forms), social (co-habitation, includes sexual and genetic), sexual (sexual exclusivity), and genetic (evidenced by paternity) monogamy. Generally, when the term monogamy is used it is in reference to marital and social monogamy.

In a mixed methods study of 200 married, heterosexual participants, Frank and DeLamater (2010) explored how couples with various sexual exclusivity practices define, negotiate, live, and justify the boundaries of fidelity. For the purposes of their study, they defined monogamous colloquially, "to denote sexual exclusivity for the duration of an intimate relationship, not in the anthropological sense" (p. 11). Their wide range of findings are too lengthy to cover here but it is worth mentioning that how couples define

monogamy, fidelity, transgressions, cheating, etc. varied so widely among respondents that cohesive definitions were impossible. From definitions of cheating that include fantasizing about someone outside of the relationship to “new monogamy” and “old monogamy” (neither of which are clearly defined), the authors point out the endless complexity of intimate relationships. Their primary finding, the only constant, was that of fluidity in how couples define and negotiate their arrangements and the meaning of these arrangements. What couples call monogamous varies widely, “For other individuals, the term ‘monogamous’ denoted an attitude that went beyond the absence or presence of sexual exclusivity.” These couples practices varied widely, including consensual and secretive non-monogamy, “but they identified as monogamous anyway” (p. 18). The authors conclude that our conceptions of monogamy must be refined, not simply held as a static, unexamined entity against which we study non-monogamies. These discursive issues will be discussed in a later section. Next, I will look at the construction of normative monogamy.

Mononormativity

Until recently, monogamy as a norm, or at least an ideal, has been rarely questioned in Western culture or in psychoanalysis. Similar to other aspects of sexuality, non-monogamy, particularly infidelity seems to hold a particular, unexamined, preoccupation in popular culture (Frank & DeLamater, 2010; Samuels, 2010). In their popular and critically acclaimed book, “Sex at Dawn,” Ryan and Jetha (a psychologist and psychiatrist respectively) convincingly present how a mononormative narrative was constructed and then effectively dismantle this narrative. Their well-researched theory

posits that monogamy is not biological, that Darwin was a product of his Victorian era where monogamy was already the moral imperative and norm and this influenced his “scientific” findings. They present strong evidence that before agrarian times, when humans were tribal hunter gatherers and much more communal, sexual relations were also communal. From this perspective, it was not only “natural,” for people to be communal in every way, including in sexual relations, it was beneficial for the tribe as a whole to not be concerned with paternity. That a child could be the genetic material of multiple men served as an imperative for everyone to take care of that child.

Furthermore, there is evidence that many of these societies were less patriarchal, trending towards equal or even matriarchal arrangements, and, therefore, women were certainly not viewed as property and had the same amount of sexual subjectivity and choice as men. Ryan and Jetha (2010) contend that monogamy developed as a more common practice around the time societies became less communal, when private property came into play with agrarian culture. With a move away from community towards individualism and property, paternity becomes more important. After all, who would land property and the benefits reaped from said land be handed down to? Women and children were also subsumed as possessions, property. It is well documented that religion supported these early capitalistic leanings and that the two served to support and perpetuate the other. As Freud and Darwin were contemporaries, it is not surprising that Freud also supposed monogamy as the norm. The next section will explore the history of mononormativity in psychoanalysis.

Monogamy and Mononormativity in Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis has had next to nothing to say about polyamory. Monogamy was already firmly established as the norm in Freud's time and has rarely been questioned by psychoanalytic thinkers. So much so, that there is scant writing about monogamy itself (nothing to be questioned) much less non-monogamies. Historically, basically anything other than procreative, heterosexual, monogamous sex was labeled a perversion (Dimen, 2001). It is easy to see how well these ideas line up with the power structures of patriarchal religion and capitalism, as mentioned above. In this section, I will outline the received theory of normative monogamy in psychoanalysis and explore the few exceptions by psychoanalytic authors who discussed, questioned, or came close to questioning monogamy.

While Freud wrote that there is an amount of bisexuality or pansexuality in all of us and cautioned against pathologizing homosexuality, his theory of 'normal' sexual development was both heterosexual and monogamous. Or, at the very least, sex outside of marriage was simply not spoken about. Children of heterosexual, married couples choose a similar life path; this is what was considered normal. Any deviation from this path would suggest pathology. Freud did not spend any time questioning monogamy, it was simply a biological (and moral) assumption.

Mononormativity has been firmly entrenched and largely unquestioned since Freud's time. One notable exception was a paper presented by Horney (1928) entitled, "The Problem of the Monogamous Ideal," in which she deconstructs the conflicts inherent in monogamy. She opens with, "For some time past I have asked myself with growing astonishment why there has as yet been no thorough analytical exposition of the

problems of marriage, although assuredly every single analyst would have a great deal to say on the subject..." (p.1). Horney notes both the wish for monogamy and the forces with which that wish comes into conflict, both of which Horney viewed as springing from the Oedipal situation. Horney (1928) first outlines the "fundamental psychical situation implied by marriage," which is the Oedipal situation. She notes that all marriages are entered into with unconscious wishes stemming from childhood, the id wishing for fulfillment of these fantasies and the super ego prohibiting them, leading to difficulty sustaining sexual interest in one's partner that co-exists with affection. She then shifts to the problems of monogamy, first stating, "The possibility that other human beings may become the objects of our love is, we must admit, always there, for the impressions of our childhood and their secondary elaborations are so multifarious that normally they do in fact admit of the choice of widely differing objects" (para 18). She examines both the demand for monogamy and the forces with which it comes into conflict, primarily our "polygamous" impulses and how they conflict with internal and external demands for monogamy by a partner and society. Horney states:

Where a dissociation in the love-life persists, the subject will be compelled to centre tender feelings on objects other than those of sensual desire. We can easily see that the retention of any of these infantile conditions is unfavourable to the principle of monogamy: rather, it must inevitably drive the husband or wife to seek other love-objects. These polygamous desires then come into conflict with the partner's demand for a monogamous relation and with the ideal of faithfulness which we have set up for ourselves in our own minds (p. 4).

Horney notes that one way we deal with the anxieties inherent in marriage is by exaggerating feelings of love or clinging to the idea, “long after it has ceased to be a living force.” She elaborates on this defensive process, stating, “...it probably springs from the need for synthesis with which we are familiar in the ego and to which we may well ascribe a falsification of the facts for the sake of demonstrating a single-minded attitude in a relation so important in life” (para 8).

Horney (1928) seems ahead of her time in acknowledging that marriage is a social institution and that, as such, to approach it from a solely psychological standpoint is “hampered.” While skeptical that the institution of marriage would ever come to an end, she recognized that the structure of society will affect our wishes for monogamy. She also notes the impact of religion on the super ego, that matrimony is an unconscious renewal of the fourth commandment, requiring that we exaggerate love and suppress hatred. “Naturally, then, the retention of love or the illusion of it serves an important economic function and that is why it is so obstinately striven after” (para 9).

Horney notes that clinging to a monogamous ideal has costs,

“It is a matter of frequent observation that after marriage people sacrifice a considerable part of their personal development, whether in the sphere of their professional life or in that of character or intellect” (para 10).

She goes on to state that monogamy is more of a wish than the norm:

While as a wish it is understandable, is as a demand not only difficult to enforce but also unjustifiable; and further, that it represents the fulfilment of narcissistic and sadistic impulses far more than it indicates the wishes of genuine love.

Citing Rado, she writes that the formation of this ideal provides the ego with a “narcissistic insurance,” under cover of which it is free to give play to all these instincts which otherwise it would condemn, and at the same time is raised in its own estimation through the sense that the claim it advances is right and ideal” and later, “In fact, we might describe the demand for monogamy as an insurance against the torments of jealousy” (p. 6).

So firmly entrenched is mononormativity in psychoanalysis that Kernberg (1995) wrote an entire book entitled, “Love relations: Normality and pathology,” in which he does not discuss, much less question monogamy. However, he (unwittingly, I’m sure) lays building blocks for what could be the consideration of non-monogamy as a way to strengthen intimacy. Kernberg (1995) writes that the capacity for mature sexual love requires the integration of aggression in the couple’s sexual relationship, in their object relations, and the establishment of a joint ego ideal. In discussing these areas he writes that integration in these areas, “guarantees the depth and intensity of the relationship and yet may threaten it.” He goes on to describe, basically, that if individuals continue to grow psychologically, they are likely to be attracted to others who match their current state of being. Along with Mitchell (see below), he notes that regardless of how auspicious and safe a relationship might seem, things change and change upsets equilibrium. He writes:

The very fact that the requirement for a deep and lasting relation between two people is the achievement of a capacity for depth in relation to one’s self as well as to others—for empathy and understanding, which open the deep pathways of the unspoken multiple relations between human beings—creates a curious

counterpart. As one becomes more capable of loving in depth and better able to realistically appreciate someone else over the years as part of his or her personal and social life, he or she may find others who realistically could serve as an equally satisfactory or even better partner. Emotional maturity is thus no guarantee of nonconflictual stability for the couple. A deep commitment to one person and the values and experiences of a life lived together will enrich and protect the stability of the relationship, but if self-knowledge and self-awareness are deep, each partner may experience, from time to time, a longing for other relationships (the potential of which may be a realistic assessment) and repeated renunciations. But renunciation and longing also may add depth to the life of the individual and the couple, and the redirections of such longings and fantasies and sexual tensions within the couple's relationship may constitute an additional, obscure, and complex dimension of their love life. In the final analysis, all human relationships must end, and the threat of loss and abandonment and, in the last resort, of death is greatest where love has most depth; awareness of this also deepens love" (p. 63).

It does not seem to occur to Kernberg to consider the possibility that non-monogamy at such times might possibly benefit the individual and the couple but it does not seem like too far a leap from his statements. His only solution is renunciation. Anything else appears unthinkable. One might wonder why the need for all of these security/insurance enactments (Pansulla, 2016, personal communication).

Fromm and Mitchell do not directly write about monogamy or problematize it and both wrote about love relations primarily non-academically, but their ideas are

nonetheless worth noting. Nowhere does Fromm (1956) directly discuss monogamy, but he appears to indirectly grapple with it. He discusses issues of freedom in relationship and sexuality being a creative, unifying act. He discusses the social construction of intimacy, specifically how capitalism and commodification influence our intimate relationships. He illustrates his point by noting how the ‘ideal’ partner qualities have shifted throughout the times.

On one hand, Fromm espouses mononormativity stating, “In erotic love there is an exclusiveness which is lacking in brotherly love and motherly love,” (p. 51). However, he then goes on to problematize not monogamy but the ‘misinterpretation’ that monogamy means possessiveness. He also cautions against couples shutting out the rest of the world, calling this egotism “Erotic love is exclusive, but it loves in the other person all of mankind, all that is alive...Erotic love excludes the love for others only in the sense of erotic fusion, full commitment in all aspects of life—but not in the sense of deep brotherly love.”

Fromm points out the defensive nature of monogamy, “If a person loves only one other person and is indifferent to the rest of his fellow men, his love is not love but a symbiotic attachment, or an enlarged egotism. Yet most people believe that love is constituted by the object, not by the faculty. In fact, they even believe that it is a proof of the intensity of their love when they do not love anybody except the “loved” person” (p. 43).

Fromm situates his arguments within the socio-political context of his time. He comments to the premise of this dissertation, stating that love itself is a subversive act:

People capable of love, under the present system, are necessarily the exceptions; love is by necessity a marginal phenomenon in present day Western society. Not so much because man's occupations would not permit of a loving attitude, but because the spirit of a production-centered, commodity-greedy society is such that only the non-conformist can defend himself successfully against it. Those who are seriously concerned with love as the only rational answer to the problem of human existence must, then, arrive to the conclusion that important and radical changes in our social structure are necessary, if love is to become a social and not a highly individualistic, marginal phenomenon...Society must be organized in such a way that man's social, loving nature is not separate from his social existence, but becomes one with it (p. 123).

From Fromm's Marxist ideas of community, sharing, and freedom, one can imagine not too far a leap to a polyamorous possibility. The postmodern ideas from relational theory of a fluid, decentered self lend themselves to critique mononormativity. The fluid multiplicity, rather than fixed singularity, of the self problematizes monogamy. Mitchell (2002) also appears to presuppose monogamy in his exploration of, "Can love last? The fate of romantic love over time." He explores the dichotomous tensions of: safety/stability and adventure; the familiar and the novel; surrender and control; desire and dependency. While he assumes monogamy, it would seem some of his statements could make a case for polyamory. One can imagine that polyamorists might see the answer to his question, "can love last?" as a resounding "Yes!" and that non-monogamy has the potential to create space for holding the inherent tensions and experiencing the dichotomies that Mitchell claims to allow for lasting romance (expanding one's view on

partner, in that it is non-reductionistic, and that it allows for excitement with others and with one's primary partner).

Mitchell also points to the defenses inherent in monogamy, stating:

The great irony inherent in our efforts to make love safer is that those efforts always make it more dangerous. One of the motives for monogamous commitments is always, surely the effort to make the relationship more secure, a hedge against the vulnerabilities and risks of love. Yet, since respectable monogamous commitment in our times tends to be reciprocal, the selection of only one partner for love dramatically increases one's dependency upon that partner, making love more dangerous and efforts to guarantee that love even more compelling. So we pretend to ourselves that we have, somehow, minimized our risks and guaranteed our safety—thereby undermining the preconditions of desire, which requires robust imagination to breathe and thrive (p. 47).

Mitchell presents a sex positive view stating, "Because it provides such powerful material for emotional experience, sexual desire in humans has become our most intimate arena for personal and interpersonal expression" (p. 60). Mitchell makes statements alluding to non-monogamy but falls short of questioning mononormativity. In discussing the sexual revolution and the AIDS epidemic, he seems to suggest that if it weren't for disease, more people would practice more non-monogamy, open or not.

The identity principle was consistent with the more general conviction of the times: sexuality is central to self and happiness in life depends greatly on its expression and gratification.... Disease made sex with multiple partners too adventurous and risky for many, and stable, familiar relationships became less

expendable. Nevertheless, most of us still believe that our self is reflected and expressed in our sexuality, a belief that makes the pursuit of romance, within or outside long-standing relationships, a popular life's work (p. 42).

In his conclusion, he writes,

Passionate intimacy requires a multiplicity of connections that cannot be housed in a singular, steady arrangement. The inevitability of perpetual change over time, like Nietzsche's incoming tide, washes out all sandcastles and gives lie to aspirations of permanence (p. 200).

Samuels (2010) points out the collapse into psychopathology regarding non-monogamies after the 1960s until recent writings. He also notes the value judgements placed on relational time ('serious' means long term) and sex outside of relationship. He points out the paradoxes inherent in non-monogamy and points out that, "All relationships, regardless of composition, involve power issues and carry the potential for the abuse of power" (p. 213). Regarding monogamy and non-monogamy, he writes,

They are linked by their defensiveness against the other: monogamy defending a weak ego and low self-esteem, promiscuity as a defence against the dangers of intimacy. Of course, the defensive properties of promiscuity are much more extensively theorized by therapists than those of monogamy.... (p. 213).

Samuels points out the historical shift in politics that politicians (even in Europe now) need to maintain the appearance of monogamy. He notes that Freud used Jung's proclivities against him and that the psychoanalytic community went into overdrive to smear researchers that suggested that Freud had extra-marital sexual relationships.

Samuels then briefly forays into promiscuity as spiritual phenomenon and points to

Gross' work suggesting that, "behind non-monogamous relating we find the presence of a 'promiscuous God', one who loves indiscriminately (p. 216).

Theorizing on why psychoanalysis has so firmly held onto mononormativity, Samuels writes, "Sexual desire generates an anxiety that calls forth a certitude that is really not at all grounded" (p. 217). He elaborates, stating:

From a psychological point of view, promiscuity calls up symbolic or metaphorical dimensions of issues of freedom, differentiation from parental and family background, a new relation to the primal scene.... Re-visioned imaginatively, promiscuity holds up the promise—and the threat of an internal pluralism always on the brink of collapsing into undifferentiatedness but, somehow, never quite doing so. On a personal level, we are faced with what could be called the promiscuous task of marrying up our many internal voices and images of ourselves so as to feel integrated and speak with one voice (p. 218).

In this section, I accounted for the small body of psychoanalytic literature that directly discusses monogamy or non-monogamy. In the next section, I will look at literature from contemporary psychoanalysis that is helpful in considering non-monogamies.

Contemporary Psychoanalysis

The postmodern, constructivist movement in psychoanalysis comes mostly from feminist and relational thinkers. Postmodern psychoanalytic thought, largely under the umbrella of relational theory, provides a helpful lens with which to view ideas of normativity and those who do not conform to such normativity. The ideas from relational

theory of a fluid, decentered self lend themselves to critique mononormativity. In addition, the fluid multiplicity, rather than fixed singularity, of the self problematizes monogamy, as indicated above in Mitchell's work. Relational psychoanalytic thought questions how we sit with and think about love relations, coupling, the body, sexuality, and ideas of perversion. In this section I will review this work and how these lenses are helpful in considering non-monogamies. Finally, while there is paucity in psychoanalytic literature regarding monogamy and non-monogamy, the work that has been done on the intersection of homosexuality and psychoanalysis lends itself to considering polyamory as it is another non-normative way of being. I will briefly consider this work.

Flax (1994) brings psychoanalysis, feminism and postmodernism together and argues for a postmodernization of psychoanalysis if it is to survive. She echoes social constructivist ideas that claims of truth are, "always contextual and rule dependent" (p. 2) and that claims of knowledge cannot be separated from their contextual networks, networks that are inherently power laden. Flax notes psychoanalysis' contribution to dichotomous, normalizing categories, such as masculine-feminine, homosexual-heterosexual, good mother-bad mother, healthy-deviant. Monogamous-non-monogamous could be easily added here. Power and order are maintained by displacing inferiority and chaos into the latter of each binary. The latter of each is inferior to and dependent on the former.

Flax pithily notes that in psychoanalysis tolerance of ambiguity is a sign of psychological health and that, rather than collapsing into dichotomy, the field would do well to embrace ambiguity in its discourse as well. She writes, "The confounding of binary oppositions disrupts its potential place within discursive formations...." and,

If psychoanalysis is to survive in the postmodern world, it must broaden the topics considered legitimate within its discursive conversations. It should increase the number and kinds of partners with whom it converses and explore the implications of their knowledge for analysis (1994, p. 18).

Layton's (1998) theory of gender identity brought into conversation the work of relational analytic feminists and poststructuralist feminists, primarily Butler. Layton introduces how normative processes are at work in identity theories. Layton views identity as socially constructed *and* relational, stating,

Identities are multiple, contradictory, fluid, constructed in relation to other identities, and constantly changing—they have no essence; yet, at the same time, people in groups identify or are identified as like and they produce histories that lend their identities coherence over time (p. 4).

The primary way something becomes “normal” is that the dominant group in society assumes that what is good for them is universal and sets about creating laws, disciplines, and discourses based on this presumption. “The process involves generating narratives and images that make what is historically class-,race-,and gender-specific look universal, natural, timeless, and mythic” (Layton, 1998, p. 6). This is certainly the case with monogamy.

Layton (1998) views the self as, “neither a true self nor fully defined by existent discursive positions but rather as a continuously evolving negotiator between relationally constructed multiple and contradictory internal and external worlds” (p. 26). She goes on to elaborate on identity as inextricable from culture stating,

The meanings these bodies, temperaments, and other individual identity elements take on are not outside of culture; they are culture. Neither are they reducible to already existing discursive positions, because neither the individual nor the discursive level is static. Rather they are mutually negotiated and renegotiated. Subjects idiosyncratically make meaning of, identify with, disidentify with, take up parts of, or modify these positions in accord with ongoing relational experience (p. 27).

Layton (2002) later introduced the terms “normative unconscious” and “heterosexist unconscious” and, pulling from Butler and Foucault, tells us that conceptions of the unconscious must include the idea that conflicts are, “inextricable from the gender, race, sex, and class positions we inhabit...” (p. 218) and that we must consider the imbued conflict of these positions and the normative processes that are at work in the unconscious not only with patients but also in ourselves.

In considering polyamory, the history of psychoanalysis and homosexuality provides both cautionary tale (in its’ history of discrimination, normalizing moralism and pathologizing) and, in contemporary dialogues, a path for a way forward. Dean and Lane (2001) suggest that psychoanalysis can be helpful in thinking about sexuality in alternative ways and for challenging normativity. One strand of queer theory, as described by Dean and Lane (2001), challenges identity politics, instead advocating,

A politics based on resistance to all norms—a politics that connects gender and sexual oppression to racial discrimination, class inequities, ethnic hierarchies, and national chauvinism. Espousing a far-reaching politics suspicious of all norms, this strand of queer theory divorces sexuality from identity (p. 7).

Dimen (2001) takes up perversion from a relational lens, noting the cultural context and power structures involved in the construction of “the sex you like that I don’t” and how what is considered perverse then falls apart when examined and when the cultural context shifts. Dimen presents a compelling consideration, noting that psychoanalysis all too often enacts a perversion of its own, “to reduce your patient to a non-entity by annihilating his or her subjectivity, to confuse what the patient means to you with what the patient means to himself or herself, and thereby to violate the patient's (emergent) boundaries.” She goes on, citing Foucault, to state, “This is an act of power and knowledge not without its own pleasures.” (Dimen, 2001, p.) Whether homosexuality, perversion, or non-monogamy, the pathologizing of these ways of being (interesting that they all have to do with sex) because they are non-normative is an act of domination that maintains normative power structures.

In this section I reviewed contemporary relational psychoanalytic literature that exposes the participation of psychoanalysis in normative, regulatory practices and challenges us to consider and question the cultural, socio-political contexts in which we theorize and practice. One thing I take from this is how fragile these social constructions are under scrutiny, normative monogamy being one of them. Their coherence dissolves under examination yet we cling to maintaining these norms; perhaps out of habit, or, as I tend to think, mostly to defend against the anxiety of uncertainty. As Dimen (2001) states, “Normality marks off the territory that, if stayed inside, keeps you safe from shame, disgust, and anxiety” (p. 838). Then there is the anxiety that comes with expressing doubt, a subversive act of its own in many ways. Again, Dimen, “How can we prescribe health when we cannot know, going forward, what produces illness? There

needs to be a way to back off from the authoritarian and dominating inclinations that psychoanalysis shares with other regulatory practices. Remembering doubt is one route; writing disruptively is another (p. 856).”

Throughout my literature review on polyamory, monogamy, and psychoanalysis, a common theme of discursive issues have arisen. In the next section, I will explore the discourse around polyamory and around normativity.

Discursive Theory

If monogamy is a socially constructed norm as opposed to an inherently biological phenomenon then the discourse around it becomes of central importance. In this case, the reliance shifts to discourse rather than scientific fact. Wood outlines how discursive practices affect human understanding and behavior in a profound way, “Understanding cultural narratives as ideologies, both centered and marginal, exposes the potential of discourse to sustain prevailing social order, yet also highlights it’s power to foment change” She goes on to point out how discursive theory can add, “a distinctively critical edge to efforts to understand, critique, and alter conditions, identities, and practices that enable sexual harassment” (p. 29). Of course we can apply her statement to any normative or oppressive dynamic in society, including mononormativity. Wood’s theorizing can be used to understand, examine, critique and perhaps alter the dominant discourse that creates and recreates normative monogamy. Flax (1994) raises important questions about what is allowed, what is prohibited, what is marginalized in a particular discourse and what gets legitimized and what is de-legitimized. In this section, I will

review literature regarding discursive issues around polyamory and will conclude by further discussing the problematic dichotomization of monogamy/non-monogamy.

Based on a qualitative study of 44 participants, Klesse (2006) presents polyamory as a ‘specific—even if contested—discourse on non-monogamy’ (p. 566). Klesse identifies the dominant themes of polyamory as love, friendship, and ‘responsible non-monogamy.’ In the discourse on polyamory, love is a central theme, with or without sexual partnership. Often there is a de-emphasis of sexuality. Friendship was a theme in Klesse’s research, with participants stressing elements of intimacy, closeness, openness, and non-exclusivity. “The idea of intimate friendship (both sexual and non-sexual) has a central place within polyamorous discourses” (p. 569). “Being able to work out together the mould of each specific relationship depends on a high degree of self-reflexivity and other-directedness, two skills or qualities that have been described as core aspects of intimacy” (p. 570).

While some have an inclusive definition of polyamory, as an umbrella for diverse relationship forms, much of the discourse focuses on distinguishing polyamory as the ‘responsible non-monogamy’ (Lano and Parry, 2010) with an emphasis on honesty and consensus. Klesse writes,

I perceive honesty as *the basic axiom* of polyamory.... Other central elements of polyamory that are discussed in both the literature and the interviews are communication, negotiation, self-responsibility, emotionality, intimacy, compersion, all of which are closely linked to the dominant theme of honesty (p. 572).

Klesse points out however, that these definitions render other forms of non-monogamy as “less responsible” and problematic.

It is generally argued that the advanced ethical character of polyamory derives from its strong emphasis on love, intimacy, commitment, consensus and honesty.

As I have shown earlier, the emphasis on love often tends to go hand in hand with the de-emphasis on sexuality (p. 572).

He discusses the politics of differentiation, where polyamory distances itself from promiscuity in a categorical way, as promiscuity is a derogatory term. Many polyamorists distinguish themselves from other non-monogamies by their emphasis on few partners and an, “honest interest in building intimate long-term relationships,” comparing this to the definition of ‘polyfidelity’ (p. 574). Some within the polyamory movement, however, deplore that promoting polyamory, “as an ethically advanced style of non-monogamy creates divisions within the movement and undermines sex-radical politics” (p. 576). The discursive effect of distinguishing polyamory as a, ‘relationship ideology that is built upon the concept of love’ or ‘responsible non-monogamy’ could be that of further stigmatizing other forms of non-monogamy, following a logic that, ‘structuring what she calls the ‘desire for an imaginary inclusion’ (Klesse referencing Smith). ‘Othering’ differing forms of non-monogamy could be at work in the juxtaposition of polyamory with promiscuity. “The problematic dichotomies they see getting established in polyamory discourses are ‘the good polyamorist’/’the bad swinger’ or the ‘responsible non-monogamist’/’the promiscuous queer’ (p. 578).

Klesse (2006) stresses that polyamory is not a unified discourse, but is being organized around core themes of, “love, intimacy, honesty, communication and commitment” (p. 578). Referencing Ringer, Klesse writes,

We can understand such themes as ‘relational ideologies’, i.e. a set of normative assumptions that frame and regulate relationship practices in particular ways. As a love-and intimacy-centered discourse polyamory can be presented as being superior to other forms of non-monogamy that emphasize more strongly the pursuit of sexual pleasure” (p. 578).

He notes that feminism has been wary of the idealization of romantic love in women’s lives as it potentially validates a double standard of sexual morality. Klesse concludes with pointing out the ambivalence of the political and representational effects of the discourse of polyamory activism:

Many polyamorists see polyamory as a critical discourse that aims at diversifying intimate and sexual cultures. At the same time, polyamory discourses tend to establish exclusive standards for what should be considered an ethical sexual and relationship practice. Thus polyamory seems to be positioned ambiguously in the conjuncture of diverse normative and counter-normative discourses on sex and relationships. The central role of love and intimacy in polyamory discourses renders them vulnerable to be appropriated by normative and assimilationist ideologies (p. 579).

Ritchie and Barker (2006) argue that conventional, mono-normative language around partnering, jealousy, and infidelity are constraining to the “potentials of polyamory” (p. 1). Through analysis of websites, self-help books, and online

discussions, they noted that alternative language is emerging that offers, “new discursive possibilities for the development of polyamorous identities, relationships, and emotions” (p. 1). They explore these new discursive developments, such as, “metamour,” “poly-fidelity,” “ethical slut,” “responsible non-monogamy,” “compersion”, and offer broader conceptions of conventional ideas of faithfulness and jealousy. “Our intention here is to suggest that the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships, and emotion can enable alternative ways of being” (p. 16). That, there is power in the language we use and how we tell our stories that can contest dominant themes and potentially transform narratives of sexual identity.

Dimen (2001) takes up discursive issues around perversion, which could easily be applied to non-monogamy. First, using significant quotes from Freud and Laplanche and Potalis, Dimen writes:

Well, you can't say it much more loudly or clearly than that. Perversion is culturally constructed. By this, I do not mean the crude misapprehension that psyche is culture's clone. Rather, perversion links with a set of meanings and practices that render each other intelligible and habitable. To label something a perversion is simultaneously to identify something else not perverse.

She goes on to write:

Perversion and that inadequately specific term *normality* construct each other.

Perversion is necessary in more ways than Stoller (1975) imagined. How do you know what's normal unless you know what's not, unless you have a boundary?

How do you know what's not normal unless you know what is? In the discourse of psychosexuality, perversion and heteronormality constitute each other's limits.

Perversion marks the boundary across which you become an outlaw. Normality marks off the territory that, if stayed inside, keeps you safe from shame, disgust, and anxiety.

While it is difficult, if not impossible to discuss one without its other (in this case polyamory/monogamy) thereby participating in a dichotomous discourse, it is important to at least keep in mind the awareness that we are doing so. ‘Otherwise, we run the risk of showing how monogamy is constructed while possibly suggesting that polyamory is a “real thing.” While polyamory has been given some notice in academic disciplines and literature, it has been largely overlooked. ‘To be clear, monogamy’s privileged place in our society overshadows, negates, and pathologizes polyamory. Polyamory exists in language and enactment in relation to and in reaction to monogamy’ (Solomon, 2016). As Ritchie (2010) puts it, despite growing visibility in mainstream media that has raised awareness, “the framework within which such representation is produced remains decidedly mono-normative” (p. 47).

Monogamy as a central organizing concept arranges the noticing, naming, and performing of polyamory. So, while I may be discussing monogamy/polyamory as opposite positions of a sexual-relational spectrum, they are named and given meaning in tandem; they are co-created. That monogamy is such a central, stable concept, I argue, originates from assumptions of its natural place and social worth and that meaning of monogamy forms and informs the meaning of alternative relational-sexual forms such as polyamory. It is an ideological code (Smith, 1999; Solomon, 2016, personal communication).

Pansulla explores these “category problems” and notes how, “the binding nature of these categories can stifle and diminish.” (p. 12). As clinicians and theorists, Dimen (2001) suggests that allowing, even encouraging doubt and writing disruptively are ways to “back off” an authoritarian and dominating discourse. Pansulla (2015) adds the idea of “unhinging” from categories and agendas as a way of listening and being, that we maintain an awareness of the “scaffolding,” but allow a surrendering, to “merely court surprise” and allow for a space where, “...newly formed entities could emerge and new meaning could be derived” (p. 13).

Chapter III

Research Strategy

Introduction

This qualitative study utilized a psychoanalytic case study methodology (Tolleson, 1996) and is grounded in a social constructivist paradigm and hermeneutic/interpretivist epistemological stance. I will briefly restate the objectives and research questions of the study. I will then provide rationale for using a qualitative design, social constructivist paradigm, hermeneutic epistemology, and case study methodology. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To understand the socio-political meanings of polyamory from the perspective of those who are living it and view it in these terms.
2. To contribute and expand upon to the existing literature on polyamory from a psychodynamically informed, clinical social work perspective that is non-pathologizing .
3. To engage in a critique of mononormativity, as summarized by literature and as conceptualized and lived by participants.

The main research question explored in the study is: “What are the socio-political meanings of polyamory to those who are living it?” More specific research questions are:

1. Do some polyamorists conceptualize polyamory as political resistance?
2. If so, how do they conceptualize it and what does it mean to them?

3. What does it mean to them to reject or challenge mono-normativity?
4. How do they live those values?
5. What are the tensions inherent in such a discourse?
6. How do they navigate in a world intent on de-contextualizing and de-politicizing?

A qualitative design is not only appropriate but is the best *fit* for this study because it aims to obtain a complex understanding of a complex phenomenon within a complex context (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is inspired by the constructivist tradition and espouses the same view that there is no single objective reality and that there are multiple ways of viewing phenomena. Perhaps one of the most important qualities of qualitative research is the interest both in individual experience and how this experience is contextually embedded (Cresswell, 2007, Heppner & Heppner, 2004). Furthermore, according to Creswell (2007), “We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants of a study” (p. 40). This is especially pertinent to the study of mononormativity and the social construction of intimacy as the issue is rife with power differentials between polyamorists, who are marginalized, and the dominant culture and how the fields of psychoanalysis and social work often represent the dominant culture.

This is a social constructivist project. As introduced in the literature review, the social constructivist paradigm maintains that reality and all knowledge claims are inextricable from their socio-political and cultural context. Put another way, all knowledge claims are specific to and culturally, locally, and historically situated (McNamee, p. 17). Social constructivist research emphasizes that meaning emerges

(rather than discovered) and that reality is relational and co-constructed between researcher and subject. Furthermore, social constructivism is concerned more with issues of meaning, richness, complexity, depth, and human subjectivity than with fixed, knowable reality claims (Gergen, 1998; Hoffman, 2009). In terms of methodology, this means that the inquirer and inquired upon dyad is an interactive and co-creative process, that findings are created, not “uncovered”. Epistemologically, constructivists are subjectivists; realities exist in peoples mind so the only way that reality is accessed is through a subjective process. (Guba, 1990, p. 26). Methodologically, constructivists aim for more sophisticated constructions rather than uncovering an objective reality. Informed and sophisticated constructions are achieved by employing a hermeneutic/dialectical methodology (Guba, 1990). “The hermeneutic consists in depicting individual constructions as accurately as possible, while the dialectical aspect consists of comparing and contrasting these existing individual (including the inquirer’s) constructions so that each respondent must confront the constructions of others and come to terms with them (Guba, 1990, p.26) .

The study utilized a case study methodology. Case studies are used to study phenomenon in depth and in context (Gilgun 1994, Hoffman 2009, Yin 2009). Yin (2009) states that case studies are used when, “how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed” and when, “the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context” (p. 2). Not only are the socio-political meanings of polyamory complex and highly contextually embedded, but polyamory is certainly a contemporary, real-life phenomenon and would therefore benefit from this type of inquiry. Referring to the scope of a case study, Yin (2009) writes, “A case study is an empirical inquiry that:

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when
- The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18).

This speaks directly to the subject matter of this study and could not be more fitting.

Furthermore, case study methodology was chosen because it aims to explore a phenomenon through individual narratives and then more broadly via a cross case thematic analysis (Tolleson, 1996, Yin, 2009). My aim is to honor the best aspect of social work (person as inextricable from their socio-cultural context) and to use the themes from this inquiry to inform psychodynamic theory and practice with polyamory/non-monogamies. As many, but perhaps none so eloquently as Hoffman (2009), have stated:

In a nonobjectivist hermeneutic paradigm best suited to psychoanalysis, the analyst embraces the existential uncertainty that accompanies the realization that there are many good ways to be, in the moment and more generally in life, and the choices he or she makes are always influenced by culture, by socio-political mindset, by personal values, by countertransference, and by other factors in ways which are never truly known. Nevertheless a critical, nonconformist psychoanalysis always strives to expose and challenge such foundations for the participants' choices. The 'consequential uniqueness' of each interaction and the indeterminacy associated with the free will of participants make the case study especially suited for the advancement of 'knowledge'—that is, the progressive enrichment of sensibility—in in our field. (introduction)

Hoffman makes many important points here; about the nature of “knowledge”—ever evolving and certainly not objectivist and about multiplicity, not only of “good ways to be,” but also of influences on our choices. Case studies are ideal for studying these nuances and complexities. Hoffman (2009), references Olinsky to make the point that, from a constructivist point of view, the only “essential” is that we are embedded in sociocultural, political, and developmental contexts and case study research is uniquely situated to do justice to these realities rather than distort them. (p. 1063). Hoffman also movingly raises the question about whether our methods of inquiry, ‘cultivate and celebrate the full potential of human experience or constrict and limit it, thereby contributing to its desiccation’ (p. 1064).

Research Sample

This study aimed at obtaining a beginning yet rich understanding of the sociopolitical meanings of polyamory to those who are living it. Participants in the study were adults, age 25 or older, who self-identify as polyamorous and who self-identify as thinking about polyamory socio-politically in any way. In this study, race, class, gender, and sexual identification of the participants was open, pulling from what grounded theory calls theoretical sampling, “which involves recruiting participants with differing experiences of the phenomenon so as to explore multiple dimensions of the social processes under study.” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). While the study is case study methodology rather than grounded theory, the rationale for this type of sampling is clearly fitting.

I planned to interview five participants as this is a typical sample size for multiple case studies because the goal is to obtain depth not breadth and generalizability is not the goal of a case study sampling. Participants were recruited through organized polyamory groups including advocacy and social groups in Chicago, IL and the Denver/Boulder, CO area. Inclusion criteria for the study included:

- Adult over the age of 25
- Self-identify as polyamorous
- Self-identify as thinking about polyamory in a larger socio-political context in any way
- Agree to be interviewed multiple times and audio-taped each time

A screening interview took place by telephone to assess interest, inclusion criteria, and willingness to participate in multiple interviews. During this interview, participants were given further information about the project, intended use of data, and confidentiality. Once participants agreed to be part of the study, they were provided with an informed consent document (Appendix A) to read and sign before the first official interview. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym which was used for all identification purposes in the project. If they declined, the researcher assigned a pseudonym.

Data Collection

The study collected primarily narrative data. Data was collected through both in depth semi-structured and flexible face to face intensive interviews, which allowed

participants to talk about what feels most important to them (Yin, 2009). Multiple interviews were conducted, generally two per participant, each 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The interviews took place in a quiet, private location most convenient for the participant. The purpose of the study was reviewed with participants and a consent form (Appendix A) obtained from each participant.

My goal was to remain curious, open, flexible to new information or situations and to look for depth and latent meanings (Tolleson, 1996; Yin, 2009) Intensive, in-depth interviews allowed me to obtain rich data that furthered the understanding of the nuances of how polyamory and mononormativity are experienced and navigated by the participants. The interviews generally began with obtaining demographic information and the person's current polyamory context. I then asked about the participant's "polyamory story," as they wished to tell it. That included how they came to be polyamorous, what polyamory means to them, how they have lived polyamory in the past and how they live it presently, and the joys and difficulties they have experienced. The interviewing was then directed towards the person's thoughts and experiences in the larger, socio-political sense. While it is not possible to separate the personal from the political, I wanted to hear what arises when the socio-political was asked about directly. Specifically, as previously mentioned, I wanted to get at the following questions:

1. Do some polyamorists conceptualize polyamory as political resistance?
2. If so, how do they conceptualize it and what does it mean to them?
3. What does it mean to them to reject or challenge mono-normativity?

4. How do they live those values?
5. What are the tensions inherent in such a discourse?
6. How do they navigate in a world intent on de-contextualizing and de-politicizing?

I also took field notes during the research process, including before and after interviews, which included my own thoughts and experience of the interviews and observations that may not have been captured in audio-recordings yet may speak to nonverbal communication. This provided an additional source of data.

Data Analysis

The data obtained in this study was audio recorded and transcribed, some by the researcher and some by a professional transcription service. Data was analyzed according to qualitative and case study methodology guidelines. I then completed within case and cross case interpretive analysis (Tolleson, 1996; Yin, 2009). First, each case was described and presented individually and a thematic analysis was completed on each individual case. Put another way, the data from each case was be coded for categories of meaning. As noted above, the primary frame for analysis was social constructivist. A psychoanalytic interpretive frame was used at times when it seemed most appropriate, for instance when there was a latent theme in a case that seemed significant to bring to light or in the cross case analysis to consider the functions political discourse serves for participants. However, the primary aim of the study was not to focus on the subjectivity of participants but to understand the themes and nuances that comprise their conceptions of the socio-political meanings of polyamory. I also analyzed the data from a deconstructive stance, “a stance focused on issues of desire and power (Czarniawska,

2004 cited in Cresswell, 2007). This deconstructive stance focuses on the following areas:

- “Dismantling a dichotomy, exposing it as a false distinction” (e.g. monogamy/non-monogamy)
- “Examining Silences—what is not said (e.g. noting who or what is excluded by the use of pronouns such as “we”).”
- Attending to disruptions and contradictions; places where a text fails to make sense or does not continue” (p. 153).

After each case was analyzed individually, I then completed a cross case analysis for comparative themes and what can be learned from the sample in total with the aim that the cross case themes can be used to inform a psychodynamic consideration of polyamory/non-monogamies that is inclusive of socio-political context.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical consideration in this research was staying true to the participants experience and not trying to fit findings into any theoretical framework or my desired or expected findings. Again, as Hoffman (2009) discusses, it was my goal to encourage, cultivate, and enhance participants full experiencing of themselves, not to constrict it.

Potential risks to participants were psychological discomfort, including feeling vulnerable, exposed, or anxious resulting from sharing personal information during interviews. While not likely to be severe, it was possible that participants could have felt

these things during or subsequent to interviews. Potential incentives for participants were being able to share their polyamory story and to contribute to academic research. No other incentive was provided. The researcher's professional office telephone number was provided to each participant if they had questions during or after the study or if discomfort arises during the study. Participants could choose to leave the study at any time.

Issues of trustworthiness

In the social constructivist paradigm, the hermeneutic definition of validity is used (see p. 39). Validity is not defined in empirical terms. In case study research, what is most important will be things such as: Do interpretations make sense; are they meaningful; do they make a contribution to understanding; do they cohere; are they authentic, are they more plausible than other possible interpretations of the data, etc... Validity will be increased by the committee and member checking. Committee members will be asked to assess validity of the researcher's interpretations by comparing them to the interview transcripts. (Tolleson, 1996; Siegel, Josephs, & Weinberger, 2002). In addition, a follow up meeting was held with each participant where I asked them to review what I wrote to ensure that it accurately captured and represented what they intended to convey.

Limitations and Delimitations

Lack of generalizability is a commonly stated limitation of case study research (Yin, 2009). However, Yin also notes that in case study research, the aim is not

generalizability of populations, it is to be generalizable to, “theoretical propositions” (p. 15). Meaning, the goal is not a statistical generalization but rather to expand and generalize theory. This study aims to contribute to and expand upon theory and to account for rich subjective experiencing of subjects.

Statement on Protecting the Rights of Human Subjects

The rights of all participants in this study were protected. In the initial screening interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and was being asked of the participants should they choose to participate. This was repeated at the first interview, along with an explanation of and copy of the informed consent. Participants were also informed that they could stop the interviews at any time, refuse to answer any questions, and withdraw from the study at any time.

In order to maintain confidentiality of data, the pseudonym selected by the participant was used to identify all data. Furthermore, only the researcher and committee members, and a transcriber had access to raw data. All data has been stored on a password protected computer. Identifying information of the participants is only be available to the principle researcher. Consent forms are kept in a separate file. All raw data will be destroyed within 10 years of the completion of the dissertation.

Chapter IV

Findings

Case #1: K

“I think to be (on the) fringe is inherently political.”

K is a queer, white, non-binary trans, Christian community activist in his late 20s who lives in a large U.S. city. K uses gender pronouns interchangeably but stated that, for the purposes of this study, I should use he/his/him pronouns. K has an M.Div. in Theology from a progressive seminary school and works as a community organizer. K grew up in a middle class family with a “normative upbringing,” which he defines as:

So for me that means house in the suburbs, parents who are still married to one another, with the trappings of middle class life. So each of my parents had their own car. I had a car when I was in high school. Access to reasonably good education. Access to cable television and nice vacations, and sort of the...I think a lot of the elements of the American dream were sort of present in my childhood of, yeah, of having a comfortable middle class life and having the sense that I would also sort of be on the path to achieve that for myself.

K has identified as polyamorous since he first heard the word as a teenager but states that he had a felt sense long before then but no language for it.

Like there was nothing in the culture around me that indicated that three people could be with each other, but that kind of visceral, physical sense felt very right to

me on some level. And I started kind of like telling these stories to myself in which three people would be romantically linked to one another. And it wasn't, like at that point it wasn't like oh, this is a thing that I want for myself, this is a thing that I'm going to achieve because there wasn't any outside evidence that that was like a real thing. But these were stories I was kind of making up and working with.

And then at some point, when I was about 16 or 17, I just ran across, on the Internet, in like a forum about, I think like web comics or something completely unrelated to sexuality or anything, but I ran across information about polyamory, and I read it, and I was like oh, that just clicks and makes sense, and I totally get that and want that for my life. I was just sort of like I'm choosing this as my relationship style that I want to have going forward.

K's first adult relationships were polyamorous and it has always fit for him:

And very quickly, within a month or so of moving here, I met a guy who was married and then had another partner outside of his marriage, and his partners had other partners, and I started dating him. And so I was in a very established poly network very quickly. And it always just felt very right. And so it's just been a part of how I do relationships for essentially as long as I've done relationships.

K was thoughtful and eloquent in our interviews and presents as scholarly. He has clearly done a lot of studying, listening, conversing, and thinking about his politics, social justice, theology, his relational life and how they all fit together, which they appear to do almost seamlessly. His life seems to be lived as a statement of his entire worldview. He is at once fervent and gentle; living out loud, yet in a quietly confident

sort of way. His tight critique belies his openness. He left the impression of someone who is well integrated and non-defensive.

Despite his obvious intelligence and sophisticated discourse, he presented as very accessible, open, friendly, down to earth, kind, and gentle. The following quote from my field notes after interviewing K is indicative of what it felt like to sit with him: “I’m feeling inspired and stimulated. So many thoughts...both heartening and intimidating to be talking with someone who is so eloquent in the discourse.” I also wrote about how sitting with K inspired self-reflection into the ways in which I am steeped in normativity despite my conscious efforts to challenge these constructs, especially around gender and sexuality.

I will now present and discuss the categories of meaning from my interviews with K.

Categories of meaning.

Four main categories of meaning were evident in K’s interviews: Intersectionality, Community, Freedom, and Consciously Lived Values.

Intersectionality.

The theme of intersectionality came up in my interviews with K frequently and in several different ways. K talked about his own intersecting identities, how he sees intersections of oppression/marginalization, and the intersections of his theological beliefs, his religion, and his politics.

For K, his politics and his sexuality have always been intertwined, almost inextricably, what he called, “an intuitive sort of experience of intersectionality.” His politics and his sexuality very much inform and influence each other yet it seems that being non-conforming in his sexuality preceded and influenced his political identity. He wondered how much he would have questioned his conservative upbringing had he not been queer.

I think that as like a white middle class person with a very normative upbringing, that having a marginalized gender sexuality relationship style was really essential for me to understand things about society, you know, to understand that, you know, that the nice little American dream that we’re sold is very much a fabrication, and it’s very much not available to everyone. And to build empathy for other people’s experiences of marginalization.

So that combined with the fact that through seeking out queer people I met people who were politically radical and were also espousing leftist politics that I probably wouldn’t have run into, being [queer, I felt], sort of made me open to that.

Where I think that if I hadn’t been kind of nonconforming, on the one front I may have kind of encountered all of that and been like, eh, that sounds silly, like these people are making up problems that don’t really exist, and they’re like very extreme, and I might have been more resistant to it, had I not kind of had these personal experiences of being on the margins.

In psychoanalytic terms, it is much easier to defend against that which makes us uncomfortable using denial and minimization when it is something we don't have direct experience of.

For K, being queer, trans, and poly were all happening at the same time and were inherently political for him. He says, "I found one because I was looking for the other." When I asked him to elaborate, he spoke about trying to find spaces where he could be out and openly queer and polyamorous. He remembers that what felt to him as a very formative time of starting to identify as, "some variety of queer," was happening as the gay marriage debate was very much on the national political stage.

And so I think that's when it suddenly felt like politics was personal for me, like there was a thing that would have an effect on my life, and that now lots of politicians were suddenly talking essentially about me when they were having these conversations. And that definitely wasn't a thing I had felt before in thinking about politics.

He spoke of feeling a sense of fear and alienation both from the voices of the anti-gay Republican party and from large parts of his community and family that were, "expressing approval both of that specific rhetoric and of Republicans in general." He wondered what it would mean for him to be queer and out. He found that the spaces that felt safe and inclusive to him were also more progressive and politically involved, which influenced his thinking and identity.

And then because people who were talking about queer issues in a positive light were also espousing these other progressive political positions, I was sort of getting it all at once. And so I was only looking for the places to be gay and feel

okay about that, but then when I found this other stuff I was like, oh, I'll also just add that to my understanding of the world and how I want to identify and live it out.

In addition to concerns around sexuality and identity, K tends to think in terms of, "broader liberation issues," including class and race. For K, caring about marginalized and oppressed populations extends beyond his own direct experience. His interests are in challenging oppression and marginalization in whatever form they arise. K spoke frequently about anti-racism as an important part of his politics:

And there's a couple people I'm close to who are very smart black poly thinkers who are doing some kind of work at the intersections of racism and poly stuff, whose work I read with great interest. And so thinking about that, and then thinking also about kind of broader liberation issues and the way that race plays into the kinds of liberation that we need to be doing is a thing that's certainly very present for me.

K elaborated on this in our second interview, talking about living in a city with a large black population and how race has been entering his political thinking more and more in the last few years:

Part of why I chose the church that I'm at is because it is a church that has a lot of black members. It has a black pastor. So that's a place where I'm interacting with a large number of people who are not white. And it's become a thing that I am sort of generally more aware of, is looking at, you know, if I'm in a space and kind of looking at the racial makeup of the space is an important indicator of what might be happening in that room.

He notes how there have been increasing conversations in his polyamory circles about race and how the public face of polyamory is very white and upper middle class and how it is difficult to tell what that means since there are few statistics and those that exist are, “informal at best.” So, it is unclear how representative the white, middle to upper middle class face of polyamory is. This is discussed further in the above literature review as well as in my cross case analysis. K thinks about these things and then looks at his own life and who he is close to and why.

And also that there’s kind of interesting conversations to be had around the intersections, I think, of polyamory and race. And I’ve been sort of watching some of those conversations with interest, and thinking just as well in my personal life about who am I close to and what are the kind of demographics of the people that I’m close to. Yeah, and wanting to be aware of those things, and wanting to think about those things as a person who moves through the world and strives to be antiracist in the way that I’m interacting with others, and to resist racism as one of my political goals.

Talking about race lead K to bring up another area of intersection for him, “the theological underpinning to my politics” and to talking about his seminary degree. He went to a “progressive, politically motivated seminary.” So for him, liberation language is theological language. In our second interview, K elaborated on the intersections of theology, religion, and his politics, starting with his own experience of wanting to accept himself and his sexuality without having to renounce his Christian faith.

And as I started coming out as queer, I also kind of developed...some of my political development on that front was reconciling negative messages about

queerness that are prevalent in so many churches and that were a little under the radar, but were kind of there in my own church background, with my own kind of coming to terms with my sexuality as a positive thing.

So there was, so sort of my first, yeah, I think probably my first sense of a politics of resistance was grounded in sexuality. And the queerness and the polyamory kind of went hand-in-hand there because there's not churches that are poly positive at all. And so the fact that I was kind of coming into both of those identities and saying, you know, and I'm still going to be a Christian, and I'm still going to be able to have a religious life with this alternative sexuality was definitely a political development for me.

It was an act of resistance for K to embrace his sexuality within his religious life without refusing to leave or hide and to then find spaces where he could have both. He went on to talk further about the intersections of his politics and theology in a larger sense, which was further shaped by his experience in seminary school and now shape how he views his work as a community organizer and his own anti-capitalist political beliefs.

And so the political and the theological were just completely intertwined with each other there, and there was a really strong sense that the religious work that we're doing is meant to be directly relevant to people's lives and to the experiences of people, and particularly the experiences of marginalized people, and that particularly the role of religion is to work towards social justice.

And so there was a sense of bringing in these political movements and having them be in conversation with the theological material, and having the

religious experience feed into that working for justice and that being politically motivated. And so that's, these days, where I am.

And now about a year and a half out of seminary I'm back in kind of the community work side of things, so it's a little more just sort of background to what I'm doing, and one of the things that is my ongoing motivation for the work that I do and the ways that I'm engaged is that I have this religious perspective about the need for justice, the need for the kind of human community that I want to have where people have loving connection to one another, and people's needs are taken care of, that sort of thing.

My ethics, in general, have a sort of religious foundation to them in addition to kind of the more traditional leftist secular foundation.

Community.

Community is another category of meaning evident in my interviews with K. He talks of community as a major influence on his identity and politics, a place where he finds safety and intellectual growth, and as a value that he sees as part of anti-capitalist politics. Similarly as above, K talks about the intersection of his identities and thinking and how he found refuge, influence, and education in community.

And I think that had I not been queer, in particular, I wouldn't have questioned a lot of that. But because I was coming into this different sexuality that was not being supported actively by the society around me and starting to look around for okay, where are the places that I can think through this.

He found people that people who were open to talking about queer and poly issues were also more politically liberal. He specifically looked for a queer supportive college, which he states was “extremely progressive.”

And so just in the process of putting people around me who were going to be supportive of my sexuality, and my gender identity, and my relationship style, I had people around me who were also vocal about progressive political situations. And so I started to learn about social justice issues, and I started to learn about different political theories. And I was just like oh, that makes sense.

Later, in talking about his thoughts about people who are not politically active, he talks again about how influential community was for him:

That politics is sort of taboo for a lot of people, and so you want to sort of remove that from your choices. And for me having a community around me who are all committed to similar values is really how that sorts out.

It’s not that I kind of was like oh, hello, I’m a strident leftist polyamorist who’s just going to like walk out into the world and hope that nice things happen as much as that I was a scared queer kid who started to try to look for people who could connect to me and was kind of taken sort of like deeper and deeper into these kind of communities.

So, community doesn’t just instill a sense of belonging, it also played a big part in developing K’s identity. Here, K clearly identifies the personal, his sexuality as coming first and the political following as he felt marginalized and searched for safe places. Community provides safety. K values being out as part of his activism but still struggles with where it is safe to be out.

And it's not like that I'm kind of feeling like I'm actively in danger about bringing things out about myself, but there's still kind of these reflexes of like, well, if you're not kind of in my group, are you going to be able to kind of handle this information about my life.

He spoke about what feels like an inhibition to intimacy and authenticity with others when he doesn't know if it is safe to be out and how this affects him in his work and religious life.

And that creates a, as I'm trying to do the community building work, it creates a kind of disconnect as well of trying to figure out how much safety and ability to come out do I need to have versus how much do I want to kind of have these people as like coalition partners in broader political goals, and how kind of intimate do I need to be with people in order to have those be robust coalitions.

I am an active Christian church goer kind of person. That's been another struggle of...finding queer friendly churches is fairly easy these days in major cities.

I was a little surprised to learn that K encountered more discrimination in churches around polyamory than other parts of his identity.

Being able to also get them to handle polyamory is a lot harder, and I have starts and stops of being in a church that was like very rainbow flag, and very excited that I was openly queer. And then they kind of find this other thing out and they're like—[gasp]—can we let you be around the children, like I—

Interviewer: The poly part?

K: Yeah, the poly part, 'cause it really freaks people out. And that's been a struggle.

And these days I've ended up in a church that's a gay church that like everybody is queer and they are all kind of coming from having at some point been rejected by a church for being queer, they're not going to reject anyone for anything. And so a lot of them are like I've never heard of this polyamory thing, but like come on in and tell me about it.

And so I'm now in a space that's much safer, but it's still sort of...like that's where kind of my most monogamous people that I know are, and it's still sort of a line that I'm not familiar with walking of like how I am out to these people and how I kind of talk to them about my life, just because they don't have the background that I'm kind of used to people having.

So yeah, I'd say that's a struggle of how to manage those relationships that are on the borderline of communities of where I'm not kind of just surrounded by people who are all more or less like me, and so are on the same page.

K directly stated that his politics inform, "how I do poly." Developing community is a large part of this for K. For him polyamory, "as an anti-capitalist strategy feels very important for me." He is suspect of the capitalist model of the nuclear family and a very narrow ring of care that perhaps extends to some light charitable giving.

We have a responsibility to care for one another on a much deeper level than those kind of individualized units of biological reproduction. And polyamory for me really opens up those kind of relationships of care. I think it's so reasonable that people want to care for those that they're most intimate with and that having the close emotional relationship naturally facilitates that kind of thing.

And so for me it's not just that I find myself capable of having a close relationship with multiple people, but that I really want to emphasize that forming those larger networks of care is an essential current strategy around the fact that we might have dreams of setting up governmental systems of some sort that would also facilitate that kind of care.

Community building as a political strategy, and polyamory being part of that came up again in K's second interview. He believes, as many others do, that polyamory naturally offers a resistance to capitalist values.

I think that even as an immediate strategy, one of the best resistances to capitalism right now is forming of small groups and communities of economic care for one another. And that's a thing that family units have always been, that, to a greater or lesser degree, most families are involved in sharing economic resources across generations as well as kind of in each sort of nuclear family bubble. And so to the extent that polyamory creates wider family networks, there's a much greater sharing of economic resources among those. And I see that as really essential to resisting capitalism.

He goes on to talk pragmatically about this situations and examples of unemployment or disability where a wider social network makes more sense. K further talks about the interdependence and influence of community:

One of the schools of theology that's appealed to me a lot is practical theology which imagines...which sort of is built on this sense of a circle of practice where you're doing the theoretical work, but you're also doing the community work, and you're involved with people, and those are influencing one another.

So, you know, you're bringing your experiences that you have with people back into where you're doing your theory and you're building that in, and then you're taking the lessons of your theory back out into the community, and then those are feeding into one another.

Again, we see this seamless integration of K's political, theological, and sexual identities. While his discourse is sophisticated and seems as though he's got it all figured out, I got the sense from K that he is open and sees himself as continuously changing, taking in new information and considering how it fits for him and how he wants to live based on that new information. While he has a core beliefs that the personal and political are one and is devoted to challenging oppression and categories of oppressive normalization, he is guided by the prevalent needs of his community and open to change based on the reality he sees in front of him.

Another thread in K's communication are ideas around freedom, which are largely represented by his beliefs in a relationship anarchy theory.

Freedom.

K speaks of his politics as anti-capitalist, anti-racist, with some queer anarchist threads. However, he doesn't want to get too caught up in or over-identified with any one theory. He states:

Yeah, so I'd say that I'm kind of loosely socialist, with a fairly strong undergirding of some anti-capitalism, but more focused on kind of immediate goals of needs in my community than on placing myself within a political theory.

In terms of polyamory as a political act, K states:

I have a number of friends who are committed to polyamory as a plank of forming that kind of revolutionary community. Where setting up these kind of alternative family structures is one of the ways we can create anti-capitalist supports for one another and one of the ways that we can resist oppressive forces that are going on in our lives that is very much a part of my life and the conversations that I find myself in pretty frequently these days, yeah.

K challenges many forms of normativity and very much acts from a queer anarchist perspective of challenging dominant systems. When asked his thoughts on rejecting monogamy vs. rejecting mononormativity, K became very thoughtful. He is very clear that there is a difference between the two and spoke about being in circles that challenge all forms of normativity. For him, rejecting monogamy but still practicing a normative life style and trying to 'fit-in' is counterintuitive.

I think that for me and for the communities that I feel most embedded in there's a strong sense of rejecting norms and being kind of nonconforming, and that's—I realize that that's not normal when I sometimes find myself at conferences or larger events where I suddenly discover that many people are very interested in kind of fitting in and keeping their head down and not making a huge fuss. And I'm embedded in a lot of punk circles. Most of the trans people I'm with are very openly trans and are like non-binary, so it's not about having this self-identity as much as it's really kind of like blowing up these categories and being very visibly weird. And that's, like that's normal for me. It takes me some mental effort to kind of remember outside of my totally weird neighborhood and my set of totally weird friends, like this is what an American experience is.

So kind of within that, being also in a culture where I assume that most people I meet are non-monogamous, I think that there is a strong, like the resisting of mono normativity has become a second nature to me in that I, you know, if I meet a couple I don't assume that they're monogamous together, even though they live together or even have children or whatever.

K talks further about how polyamory challenges the system by challenging ideas of ownership over another person and how, for him, those ideas expand to the idea of property ownership as well, which is in line with a relationship anarchy point of view which challenges the ways in which society gives primacy to romantic relationships.

I think particularly the ways that it breaks down the sense of ownership as well. I think the fact that when we start doing the work on jealousy and the work on what another person owes you that happen within the context of having multiple romantic and sexual relationships that those kind of skills can apply easily to other kind of economic activities.

And you can start to be like, well, now that I've kind of broken through the sense of I need to own this thing, and this thing is my special thing, and no one else is allowed onto my turf, you can start to have those kind of same feelings about the money that you're accumulating that you don't actually need for your immediate needs, or other kind of property sort of stuff.

For K, polyamory is a form of political resistance and being non-conforming is a political statement, though it's not black and white for him. When asked if polyamory is a form of political resistance, K replied:

I think I do. And I think that the amount that I do varies. I think I struggle with how much is the personal and political. And it's one of those things that on some level I very much feel that all of our individual choices are political. But I'm also...like I worry about having so much burden placed on the individual choice that we ignore the bigger systemic stuff that's going on.

But I think that making any kind of choice to be nonconforming—and polyamory is absolutely a nonconforming choice—is a political statement, especially when we're in an era of extremely conformist national politics, and where a lot of the political conversation we're having right now is kind of like this is the way to be, and if you're outside of that, you are to be punished in some way for being other. So I think that that is still a very political piece. And I think that it's... And I still do think that it sets us up for the ability to be more social, more sharing with one another.

I think that even among the people who I know who are less political in their polyamory, just the fact that you might have five or six adults who are kind of in a family unit together, within that family unit they're really taking care of each other in a way that if that were like three discrete couples they would never be sharing the kinds of things that those people are sharing. And so even if they aren't themselves kind of conceiving of it politically, I think that they're still subverting a piece of capitalism kind of by accident just because they're choosing to kind of share with one another in a way that is not really supported by our social structures.

Part of a relational anarchy stance that stems from queer theory is challenging the

privileging of not just heterosexual monogamy, but of sexual and romantic love. K talks of his experience of this: “I’m working on getting myself to a place where I’m not privileging romantic relationships as automatically better than other kinds of committed relationships.

He identifies one of his relationships as “a very committed queer platonic partner,” which he defines as follows:

(The asexual community uses the term) as a way to talk about relationships that are not necessarily sexual or romantic, but that otherwise have intense partnership. And in my case, with this person, it is not sexual or romantic, but it’s a level of very deep, committed friendship and a sense that we’re major support people for one another, and that we’re in each other’s lives for the long term and kind of taking each other in account in a way that is partner, like is a sufficient title for that.

So I have this person in my life. And then I’m in a sort of transition phase with a person who has been a romantic partner of mine for some time, but who is coming into an asexual identity and is not wanting to have a physical component to our relationship.

And I am not interested in being in a romantic relationship that isn’t physical, and so we’re sort of feeling our way through what we’re going to do with this connection to one another, and that we still [care] about each other’s lives, but it’s not the same shape as we kind of originally put it together as. And that kind of pulling apart and reorganizing started in May, and so that’s sort of still fresh and we’re still working through it.

K talks more about challenging himself in this way and how he prioritizes his relationships, which is discussed more the next section about the work of consciously living one's values. Freedom is very much an undercurrent to K's political beliefs and practices as well as his theological beliefs:

You know, a lot of the philosophy that I was taught there and how we work with people is that it's not the form of religion that's about like converting and evangelizing and making someone fit the box that you have, but that it's more about having a curiosity towards people's experiences and wanting to kind of support them in their own choices and the ways that they want to put their life together.

Psychoanalysis, at its best, also operates from this position and what is it doing if it's not operating from this position? It calls to mind Foucauldian questions regarding whether we are a tool of liberation or a tool of oppression.

I think that's also an underpinning in kind of my political understanding, is that I want people to be able to make those life choices and have the freedom to make those life/choices, and to not have a really sense of stronger prescriptions of you must behave in this way beyond the things that we need to make sure that people are fundamentally decent to one another, and that they're not limiting other people's options. And I think for me that comes out of that sense of the pastoral relationship of meeting people kind of spiritually where they are.

For K, making a conscious choice about how one structures their relationship is more important than whether they are monogamous or non-monogamous. That questioning why we do what we do and determining if that in fact is in line with our

values and then making our choice. He advocates for conscious, ethical relationships, no matter where they fall on a monogamous/non-monogamous continuum. One of his main issues with unquestioned monogamy is the embedded quality of ownership.

So one of the approaches to the polyamory/monogamy conflict is this feeling that monogamy is fundamentally about owning someone, and that when you demand monogamy from someone, it's always a control move, and it's a sense of being this person is mine and no one else can have them. And I certainly think that's how a lot of people do set up their relationships. That's a very normative thing that people are handed as a relationship model, and a lot of people just accept that and try to make that happen.

And on one hand I've also seen behavior like that happen in polyamory. It's not like polyamory is exempt from abuse on the extreme end, or that people don't kind of still come into polyamorous relationships with this [idea] that they get to put constrictions around their partner's behavior, or that they have needs that really require that their partners don't do certain things, and have a sense that this person does kind of belong to me in some way.

While polyamory is what fits best for K, the idea of a conscious, ethical relationship is more important than whether one is monogamous or non-monogamous.

But I also find that it's entirely possible to set up a relationship where you have a mutual agreement with one another that you're not going to date other people or be sexual with other people, but still offer each other a lot of freedom and a lot of choice in that space. I think of that as ethical monogamy, and as ethical

monogamy as being like a real thing that has to be kind of chosen and constructed. But I very much believe that happens and have seen people do it.

So that's kind of, I think for me, rather than there being sort of a polyamory/monogamy dichotomy, there's a kind of like ethical and unethical relationship dichotomy where there's people who are really focused on being intentional and careful with their partners and treating their partners as fully formed human beings who get to make all kinds of choices and people who are moving in a space where they are being more controlling and they're kind of making...or objectifying of their partners or not kind of wanting to give their partners full freedom.

I think that for me being intentional about relationships is really essential as a value. You know, we live in a society where monogamy is considered the default, and so I think a lot of people don't get the chance to choose it, because as far as they know the only way to prove that you love someone is to be monogamous with them. But for people who are able to make free choices, I think that choosing to have only one sexual partner is a perfectly legitimate free choice. It just has to kind of be made outside of a lot of coercion that is very hard to avoid. But I do think it's possible.

This leads him back to questioning the primacy of romantic and sexual love:

And especially as I find that romantic and sexual relationships are kind of weak, in a way. It's very common for those to fade over time or for them to be...to just, to not last in a way that really provides lifelong stability. And so to start thinking

about how to form solid intimate relationships that can include that kind of community of care, whether there's a romantic, sexual component to that or not. And I find that to be almost harder, I think, because even polyamorous people are still kind of very programmed into the sense that my romantic relationships are the most important and everything else is sort of auxiliary.

So to kind of bring lots of different kinds of relationships into the central planning of one's life feels like a very important, like immediate revolutionary activity to me. For people to be able to form those broader networks of lifelong commitment that permeates those kind of families, yeah.

I'm very interested right now in relationships that are resilient over time. And I've found that it's been hard for me to build that kind of resilience in a relationship that has sexuality kind of at its core.

He further explains that basing a relationship on sexual compatibility is unstable and questions a focus on this element in long term relationships because it naturally fluctuates due to many factors, including brain chemicals. His sense is that many relationships fail because once the initial feel good hormones wear fade, there is often not that strong foundation or base and many relationships don't survive that transition, in part because we are not taught how to think about relationships differently.

And to figure out how to still—like I'm not going into like total celibacy here or anything, but to figure out how to balance those relationships that are sexually exciting with forming things that are really stable for the long-term and that provide that kind of broad-based family that feels really essential to me as well.

And I think some of that is learning how to have resilience in spite of changes in sexual interest over time. And it's also about finding people who are willing to form kind of nonsexual partnerships and to still be a really big part of each other's lives, even though there's not sex chemicals connecting us to one another.

K speaks of recently watching a documentary about the Roosevelts and seeing some of these themes in their relationship:

But I really, like I found myself identifying with them. It was like oh yeah, here's this example of this relationship where everything had to kind of change for them, but they stayed deeply connected to one another. And, I mean, they're the Roosevelts, you know, so like do all kinds of really impressive things with their lives. So I feel like there probably are more models of this that we don't have terms for what that looks like and we haven't been pulling out and recognizing these things for what they are.

But I think that people have for a long time needed one another and needed to form lifelong relationships with one another, and sexuality has always been a kind of fickle way to do that. And so it's a matter, I think, of actually being honest about that and kind of bringing that out and being able to talk about it.

So, for K alternate relationship forms are probably happening more frequently yet there seems to be a taboo against openly talking about it and to do so, to have role models would be helpful. This makes me think of Samuels (2010) assertion that psychoanalysis is far more likely to analyze the defenses involved in non-monogamy than those employed in monogamy and the implications of that, which will be discussed further in the Implications section of Chapter V.

Consciously lived values.

Talking with K, I got a real sense of someone who is living a self-examined, conscious life and living his values both in his work and his personal life. It shows up in the work he does, in the church he goes to, in his friend circles, and in his partner relationships, is very much a part of his identity. He challenges himself to be clear on his beliefs and what is important to him and to then live it, even when that is not easy.

You know, I've been raised with a sense that we're kind to other people, and participate in charitable activities and these things, and so it just made sense to me to now connect that to political values that are about taking care of other people and making sure that people have access to equality, and justice, and fairness, and that kind of thing. A lot of people around me are very political, so kind of political discussions are a normal piece of how I am in the world. If I'm at a dinner party, we're as likely to be talking about anti-racism as like the TV show we're watching, I guess. That's one thing that's kind of always going on.

Even though K has never identified as monogamous, challenging his own ideas of normativity around monogamy took some time. He also speaks about how it takes conscious practice and intention to live your values. From his discourse, one could think that K has it all figured out but my impression was of someone who feels certain about many things but is very much grappling with how he wants to live his politics and what that might mean for his sexual/romantic life. At this time, that means challenging his ideas of romantic and sexual relationship privilege/primacy. "It's just so, so, so normal for me at this point that people are not monogamous. But for a while, that took some building of being able to kind of have that kind of sense of resistance."

He speaks about how most people have assumptions of monogamy if he is in public with a partner and all of the assumptions about what “serious” about a relationship. He sees challenging norms as an act of resistance, where he first resists his internalized norms and that by doing so he is also resisting in a larger sense. The personal is political in a very real sense for K. We have to challenge our internalized forms of oppression and rules about how to be before we can take extend that beyond ourselves and that is an ever evolving process.

And so I think that...and the piece that I’m trying to do now, I’m trying to break apart even the sense that a romantic relationship necessarily has to be the most important in my life, and that the people who are my closest confidantes and my biggest supports might not be people that I’m romantic with feels like an active place that I’m trying to build some resistance to those norms right now, because even in the like weirdo, queer, non-monogamous culture that I’m embedded in, there’s still this sense that if you’re having sex with someone, that’s super important, and if you’re not having sex with someone, they’re like a little more disposable in a way that is actually counter to how I’ve been setting up my life for some time. But it’s really, really hard to break out of those thoughts and those kind of mental structures that you have.

This is no easy feat. When sitting with K I associated to it being like, “the last stronghold of something.”

Yeah, that there’s yet another wall there between the way that I would want to be living and the way that I’m actually able to even like conceptualize my life. Yeah, that’s kind of a need to build an active resistance. It’s work. It’s absolutely work.

K speaks about how some things come naturally and just fit, like non-monogamy for him but other pieces are more intentional.

Yeah. And I think that yeah, the idea that I could feel romantic and sexual love for multiple people at a time was like the most natural thing. Like I literally invented that for myself without any kind of outside help.

And the idea that someone that I love could love someone else, right, the same thing. Like that was all just like totally natural, like in a vacuum, like just came to me, and this is how I'm kind of wired. But yeah, but the sense of wanting to break down the privileged position that romantic relationships have.

And even to also think about, you know, I'm feeling like the cohabitating relationship holds a privileged position that I maybe don't want it to have in my life. But just because someone doesn't want to live in the same house as someone else doesn't mean that you're not a major part of their life. Those things are absolutely things that I feel like I have to kind of work at, and to extend my circle of care to include kind of a broader community feels politically important to me.

I want to feel invested in the lives of my neighbors and to get myself to feel that way is...you know, and to feel invested in their lives in a way that I feel invested in my friends' lives is not the most natural or most easy thing, but feels politically important.

K speaks of layers of normativity, how norms seem to blend in with each other and how it takes a conscious effort to examine and challenge them.

I think mono normativity comes with a series of other societal structures—you know, not getting the big house in the suburbs to raise your children in, and kind

of drawing the lines around whatever your family is, and if you're outside the family, you're not really someone that I'm deeply invested in. And I think part of rejecting normativity is rejecting some of those trappings instead of kind of being like, well, we're basically doing the same American dream, white picket fence thing, there's just four adults rather than two. Yeah, I think that kind of feels like the distinction there for me.

K notes all of the other privilege and normativity that comes along with the "trappings."

Yeah. I think there's a heterosexuality that's associated, a cis gender-ness, like almost certainly a whiteness. Like all of that, yeah, is certainly also in there. And to reject the privilege of those identities at the same time seems important, yeah.

K speaks about the difficulties in challenging norms, not just in theory but in living those values. Presently, for K, this is most challenging around his current relationship changes, where one of his long time partners is moving towards an asexual identity.

That kind of the biggest difficulty around that is going through this change in relationship. The sort of breakup, but not breakup thing that I'm doing right now has felt difficult somewhat on a political level because some of these values of mine have been infused in that in that not only do I love this person, value this person and want them in my life, but I want to practice what I've been preaching for some time as well, and sort of acknowledging that sexuality is not the primary way to interact with a person, and there are other ways to have important relationships.

And to have to suddenly do that when there's kind of intense feelings on the line is very different from kind of sitting there and thinking about it theoretically. But it's also, it's having that I think having that motivation where I've already done the theoretical work, and then like these are values that I want to have is part of also what's kind of gotten me through that process, is that I'm able to come back and remember like okay, yeah, I'm feeling hurt about this thing, but also I feel that it's really important to have intentional relationships and to not kind of just take the models I've inherited and try to force myself and other people to fit into them.

As mentioned in the category of community, K is interested in how theory and actual experience influence each other and it is important to him to observe the reciprocal influence of the two.

And so I think that's a lot of my approach, is that I'm wanting to draw on the work of others, wanting to draw on the education that I've had and the things that I've read and heard about, and bring that in. But there's always going to be, you know, direct experience isn't always going to completely line up with those theories.

And I tend to value the experience a little more. I tend to think that the things that happen in the world are, on some level, a little more real than the things we think about the things that happen in the world. And so I think it's that constant process of trying to bring the theory in line with the experience and to make sure that the theories actually lead towards the goals that you want.

The importance of language is a theme that runs through K's discourse. From his

early story of having a felt sense of polyamory but no language for it to hearing the word and having a moment that felt a once like a revelation and a confirmation of something he already knew, the result of which was calming and integrative. K has also clearly found the language of political and theological discourse to be helpful in understanding himself and as a guide for how he wants to live in line with his values and what he aspires to.

While K has talked about the way he has been marginalized due to his sexuality, he also recognizes his privilege and how being white, from a family with resources and access to education where he could learn and develop his discourse. Having access to such a discourse is a privilege and leads one to wonder, what about that “scared queer kid” who does not have that privilege? K seems to feel a responsibility to use his privilege to help others who are marginalized. This is a theme that will be further discussed in my cross case analysis.

Case #2: T

Introduction.

T is a white male in his late thirties who works in the finance field and is an active organizer and educator in the poly community of the large U.S. city he resides in. He’s not a big fan of labels, tending to view things as fluid, but currently most closely identifies as gender queer and bisexual. Specifically, “bi-ish” and “gender queer, in that spectrum somewhere.” Politically, T most closely identifies as socialist. He completed high school and attended college for a short time before it became unaffordable for him. He presents as smart, gentle, and passionate with a quick wit and an ever so slight edge. In our interviews I came to think of T as a “compassionate challenger.”

T has been married for 15 years, has a partner he has been with for 5 years, a girlfriend he's been with for 4 years and a new person he is dating, "on a limited basis, only a once a month kind of thing." He didn't get specific, but it sounded like all of his partners are involved with others as well. For example, the woman he has been with for 4 years had a baby with her husband three years ago which he says, "is a kind of a weird twist on things. I had a doctor's note, I'm supposed to be excused from children. So it's been weird to work through what that means." Though he didn't have a word for it then, he was in a polyamorous-like relationship in high school:

So I think I was in proto poly-ish relationships in the early '90s, like in high school. As I said, my high school girlfriend is poly. There's something in the water where we grew up. It's me and her, and there's a woman who runs poly events in (another state), and the three of us, we graduated within like five minutes of each other, so there's like something politically weird about that part of (state).

For him this relationship arose from his girlfriend at the time encouraging him to date one of her friends who was at an all-girls school and didn't have a date for the prom. He talks about the confusion of that time and, "the inevitable conflict of feelings that kind of comes up around that when you don't really know what you're talking about." He goes on to talk about how not having a frame or language for what they were trying to do and being young resulted in emotional turmoil.

And it was probably not the healthiest of relationships, but those were kind of the first seeds of (polyamory) I suppose. We've joked about it since, and it's just

like, oh, that's totally what we were doing. In retrospect the picture seems so clear. But at the time we had no idea.

He was then involved in a triad relationship in college, meaning that all three members of the triad were involved with each other. It was a tumultuous relationship of which he states:

I used to describe it as the most beautiful thing that ever happened in my life and literally the worst thing that ever happened to me because the parts that were wonderful were really wonderful, and the parts that were terrible were horrific, and took me a long time to work through. But again, not having a word to deal with this. This is like '97. And being rather poor and not having the Internet, and not really knowing to look into it in any deeper way. Not having a societal frame for describing it even, really. We muddled through and, you know, didn't do that great.

There is an implication here that having not just a name, but a discourse for what they were doing would have provided a much needed frame and perhaps guidance. It is of note that T is now providing this kind of education, guidance, and reference to people who are new to polyamory, consciousness raising really, a major category of meaning in this case which will be discussed in the next section.

When T later fell in love with his wife, she made it clear that she wanted a monogamous relationship and he agreed to it. He says:

And I was like you're really cool. I'll figure out how to make this work, totally fine. And like that was it. And we were monogamous for 9 years. And for some

reason I was really miserable. I felt like I was shoved into a box that was too small for me to be in.

T found himself unhappy, depressed, and stifled. It was around this time that the language around polyamory was becoming more prevalent and he was hearing all about it from his high school girlfriend who was doing poly organizing in another large city as well as engaging in polyamorous relationships herself. He describes a sense of deep longing that he tried to deny out of loyalty to his wife. He became increasingly unhappy in all areas of his life and when his symptoms peaked after the death of a former girlfriend, he went to therapy at his wife's urging.

I got very lucky that this therapist was like this weird Ninja who, like she sat down and really did a very good job of walking me through a lot of things and making me think about what those relationships were in different ways, and kind of doing the triage of that.

As he began to explore and understand himself more in therapy he questioned his marriage:

And I gave considerable thought to leaving my marriage. Not with any kind of goal, just knowing that it wasn't working for me. Not having put any of these dots together yet, but in the meantime (wife's name) had been thinking about things and was like hey, that polyamory thing, do you think that would work for you? Would that make you happier? And I was like, yes!

T and his wife opened their relationship and have both had additional relationships outside their marriage. While somewhat rocky at first as they worked through how this would work for them, it seems to be going quite well and I got the sense

that their relationship feels stronger because of it. It's hard to imagine T as someone who had a difficult time being aware of and communicating as it now seems to be all about communication for him.

T came to organizing in the poly community as he and others questioned the ethics of the organizer of a group they were involved in. It was important to T and his co-organizers to facilitate safe, ethical spaces so they began organizing their own events. Currently, they organize a popular monthly poly social gathering and other periodic social gatherings. T also leads frequent “newbie discussion groups” where he educates people new to poly and provides a safe space for asking questions. He and a colleague also organized an “ally event” in response to hostile sentiment and an increase in hate speech towards the LGBTQ and Muslim communities they were seeing in the wake of the presidential election. At this event they sought to explore how the poly community could be allies as needed for people who are a part of other marginalized groups in general and as needs arise. T has also been invited to teach “newbie” or Poly 101 workshops at national events.

In terms of his own political development, T states:

So I was raised by teenage girls. So (name) in particular was the kind of 13-year-old girl who carried around a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* with her everywhere she went. So I think in order to be in that relationship I had to absorb a lot of her teenage feminist thinking. And so as I moved into that community—well, to the extent that high school can facilitate those things—that's where I think the seeds of that were planted.

From there, T also did a lot of theater and moved to a larger city and did some opera training. In those communities he interacted more with the queer community, which at the time he hadn't yet identified as but felt a fitting in he hadn't felt before.

And at the time I didn't really know that about myself, so I was like the straight guy. And so I was immersed in that to begin with. And as I met more people and as I got older, and especially like as I went to college, I was like oh no, this is part of me as well. I don't know exactly how this fits in, but these are my people. So yeah, I think that was part of the evolution of me finding that and taking it as part of myself. Especially coming from the small town I came from, like there weren't a lot of people there that were like me.

For T early feminist thinking, polyamory, queer culture, and socialist values all seemed to intertwine. That combined with a strong sense of justice and a desire to combat oppression influence T's lived values, both in his personal relationships and his poly organizing.

T states that he definitely thinks about polyamory in a larger cultural and political sense but grapples with what that means for him and how to talk about it, which is part of what interested him in participating in this study.

I think this is part of the reason I wanted to talk to you, actually, is for me it is kind of abstract. I don't think concretely in these terms all that often. And so if I'm going to be talking at conferences, if I am going to be leading this community, it might be good to have a greater idea of what that actually means for me.

An overarching category of meaning that emerged from my interviews with T is Consciousness Raising which includes subcategories of “having the conversation” and “challenging from a privileged place.” Additional categories of meaning are Priorities, and Personal Meaning/Purpose.

Categories of meaning.

Consciousness-raising.

Weaved throughout T’s narrative is a theme of consciousness-raising, both inner and outer and how they influence each other. The personal is political for T. As mentioned earlier, T notes his need as a teenager and young adult for, not only language for and discourse around polyamory, but also for self-examined role models. T found his personal psychotherapy to be consciousness-raising for him, which allowed greater freedom and choice in his life which has allowed him to be the person he needed when he is interacting with people new to the polyamory community.

T then takes this awareness and is conscious about building community. In describing the spaces he and his co-organizers try to create, I commented that they sound very politically aware. T responded:

I just think it’s more important to me. I don’t know. I’d like to think the community that I helped to create is more politically aware than other communities.

In a statement that denotes how inner and outer consciousness raising are linked for him, he states, “Creating chosen family is a political act for me in the same kind of way as building a community is.” One first needs to be critically self-aware:

Because you have to think critically about the kind of values you want to have in your life at that point. If you're going to choose people to be around you, if you're going to be very specific about okay, I'm going to be, I am poly, I'm going to have these relationships, the partners that you choose are going to be kind of a reflection of the energy that you're putting into it.

So when you do that, your sense of ethics or morality is inherently a part of how you present to this other person, and if you meet in that way, then that's how you're going to find it. But yeah, I think as part of that process you really have to identify where you're at.

And poly, it's—I think it is kind of an introspective thing. In order to be really solid about communicating with other people, you really need to know where you are. And then if you know where you exist, in what kind of space, and how you think about things, then you have taken a critical eye to a bunch of different things.

For T, raising inner consciousness through working through one's identity and critical thinking are political acts. He explains:

Well, my investigation into gender is absolutely critical thinking about me as a person. And so when I choose gender queer as a label, then I'm saying certain things about myself to other people. Those labels mean—like words mean things. Those labels impart on other people an idea of who I am. And if I'm doing that, then I'm having that conversation, and that conversation is a political conversation. It's an identity, quote/unquote, conversation, but yeah.

Interviewer: "Political because?"

T: “Because the identity is subversive or not the way that society thinks things could or should operate, I suppose. People have very strong ideas of what those relationships and those dynamics look like. And by not conforming the way that they think.”

Interviewer: “You’re sort of directly challenging the norms?”

T: “Yeah. I’m at least making them think about it in a way that might make them uncomfortable. But then we have better conversations. [*Laughs.*] At least that’s the idea.”

This relates to another category of meaning, how T uses his privilege to challenge others, which will be discussed in the next section.

What I gleaned from talking with T is that he is trying to be as awake and conscious as possible and that he is trying to encourage others to do the same, which is illustrated in the following quote:

I think as I’m going through figuring out where I’m at with things that that’s a benefit to community as well because other people are doing that, too. And so if I can have those conversations as well, if I can be really introspective or solid about where I’m at, or just really honest about the conflicts that I’m feeling or the things that I’m going through, that that helps someone else who maybe hasn’t got the words around it, or maybe doesn’t know how to talk about those things. It’s a venue for them to be able to talk about it as well, hopefully. Again, a little bit high-minded and theoretical, but yeah, I think my personal work is community work, to an extent. And certainly makes me think about the ways that those two things interact.

He believes in challenging mono-normativity, but not with an assumption that any form of relationship is better than another. For him, it is really about critical thinking.

He spoke about challenging people who talk about polyamory as better or more evolved.

And I don't buy that. I think that people find the relationships that they want to be in, and whether or not that's because it's something they are or something they're choosing is somewhat irrelevant when it gets to that. It doesn't make us any better. So when that kind of thing comes up, I feel like I need to buck up a little bit and be like hey, no, you know, people make their own choices, and monogamy is totally valid.

But on the other hand I think there is still room to challenge the norms because unevaluated monogamy is not that great anyway. I just want people to be able to think critically, and if poly is something that they feel like they want, or something that they desire, or something that's intrinsic to themselves, I want to make sure that they have the space to do that.

Having the conversation.

In terms of consciousness-raising in others, T is somewhat of a poly-ambassador, a bridge builder for those new to polyamory and for those who are not polyamorous to better understand it. In both arenas his consciousness raising efforts also include gender and queer issues as well and sometimes progressive views on other populations, immigrants, for example. This ranges from having conversations with his conservative father about immigration policy to conversations at work about not just polyamory but gender and sexual identities, to challenging the poly community to be aware of gender

and queer issues to having a conversation with a friend's mother about polyamory to test the waters. For T, *having the conversation* is political.

In one example, T tells of talking with a group of people from “coal country” at a national conference. He notes how many in this group were in the “hyper-leftists space” of the polyamory conference but were quite politically conservative in other ways.

So it inherently becomes a political conversation at that point because we're disagreeing on a million different things. But if we can talk about the one thing, then that melts all the ice in between, and we can have a real conversation about what's going on in their lives instead, and it becomes a more unifying factor. So I think the way that I talk about polyamory when I'm out in community helps make things less divisive, in a way. If we can find our points of commonality and we can approach them from a place of compassion, then we can have bigger conversations than just about poly.

When I asked about the “bigger conversations” and if he was trying to have those, he stated: “I think the bigger conversations are important, but I think the conversation—to make it meta, the conversation is the more important piece.”

Another example is how T challenges and educates people within the poly community. One way this happens is how he fields introduces feminist values into conversation when he frequently gets, “dude questions” as he calls them.

I get guys coming and being like, so how do I meet women? And (I say), “Like, you treat them like people.” But no one has actually told them this before.

They've gotten what society kind of tells them how they're supposed to perform masculinity in order to accrete a certain kind of social standing, and then at that

point they are privileged enough that they by default will have these relationships. And they come in and try and meet me on that level, and I'm like no, there's this other thing going on, and this other thing you might not have thought about. And because they're asking me for advice, I'm giving them this other picture that they haven't thought about.

Another way is challenging those exploring poly to be mindful of other intersectionalities:

So that also happens at poly events as well because there will be—and I don't want to stereotype it, but it is usually suburban folk who are coming into the city and they're like, oh, we read about polyamory on the Internet. And so because they're looking to me to be a source of good information, or reliable information, then I'm also able to talk about other things from a position of authority. And I try to hold the fact that I'm imposing my thoughts on them while I'm still imposing my thoughts on them. So it's a little bit dicey, but—I want to take them out of their comfort zone and make them think critically, hopefully, about things that perhaps they hadn't thought about.

When I asked T what he wanted to make them think about he said:

I want them to think about queer issues. Since they're entering that space, I want them to think about how the other members in that community feel about things. I want us to be able to support each other as a community, and that involves having a greater understanding of where other people in community are coming from.

The main goal for T seems to be sparking critical thinking in the service of acceptance. That consciousness raising about one marginalized identity would be contagious.

Because it's sowing the seeds for acceptance of someone else. So in that way it's still similar to the way that I'm approaching hetero normativity. Because yeah, I just want them to be able to find a place of acceptance. Whether or not they necessarily agree that it's something for them, it's still looking for acceptance.

A theme that came up frequently in my interviews with T is how he stealthily uses his privilege to have the broader conversations.

Stealth use of privilege.

A sub-category of consciousness-raising and having the conversation is how T consciously uses his privilege to challenge people, which is political activity for him. One way this happens is as referenced above in how he uses his identity as someone who is experienced and is educating about polyamory. He also talks about how all the ways he "passes" out in the world as a heterosexual white male who is married (which most people assume means monogamous), how, "the world approaches me very differently, and nicer in a lot of ways." (than women, people of color, trans people, queer people, etc.).

Where someone passing me on the street is going to come up with a different picture of me than I actually am. I pass like gangbusters, like wherever I am. And so I'd like to use that to have bigger conversations.

For example, T talks about his work situation in a corporate finance environment that puts him into contact with, “people I wouldn’t normally interact with” and how:

That interaction becomes an opportunity for me to be able to subversively talk about things that are important to me, even though I’m presenting as white guy, straight white guy, especially at work, to people that I’m not out to.

And I feel really personally driven to have conversations with people who see me that way that makes them think about, hopefully with a sense of compassion, hopefully getting a new perspective about the struggles that queer people or people of color or those kind of things, that maybe they haven’t approached, that they’re able to have that conversation instead. There’s a dichotomy between far seeing and near seeing politics.

In psychoanalysis we would talk about how we relate to “otherness.” T talks about this as it relates to his conversations at work and compares it to what happens in polyamorous relationships:

That when it becomes someone that’s closer to you, then it changes from an abstract into a more concrete thing. We talk about this in poly in metamour relationships, too, where if you haven’t met somebody else’s partner, then they become this projector screen for all your insecurities, but the more they come in closer, then you’re able to identify with them better. And so I feel really passionate about wanting to be the person that brings those things closer. So I try to be out at work, even if it’s kind of uncomfortable.

T talks about using his privilege, how he tries to challenge others starting from a “cozy blanket of understanding”:

I'm talking to a lot of very privileged white men most of the time when I'm doing my job. And that feels like I'm in a unique opportunity to kind of like stealthily move through that space, but still be able to bring my ethics in and talk about what's important to me in a way that maybe they otherwise wouldn't interact with.

But because we work together on projects and because we're close physically, and because there's a thought of shared values, that then I'm able to have conversations I wouldn't otherwise have. And I think that benefits us as a society better if we're able to talk more. And like I get to pick things up from them as well. It's not entirely me preaching to them or anything.

Again we see that idea of bridge building in the service of mutual acceptance. For T speaking the unseen from a place of privilege is political, which we see in this story he tells:

I have a contractor at work, and she moved here from India when she was nine, and she's in an arranged marriage. And she has never met anyone like me, and I have never met anyone exactly like her. But I'm out to her at work (as polyamorous). Which kind of blew her mind because she wasn't seeing that as part of me because it's not visible. But that's also part of a larger conversation about gender that she also hadn't really thought about. And yeah...I think that's a political act.

As discussed above, T wants to challenge people to think critically about their life choices and also to not collapse into stereotypes or tropes. He tends to try to bring context and nuance into the conversation.

But like culture is very mono normative, I suppose. Like kind of the tropes that poly people run into in coming out or in talking to other people about it is swingers immediately, because that's kind of like that '70s kind of cultural frame that we absorbed at some point, so a lot of people will think, oh, you're having all of this sex.

And it's like yeah, no, I'm doing way too much laundry to—[laughs]—like or doing the dishes, or... Like I understand they're focusing on the spectacle portion of it, but I think that at least in a mainstream kind of way that's the assumption that some people are bringing in. Like that should absolutely be challenged. It's more nuanced than that. It's more complex than that.

Using this place of privilege to relate to others and then challenge them came up again and again for T. Another example:

Well, it's about having a conversation about context. When I talk to coworkers about my relationships, it becomes more of a conversation that I want to, A) create a place of relation for them. The same kind of things that I'm going through in my relationship are the same things that they might be going through in their relationship.

And just because I'm in more than one of them doesn't mean that the context of that specific thing changes. So if there's a point of being able to communicate about things, then it becomes more about how their relationship fits into how they think about my relationship, and so the context comes back.

Perhaps it's a little bit too simplistic, but at least that's what I like to think, that if I have a long enough conversation with somebody about it, that eventually they'll

see the parallels and I will bring more color, more texture to how they think of those relationships. When people do bring those more simplistic perspectives into it, that that needs to be the moment to add some complexity or bring up the fact that no, as much fun as it appears as if I'm having, there's worked involved in this, and these conversations are difficult.

Well, they can be difficult. But if things work well then it gives us a foundation for communication and those conversations become easier. And it's about when presented with the two dimensional picture, you try and make it more three dimensional in those moments. I try and come at it from a place of compassion. Even just cracking the door open a little bit changes the way that we talk about it.

Nuance, perspective, and priorities all enter T's political position as well, which is the next category of meaning to be discussed.

Political priorities.

While T sees polyamory and other challenges to normativity as political, to him it is less important of a cause for several reasons, which will be discussed in this section. T doesn't necessarily separate polyamory from other forms of marginalization, stating:

Yeah. It's a big messy lump for me. Poly is absolutely a part of it, but it's part of a larger conglomerate. But I think it's because of the way that I am polyamorous that it has to be more inclusive than that.

He went on to explain that sometimes he is, “poly in a queer way” and that since polyamory itself is nonconforming in addition to the other ways he identifies as nonconforming:

It’s part of the same mess. I can’t remove poly from the rest of what I am. And so politically it feels weird to segregate it out in that way as well. I suppose I could be out as poly at work without talking about gender, without talking about sexuality. But if I’m going to go the authentic leap of being out about the one thing at work, then I might as well be out about the rest of them as well. And perhaps society wouldn’t be all that off by thinking about that as well.

T grappled with this during our interviews. While above he implies that marginalization is all related and perhaps doesn’t need to be distinguished, in the next breath he noted that there is a hierarchy of need:

I think for people who don’t pass, maybe that’s...there are more critical portions in themselves that need to be accepted, and those conversations are more important than the poly thing. And I absolutely think and want to facilitate those conversations happening first, which is why I wanted to do the ally event. . . in this new political environment, post election, I think the poly thing is going to have to take a step back and we’re going to have to call in the reinforcements.

At other times, T was more adamant that there are much more important political struggles than polyamory. Many times he presented political concerns as hierarchical, based on the visible level of oppression in society. For example, at the time of our interviews, shortly after the presidential election, he was especially concerned with the increase in hate speech he was observing, including a string of violent graffiti in

predominately gay neighborhoods in the city he lives in. He frequently spoke about being more concerned about queer and gay rights, because he believes it much easier for polyamorous people to be closeted and to “pass” in public than it might be for visibly queer or those who might be perceived as homosexual. Here he compares the polyamory movement with gay rights:

At this point it’s more of a survival thing. Like I could be poly and no one looks at me and I’m not going to get, like, killed over it. And gay folk not the same.

Like that they were in a, especially in the ‘80s, with the AIDS crisis, like it was a direct struggle for their lives. We’re just inconvenienced. We might not have the same legal rights sometimes. But those two things are not the same. I feel like there’s a lot of people who want to draw equivalency, or at least draw, like, allegory or metaphor out of those two things. And sometimes it’s applicable, but oh my god, the scales are entirely different.

He went on to explain that, in his view, there isn’t as much at stake in being polyamorous.

Yeah, my other partnerships don’t get me politically oppressed. I’m unlikely, unless I’m moving like seven people into one house; I’m unlikely to approach anything like housing-wise the same way that gay folks had housing issues in the ‘70s and ‘80s, or like a workplace issue. I might have some problems at work for that, but oh my god, like being gay in the ‘80s and being out at work basically meant you did not have a job. And yeah, it’s not the same at all.

And again, he talks about prioritizing actions:

We're going to have to really help those people who aren't in a privileged space, or can't pass, or don't want to. That is also important to me. Those people need more support than my poly does, probably. I mean, we'll see what happens. . . It's gonna be all about context. If there's a Muslim registry, we need to approach that first. If there's hate crimes on the street, we need to approach those first. Like we're not going to know until it becomes apparent to us.

T noted in our second interview that he had been mulling over his ideas of what it means to be subversive, that at times he thinks about it as active protesting, holding up signs or on a soapbox with a megaphone and at other times he sees being out at work to be politically subversive, that being intentional about being out and having conversations is politically subversive. I reflected to T that it seemed from our interviews that he sometimes equated the amount of struggle or pain with being political. He replied, "Right. [*Laughs.*] That I wasn't suffering enough to qualify as political, I guess."

Sense of purpose.

For T his organizing and political activity is as much about personal meaning and a sense of purpose as it is political. As mentioned earlier, there is a reparative aspect of T's actions, in that he is embodying and providing what he desperately needed as he was coming of age—an older, wiser, non-judgmental, patient person to educate him and hold space for him. When he talks about educating people, especially when it is people outside the poly community and feeling that they have an a-ha moment or that he has widened their view, it is clear that this is very satisfying for T. He also speaks about his feelings about teaching within the community:

So I'm in a position where I can afford to go to these conferences and teach these classes. And I have a relatively higher level of expertise than other people that I'm talking to, so it makes me look like I know what I'm talking about, even when I don't feel like I do. But yeah, I'm privileged to be in a position to be able to do that. I'm really happy to be able to work in community that way.

It is a source of healthy self-esteem for T. He is now expert at leading workshops, he is good at it, and he gets direct, tangible feedback that he is helping people.

But when I'm in the newbie group I get really energized having those conversations, even if it's like the same conversation I've had ten times in that particular day. The knowledge that I'm the ambassador that they're coming to for the first time, there's a lot of power in that. There's a lot...That feels sacred, in a way.

At other times, T further pondered what this means for him, wondering if it was getting to experience a more extroverted side of himself, if he was fueled by political anger, or "Something deep in there that I'm not entirely sure about." He states his awareness of what feels rewarding:

It's the personal engagement. It's the sharing vulnerable moments. It's helping someone out with a problem. It's...yeah, like holding space for somebody to even just talk about their perspectives on relationships, or how that's changing for them. Yeah, I think that's all kind of a part of that. And the discounted booze. Like that can't be denied. [*Laughs.*] That bar knows me very well now.

He talks of being very touched when he gets holiday cards and birth announcements from people he met years ago at newbie events who eventually met

partners through the social events he's helped organize and how meaningful it is when people approach him to tell him how helpful he was to them.

On a more personal level, T also hopes his activities make the world better for his partners:

There's a spark within me that drives me to do this. And I see how my partners are affected by specific, like by men in culture, by people that they're dating, by preconceptions of society. In addition to the poly thing, I do a lot of fundraising for the (Abortion rights group and an advocacy group for victims of rape) so I am aware of how society really doesn't treat people who don't look like me well, and that is terrible. And I feel like I should do everything I can to make that a little better. It makes it better for me. But it makes it way better for them, because if my partners are happier, then I'm happier. If my partners feel like they're being well treated in society, then I don't have to help them through feeling their way through that. I don't have to bang my head against the wall of dudes, hopefully.

Later in our second interview, T came back to why he does this work and the reparation that is involved for him.

I spent a significant part of my late teens and early 20s being a jerk, and so there's a level of recompense involved as well. I have a hard time relating to the teenager that I was. And so doing a lot of that work and trying to find compassion for my former self is where a lot of that comes from. And that was hard, and still is, actually.

He spoke about being, "unfeeling, impenetrable, arrogant" when he was younger and having poor communication skills that, "left a trail of not very happy people in my

wake as I went through life.” Now, much of his work is around teaching people to communicate well in their relationships.

I would throw terrible conversations at them like darts and then run away from the consequences of having laid that kind of shitty foundation for a friendship or for a relationship. And so when I see that in community, like I think a lot of people would be incredibly turned off and be like that person is toxic and I don’t want to have anything to do with them. And it’s like, ah, shit, that’s my job. [*Laughs.*]

I owe a debt for every—like karmically in a way kind of owe that conversation for every time that was bullshit before. So yeah, I don’t want to be hypocritical the way that I was before and I don’t want to be offensive and weird like before, and so I might be slightly, I think, to the other side of the extreme, but I actually don’t see the harm in that right now.

I feel like I turned into something better than that because of the succession of people who kicked me to the curb on a lot of my bullshit. And so when I’m dealing with that I want to essentially hold myself in a compassionate space during that conversation. And so that’s kind of the origin of it.

He circled back to why he originally started the organizing work within the poly community following some unethical actions of a previous organizer and how important it is to him to create safe, welcoming, compassionate spaces and how that drive, “comes from wanting to heal the community in that way as well, and live the values that they (previous organizer) purported to have, but didn’t. And those two things come together really nicely for me. Like I want all of those things as part of the way that I work anyway.”

Case #3: R

“If you are not actively working against the norms, then you are actively perpetuating them.”

Introduction.

R is a 38 year-old white woman who resides in a large U.S. city. She is an educator and mother of four who is polyamorous and identifies as pansexual. R has been married twice and has four children, two biological and two adopted. R is active in the polyamorous community online and in the city she lives in. When we spoke she was in the process of co-organizing a conference on non-monogamies.

R is at once soft spoken and fierce. She speaks in the relaxed manner of someone who is very comfortable with herself and her beliefs. I also got the distinct impression that she does not suffer fools gladly, having little patience for those who she sees as willfully unreflective, an aspect that will be discussed further in the categories of meaning. The idiom of, “taking someone to school” frequently came to mind, which with R, is both figurative and literal since she is in fact a high school teacher.

R says she never really understood monogamy and feels more compersion than jealousy in her relationships. She attended a small high school where people were naturally going to end up dating the same people. She also tells of her one serious high school relationship being with a boy who was clearly in love with a girl he had met the previous year at summer camp who lived out of state.

I had no issue with the fact that he was in love with this other girl—so that was really my first, like, I’m involved with this person, he cares about someone else,

and it just doesn't matter. Like if he's happy, then I'm happy for him. It wasn't a point of contention. There was no jealousy around that issue. And then basically what happened after that is every time I was in a relationship I was either getting in trouble because I was attracted to other people, which included women, or I was trying to make sure I didn't get attracted to other people, which meant that I was isolating myself.

R states that her "a-ha" moment regarding non-monogamy came in her early 20s when she read *Stranger in a Strange Land*, in which non-monogamous ideas are discussed. She was married at the time and had an affair early in the marriage:

So in the first marriage, which ended when I decided I needed to be open, there was an encounter with a mutual friend who I cheated with. And it didn't feel like cheating to me. There was no lying going on. There was no conscious deception happening. But the fact that the attraction was there, and that the friend and I crossed these lines that my husband thought were nonnegotiable, automatic boundaries, which we hadn't specifically negotiated, or said hey, this is not supposed to happen within our relationship, but are assumed within monogamous culture.

She and her husband worked through that time but monogamy always felt "off" to her.

So when I read *Stranger in a Strange Land* and came to this realization, it was like watching the puzzle pieces of my life fall into place and going no, they're not wrong. This is not a thing that I should fight against. It's really just who I am and what I have to do, and who I have to be, and there's a way to do that. And it

would be better for me and better for everyone I'm in relationships with if I'm just upfront about it rather than arguing against it, or fighting it, or trying to act like it's not there.

This realization ended her marriage and from then on she has been upfront that she, “only does open relationships.” Her next serious relationship was with a man who was already in an open relationship. At the time this relationship began, R had a two-year-old and was a foster parenting a 12-year-old and states that, in addition to being non-monogamous, being a foster parent and being in a relationship with a black man while living in a predominately conservative white area had a lot to do with the development of her political subjectivity. She talks about that time of her life and the college town they lived in:

It's a bastion of liberal sentiment in, like, the super racist South. And there is no way to ignore that when you're dating a black man, and a black man for who there's no chance of passing. He was dark. And he was from up here.

She talks of this same man, her second husband, being from an upper class, racially diverse neighborhood of the city he grew up in, “and he didn't see himself as a black man. But I was hyper aware of the fact that all of his white friends—and he only had white friends—saw him as a black man.” The racial dynamics that R was observing became even more undeniable when R became pregnant with their first child and she had to make conscious decisions about how they were going to address this in parenting a bi-racial child.

When we got pregnant with my 10-year-old, I became hyper aware of the fact that not only was he black, but that I was white, and that that was going to take

more than teaching color blindness, right? That you can't raise a black child in a color blind home, that doesn't work. You can't raise anybody in a color blind home, as it turns out, and you have to address these issues and start broadening your thinking.

Race matters to R. Both her undergraduate and graduate work focused on history, African-American studies, and the history of education. She was married to a black man, lives and teaches in a predominately black neighborhood and one of her biological daughters is biracial. As will be further discussed below, she is concerned about oppression of any kind and thinks about intersecting identities, finding it impossible to consider one without considering all. R attributes her political development to a host of factors, many of which are discussed or evident throughout the categories of meaning. She identifies being a social studies teacher and constantly looking at things from varying viewpoints, the dynamics of her family of origin, being involved with people of color, and being a parent as aspects that influenced her political subjectivity. As mentioned briefly above, R believes that the intersection of being non-monogamous and her education, relationships, and parenting in young adulthood were a catalyst for her to grow quickly in a short amount of time. She likes to think that she would have developed politically otherwise, but thinks it probably would have taken longer. She talks of having to face "cognitive dissonance" then and that being a "tipping point" for her, which she thinks was also probably easier for her in her formative mid-20s than it would have been to face if she were older.

When I asked R what interested her in talking with me about this topic, she spoke about how the books about polyamory focus on everything but the larger socio-political meanings and implications of non-monogamy.

But those books then don't address the larger societal implications of doing those things. When you come into non-monogamy, there's no way to avoid the fact that you are going against the norms of our society. The books that are out there I don't think address that political aspect of challenging social norms, right, that you have social norms that we teach not only in families and in couples, but in schools, and through laws.

R goes on to say how not writing and talking about polyamory in the larger socio-political sense,

Further isolates the community into a white middle class situation, similar to the way that gay marriage became the one focus of the LGBT community over much more arguably pressing needs like trans homelessness or suicide rates among young LGBTQ.

The categories of meaning from my interviews with R are; the politics of otherness, oppressive silence, and self-examination.

Categories of meaning.

The politics of otherness.

This category of meaning encompasses themes of intersectionality, being "other" than the norm and how this otherness is often "erased," and the normativity that is perpetuated within the polyamory community. R is highly attuned to marginalization in

larger society as a whole, inside the polyamory community, and with how polyamory has been portrayed by popular media. Similar to the other participants in this study, which will be further discussed in the next section, R tends to look at most issues in the larger socio-political contexts and sees all marginalized or non-normative identities as intersecting:

And I think that's sort of the crux of the sociopolitical aspect of polyamory for me to ignore the sociopolitical aspects of polyamory means you're ignoring them everywhere else. That you can't say I'm going to fight—I'm going to stand over here and be anti-Trump, but I'm not going to look at this sociopolitical situation. Yeah, I just don't know how you do that. I don't know how you pick just one.

In a later interview, she talks about how polyamory, in addition to any non-normative way of being, is political resistance:

I think that anything that is outside of the norm is a type of political resistance. So non-monogamy is political resistance the same way that not being heterosexual is a political resistance the same way that not being heterosexual is political in our society. To exist in a world where the norm is so expected, and not only expected, but rewarded, particularly through marriage, in our culture where marriage confers so many privileges.

She goes on to discuss how in her view, hetero-normativity, mono-normativity, sexism and racism are very tied up with and perpetuation to a capitalist economic society where norms are awarded privilege and rights, such as those conveyed by marriage, and how she questions all of those norms. She also has strong ideas questioning the

allegiance to biological family when in fact, “all family is chosen family,” meaning that families are initiated by marriage.

R speaks to the same issues as Wilkinson (2010) (see literature review) regarding whether one rejects monogamy but continues to live a normative lifestyle or whether they reject mono-normativity. Similar to Wilkinson, she uses gay marriage as an example of this and criticizes the idea of polyamorists taking up the same “flagship issue.” For her, trying to fit into a system that is oppressive is collusion and ignoring of more pressing social justice issues.

R is much more in favor of directly challenging norms and systemic oppression rather than trying to fit into that system. So, she takes issue when she sees that attempt at fitting in within the polyamory community or as it is portrayed in media. While R initially found the label polyamory to be helpful, she is increasingly uncomfortable with how it has been represented in the media, what I referred to in earlier sections of this dissertation as de-contextualizing and de-politicizing. She sees the focus of this dissertation and other work that takes the larger socio-political context into consideration as, “needed and necessary at this point to shift that, to take the focus off of where it’s moved to,” referring mostly to the media but also to some of the organized polyamory community. R is critical of the media representation of polyamory as white, heterosexual, and middle-class, “And that label has a very specific look in our culture now. TV shows have a very specific look. Pictures and articles have a very specific look.”

Interviewer: Would you say a little more about that particular look?

R: That white hetero look? [*Laughs.*] So the polyamory community is extremely

white, it's extremely middle class, and it's extremely hetero, or a hetero couple with one hetero, passing bisexual, partner. That partner is usually the woman, the way things are portrayed, the conversations that happen on forums. It's not always, but almost always it's the woman, which then plays into hetero fantasies by the man, which then allows for threesomes, which then still erases lesbians. It still erases bi women. It still erases bi men, particularly. And it absolutely erases the other components of the LGBT community who, gay men, especially, who have been in open relationships forever, I mean. And here we are like oh, look, this is a cool thing. And they're like, yeah, right. [*Laughs.*]

R goes on to talk about race and the problematics of not seeing polyamory as political. For her it is impossible to inhabit or look at one marginalized segment of society without it intersecting into others.

And it, of course, causes the same racial splits that happen everywhere else, that you have then people of color who are not safe in white spaces, that white people are oblivious to the fact that they're not safe, that they won't address their own white supremacy and their own ingrained racism. They look at each other and go we're all good people. We support Hillary and we do the right things.

And yet they aren't reflective at all on what their actual other norms are outside of I'm just not monogamous. I'm ethically non-monogamous. Okay, well, but you are not ethically racist, like, you're not looking at those deeper issues. So in sort of the larger context of non-monogamy and polyamory, there's just no way to ignore all those other social constructs. And yet people try. They continue to try.

R spoke about the “erasure” of otherness as she sees it in all contexts, including within the polyamory community. R attributes this to people’s avoidance of the discomfort that comes with cognitive dissonance. She has observed a change in the language and the meaning of the term polyamory over the past five years or so, similar to Klesse’s work in the above literature review. R initially appreciated the term and having language to talk about specific forms of non-monogamy. She notes that early podcasts and radio shows in her city were representative of polyamorous people all along the race, class, gender, and sexuality continuums. In her view, the appearance of mainstream television and print articles harkened the erasure of diversity, making the representation of polyamory white, middle-class, and heterosexual.

And so even non-monogamy community, the racial and the polyamorous movement, right, for me was a way to change those norms. And the words now have shifted. Polyamory doesn’t do that now. Polyamory has now been used as a norm. They have been moved into I reject monogamy, but I’m still part of the norm. I think now the catch phrases for the anti-norm would be relationship anarchy or that I’m non-monogamous instead of that I’m just open, but polyamorous definitely is the norm.

Silence of the privileged is oppressive (being out and speaking out as political action).

For R, silence, especially by those with white, middle-class, heterosexual privilege is oppressive. She strongly believes that it is the responsibility of those who

have privilege to use that privilege to challenge marginalization and oppression. One way R does this is by being out:

I'm out everywhere. My family all know. I've been out forever with my family. My kids obviously know that I'm out. Their friends know that I'm out; both in the sense that my kids are very upfront, at least my three older kids are very upfront about it. So I'm out in every aspect. I'm out in the classroom, I'm out at the school, I'm out in whatever is happening in (city).

R tells about being out as non-monogamous and bi-sexual in a local newspaper article 3 years ago and a community member complained to her school district. Unlike many school districts across the country, R teaches in a large urban area where the school district has anti-discrimination policies but she was still called in by her principal and questioned if it was "moral" for her to be out and encouraged to, "keep my head down," which R absolutely refuses to do. For her, the moral imperative is to be out and do the work to create safe spaces for her children and her students.

And I'm like if I can't be out in the community and I don't have support for that, my students don't have support for that. So it's, you know, the de-politicization becomes a safety thing, right? Or we don't want bad press here for that thing. And I don't have time for that. If I don't take the bad press, if I don't stick my own neck out, then my daughters have to do that.

It means that they have to grow up in a place that's less safe for them. Three of my four daughters are polyamorous, and non-binary, and not hetero. And as a straight presenting person particularly, and as a cis woman, I can't make them

do that work. So it's that. It's the mainstream who wants to stay safe. They want things to stay the same. They want things to be normal.

They don't want to think about the change. And I absolutely am not willing to say that my comfort today is worth more than my children's lives or my students' lives. I just can't do that. But that's how things get depoliticized. It's uncomfortable. I don't want to think about it. Or what's the backlash going to be, and what are people going to say. I just don't care what people say. I just don't have time anymore.

This theme came up repeatedly in my interviews with R and is the area she is the most passionate about. When I mention above her anger for those who choose to stay silent, this is where it is most prominent. For those who have the privilege to remain silent because of their own discomfort is untenable for R. She thinks there are, "legitimate times and places to not be out," for those who have other marginalized status such as being black or being gay when, "your minority status is a literal danger to your life, or to your economic wellbeing, or to having your children removed." She then went on to identify her privilege as a white, straight passing woman with job security.

And so as far as I'm concerned, the sort of...the people who represent polyamory in the media—white, hetero or hetero passing couples—are the people who need to be standing up and saying this is not a white, hetero, middle class movement. This is not this group of people. They're the safest people. When they come in and they're worried, or they aren't out, or these different things, their fears are based in privilege.

She calls herself, “super-militant about the privilege aspect” and this is where she most often confronts the polyamorous community. She is very clear that if one isn’t using their privilege for liberation work, then they are part of the problem.

So for me as a white, straight passing woman, I have enough privilege that I need to use that privilege to get rid of that privilege, to make spaces safer for people who don’t have those privileges. And if I’m not using that privilege to make spaces safer, then I’m absolutely using that privilege to oppress people. And that’s unacceptable to me. That’s not the role I want to play for my children, and it’s not the world that I want to have for anybody in the future. It’s not the person I want to be in the classroom with my students. And it’s certainly not the spaces I want to walk into.

So when I go to non-monogamy and poly situations, and I walk in and it’s a room of all white people, the first thing that happens is I go look at all of this space that you just excluded. This is not a safe space now. You’ve made it safe for your white, middle class, hetero, ruling side, but you’ve just erased everyone else who was here before you. You’ve erased everyone who could be here by not making the space safe for them.

R doesn’t think she has all the answers to this problem but, at the very least, believes that those with privilege should at least be aware and talking about the socio-political aspects, and examining their privilege and the politics of their decisions and it angers her when they don’t. She sees a difference between those who view polyamory as a choice and those who don’t, “because when you can’t take it off, then it’s who you are,

and at some point it's going to come out." In R's experience, the people who can't take it off tend to be more aware of politics and intersectionality.

Like again, so that's where the privilege component comes in. And it's not on their backs. It's not on the backs of trans youth to be out, right? Christ, they're trying not to kill themselves and be homeless. Like we have to focus on who has this energy and space within the realms of intersectional oppression, who can be out for this, who can lead that without taking it over and saying this is our thing, right?

So here you've got white hetero couples who are out. Okay, but it's not a white hetero movement, and you are not polyamory, you white hetero couples. You are just people who happen to be polyamorous. And if you can't lead that into a safe space for everyone else to be out, you haven't done any benefit for that. You've just made more white hetero space. That space was already ours. We can do whatever we want. So if we can't do whatever we want and make space that allows for others to come in, or lead the way by pointing out the areas where it's already out, that gay men have been non-monogamous for so long, right, or that in the black community there's a ton of non-monogamy. But of course they don't call it polyamory. They don't call it non-monogamy. They don't show up at (specific groups).

Why would they show up there? Those are white groups. They're not safe. Those are the people who are going to call (children and family services). Those are all very important things that you have to take into...keep in mind as you're going forward with it. So how do you represent the community accurately without

continuing to oppress those people? And yet not just sitting back and going, well, I'm going to let them stand up because they're the ones who absolutely will face hardship and punishments, and harsher social ramifications, and the backlash of those norms, so yeah, super tricky.

R speaks about the personal roots of the importance of using one's privilege to challenge oppression. She is the oldest of 11 siblings and half-siblings and sees herself as having a relatively stable, "insulated" early childhood. Things changed a lot for both of her parents after they divorced and she sees them as being very different parents to her than they were to the children they had in their subsequent marriages. Being much older than the 9 siblings from her parent's second marriages, R became a nurturer and protector for them. Siblings in her mother's home claimed abuse, which their mother denied and when R's youngest sibling came out as trans, their mother kicked her out of the home. After years of trying to maintain a relationship with her mother, this event led to R severing ties and the two presently do not speak. So, R knows very personally the cost of silence and wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't use her stability and the privilege of a stable upbringing to help her siblings who had a very different experience. To protect oneself from anxiety or discomfort of confronting difficult situations makes the world unsafe for others.

It's such a hard line for me because—and this goes back to as a white, straight passing, middle class woman—if other white, straight, passing or straight people, middle class, aren't out or refuse to look, it does literally make the world unsafe for my children, and all of them, right? My four in the house and the 180 I have in the building every year. And I don't hold grudges against, you know, their

emotional turmoil. But I definitely hold them accountable for the fact that they refuse to do it.

Here you opened up one door, and now you see the other ten, and you refuse to open those ten? I will absolutely hold you accountable for the decision not to do that. That goes straight back to that sociopolitical aspect. Your refusal to take care of those issues that you have is leading to danger for my children, for the generations who come after them, for their friends, for everyone who's not you. Your protection of you makes the world unsafe.

This leads to the next category of meaning, self-examination. For R self-examination, facing difficult situations, whether they be in one's family or in the larger society, is an imperative and that once you start examining, it is impossible to not open to all oppression and marginalized identities.

Self-examination is political.

R sees examining and owning one's privilege as political and that it has to start with personal examination.

So I think it starts with that personal examination, that we have to open up those spaces to that examination, and we have to stop acting like those are conversations we can't have, or like they're taboo, or like oppression is an opinion.

R sees the value and benefit of being "conscious and reflective" and the importance of starting internally, raising one's own consciousness by making the choice to go to therapy or to read, stating her own preference for books on non-violent

communication and love languages for example. She gets frustrated with those who she believes have the capacity and don't do so and thus perpetuate abuse and/or oppression. Here she talks about privileged people who aren't out because they don't want to make their families uncomfortable.

And so here we are on one hand saying I'm going to create this relationship status and style, and love people, and change the world with these relationships, but I can't even heal my own past. I can't even cut out the people who continue to hurt me. I want to raise my kids with these people who hurt me. And that dichotomy, that refusal to examine one's self, this... I mean, it bumps right up against this norm of family in our culture, which is that family is biological. Which of course is hilarious to me, because families start with marriage, which is not biological.

She speaks of her own ongoing self-examination and how she and her siblings work through difficult situations,

And so being able to have those conversations with my siblings, to examine my own self, to examine my relationships. And then we look at each other and we check each other and we work together.

She thinks in a rubric of conscious/unconscious and reflective/unreflective. In this rubric, it is being both conscious and reflective that makes people change their behavior. Here she talks about in terms of parenting and how parents decide to educate their children about diversity or if they even consider it. As mentioned earlier, becoming a parent made R more conscious and more reflective and made being considered both a moral imperative and a political act.

And that's the difference between people who are conscious and unreflective and people who are conscious and reflective who change. So you have to be aware of that, that that's what that is, right? Am I erasing you because I don't have kids, and I never thought about it, and I'm just doing what people all do around me, or am I erasing you because I don't want my kids to see people like you? Or am I erasing you because I'm still just doing what other people think about and do around me? It's that moment of cognitive dissonance and turning away from it. No, I'm not going to go down that road, I'm right—and that's absolutely a sociopolitical situation, parenting in itself, making those decisions.

But it changes the view. It changes how you interact with people. Are you conscious, are you not. Are you reflective or are you not reflective. And there's pain in all of those things. A lot of people are unreflective and unconscious, or claiming that they're unconscious because of the pain of saying I consciously reflected and made this choice.

R is skeptical of the unconscious, assumed, automatic trajectories assumed within hetero and mono-normativity; that one gets married, buys a house, has 2.5 children, and is an unreflective consumer. She talks about those who aren't included in that system and ways in which it doesn't always benefit those inside of it either, talking about sexism, gender roles, the push for reproduction, lack of supportive healthcare and childcare, etc... and rejects that people can't be conscious and reflective of their decisions. She talks of her own conscious choices, especially around parenting,

Which came then, or continue to come with ongoing conversations about is this right, is this where I want to be, is this right for my kids, or right for the

community that we're in, is this the right community for us to be in, all of the choices that go into it. So there's never a static moment, right, when you're outside of the norm. There is no riding through anything. It's constant growth, or constant questioning, at least, to find out if where you are is where you're supposed to be.

She seems to suggest here that being non-reflective is a luxury for those who conform to the dominate culture's norms, that turning away from cognitive dissonance and discomfort is much easier when you are accepted as normal in society.

R believes that continued, deepening examination of the self is necessary and is itself political, for when one starts examining their internal marginalized or dissociated parts, it becomes increasingly difficult to turn away from the same in larger systems.

If you really examine where you are and who you are, there's no way to escape examining your family, whether that's the family you came from or the family that you currently are in. There's no way then to not examine the government which controls our lives, the schools, which raise our children, the communities in which we live.

But, she believes we have to start internally in order to have legitimacy to our critiques—that any critique we have has to have a strong base of self-examination. R explains this belief here:

I think when the examination begins at the other end, I'm going to critique the government, I'm going to critique our community, I'm going to critique the schools, without self-examination, then we perpetuate those institutions that we're trying to critique because we haven't done the self-examination to find our place

within those institutions. So we say oh, the schools are so terrible and they teach our kids these bad things, but we don't talk about the ways that we teach our kids those bad things.

And so without self-examination first, then our critiques or anything else are empty. And that, you know, being open, living openly as non-monogamous is a constant critique—is this really who I am? Is it really where I am? Is it what I want to be? Is it the right place for my family for me to be out with this? If I'm not out, what are the repercussions?

So the constant, continual self-examination, the constant reevaluation of where I am or where I should be, and then reflecting that bigger picture onto society—is that where society should be? What am I working towards in society if this is what I'm doing in my home? So from the micro to the macro rather than big picture/small picture. You start small and you move big. You know, you have a big goal, but you've got to start local, so to speak.

Moral imperative to be out to create safe spaces.

This theme has been touched on throughout R's case but warrants its own category. It is a moral imperative for R to be out, and for her this is very much tied to being a parent and an educator. Being honest with her own children and those in the classroom creates safety for them whereas lying not only perpetuates unsafe spaces, it puts the burden of being out and political struggle around that on the backs on the most vulnerable. She talks about not lying to your children and how clear this became to her when she became a foster parent:

And as soon as she moved in I knew that I had to take this stance, right, that I had to be totally transparent with her, that we had to have these conversations, and explain it, and talk about it. And so it really became political in the sense that it became wrapped up with wider LGBTQ issues.

Her foster daughter was in middle school where issues of sexuality were coming up and friends were coming out. R's home became a place for her daughter and her friends to have those conversations.

And so our house was one of the safe spaces to talk about those topics and open relationships became part of those conversations. And the sort of general politics of acceptance—how to be out, how to do so safely, what's not safe, what parents can you talk to, what parents can you not talk to. The safer sex aspects of all of that combined. So the sociopolitical aspect of raising kids in a general sense, and being, and just being out, a life that's out.

She talks about creating safe spaces for her students to have these discussions as well. She teaches sociology to high school seniors and they talk about race, class, and gender constructions. R is out at work and notes how this has allowed students to come out and be out. R recalls a particularly moving story:

I had a trans student this year who came out, who came out as a lesbian to her mother. She's a senior, so when she was in like middle school and her mother's reaction was so drastic that she has not come out as trans to her mother. And she's just waiting, right? Waiting until she goes to college so she can come out at college and live her life, and then never go home again. That's her plan, to never go home again.

That's terribly traumatic, as far as I'm concerned. Like if my child said I can never come home again, bye, like I don't know, that's horrible. I can't imagine being in a position where I had to say I'm never going home again because you won't accept me. But she came out in an assignment me to me. And so when I asked her about it later personally, one-on-one, she told me the rest of the story. Like that's why I'm out, right there, so that she knows that there's a place, at least one person somewhere that she can talk to. So those things are more important to me than, I don't know, my own comfort, I guess, or watching my own back.

R is creating slivers of safe spaces as well as challenging homophobia and racism in her classroom. She doesn't think she changes a lot of minds on that front but, "they are not allowed to continue to perpetuate that oppression or that hate in my classroom." She talks of at least disrupting other messages they may be getting and that they at least have to refrain.

They have to find new words to describe people. They have to find new ways to talk to people. They can't insult each other in the same ways. So even in that small space, they're not allowed to perpetuate those norms that our society allows all too frequently. And yeah, so a sliver of safe space for students in the room who are LGBTQ. But then a sliver of space for those students to realize that their actions are oppressive.

Case #4: C**Introduction.**

C is a 30 year old white female who works in the hotel and hospitality industry in a large U.S. city. C is married to a man and identifies as bi-sexual. She and her husband have been in a polyamorous relationship with another couple for two years. C is warm, outspoken, and gives a fitting self-description of, “feisty with a lot of energy.” C’s has an Associate’s degree and identifies strongly with her Pagan religion. While she does not have the sophisticated discourse of other participants and isn’t as politically active, she does think about polyamory in a larger socio-political context and has things to say about the topic.

When I asked C why she wanted to talk with me she said, like others, that she feels that only the interpersonal relationships, sex, and emotions of polyamory have been explored and that the larger interplay with society and the reciprocal impact is not talked about. She talks about the longstanding norms of, “one man, one woman, and 2.5 children kind of mentality,” and how society views and interacts with those outside the norm.

And society is just now beginning to say okay, it’s okay with homosexuality because it’s just one partner- one partner, and they’re barely grasping that. Now you have this whole other relationship dynamics that are legit relationships that have homes together, families together, businesses together, and how are we going to fit that into this little cookie-cutter of what the average American society, quote, unquote, has of what an average American society, quote, unquote, should be and trying to figure that out.

She also expressed a strong desire for polyamory to be understood and accepted and hoped that she would further that cause by participating in the project.

C has identified as polyamorous for a little over a year and says that it just fits well with her personality.

I've always been one that connects to people really easily and my heart's usually on the, just out there, open, and like that. And I've never really got this, found this idea of you're only going to love one person forever, that's the only way it's going to be, it never felt right. But you kind of want it to be 'cause that's what you're told.

C thinks that she probably would have always been non-monogamous if she had the language for it and if it was socially acceptable. For her, it wasn't really conceivable until she was an adult. She says it's difficult when:

Everyone in society is forced into this exact box and everyone has to fit in this exact box, it's harder for anybody to conceive outside of the box. I think it is possible for many more people who feel that they can only be monogamous not to be, but I don't think polyamory is for everyone, just like monogamy isn't for everyone. For me, I honestly felt it was something that was just naturally the way I was, 'cause the way I feel about people, the way I get connected to people and get connected as deeply as I do.

C and her husband have been together for 12 years and started out as swingers but then found that they both wanted more than fleeting sexual encounters; that they both connected with others on a deeper emotional level and wanted to spend more time with

them. They have had an ongoing relationship with another couple for 2 years where they spend time together in various configurations and are all quite close.

So other than scheduling conflicts, we do try to do things together. So all four of us are huge nerds, so certain movies we have to see together because this is something that's important to us. And we try to do dinners together, game nights together, and just spending time together, even if it's just hanging out watching a movie kind of thing that all four of us will hang out quite frequently.

Scheduling can be difficult because C works in the hotel industry and the other woman works retail but she also notes ease in spending time because they live close together and neither couple has children. C talked about her conflicting emotions when they first began exploring non-monogamy:

And at first it was scary because there's always that fear, 'cause once you're being told by society to, you know, one partner forever, and then you have this other thing, you're feeling like you're hurting your partner and your partner is feeling like they're hurting to you, and to have that conversation about how is this going to work.

C's history and relationship to being outside the norm comes up further in the first category of meaning, "the cookie cutter state." Other categories of meaning that emerged in my interviews with C are: using the power of privilege; fears of discrimination and screaming at a wall; polyamory is feminist is political; community as safe space and source of power and; polyamory

Categories of meaning.***The “cookie cutter state.”***

The words, “cookie cutter” came up so much during my interviews with C that she joked, “now I want cookies,” at the end of an interview, which was humorous but also illustrative of how prominent this category is to her. She notes that being non-monogamous felt very natural to her but wonders how many people are actually able to challenge societal norms about how they are supposed to be and live.

Looking back on how I felt growing up and how I looked at relationships, I think it’s something that was very natural for me. I don’t think it is for everyone.

Especially because, again, when everyone in society is forced into this exact box and everyone has to fit in this exact box, it’s harder for anybody to conceive outside of the box.

C thinks that, for her, being able to “conceive outside the box” came from not fitting the norm in several ways growing up and being harshly and relentlessly bullied because of it. She tells here of her process, how not having any hope of “fitting in” dissolved the norms for her and allowed her to not care as much once she was an adult. She also notes how it made her sensitive to anyone being marginalized for any reason.

I was always picked on my entire life, really bad, like edge of suicide because of the harassment like that. So it got to the point that I cannot make fun of somebody or judge someone cruelly just because they are blank—just because they’re a different color, different sex, different gender, etc., etc. And so that ‘forced cookie-cutter thing’ slowly started deteriorating as much as I got picked on and deteriorated because I didn’t fit in their cookie-cutter of skinny, tall, etc., etc., etc.,

especially in a smaller town. So by the time I got into swinging, you know, it was okay 'cause me and my husband were doing it together. It didn't matter. You know, we're adults and we can do this and screw what anybody thinks. And it was okay because he wasn't going behind my back; I wasn't going behind his back. And then when it got into poly, it was...it was just a transition. There wasn't any like official ceremony kind of thing to it. So it's just kind of something that grew from that.

She observes how someone has to fit into the norm enough to get by, that perhaps they can have one marginalized identity but need to make up for it by being exceedingly normative in other areas. She gives the example of if a black woman were to be president she would need to be Christian, from a well off family, and have an ivy league education and that probably still wouldn't be enough, "To get anywhere in politics, you have to do it within their cookie-cutter to get anywhere higher in that system." The exception being, C notes, mass organized political movements such as the gay marriage movement.

While C thinks about the socio-political meanings of polyamory, she doesn't necessarily consider it direct political action, but she does see it as a challenge to normativity, which makes it political:

Any time you engage in any behavior that's not the norm, you are challenging it. And if you continue to engage in it, the more that you challenge it, and then if you become successful and stable with it, then you're really challenging it because you're now saying you were wrong, look at what I've done, look at the good and positive I've done. And when you start talking about it just in an open forum you are challenging it because you are making people think, well, I know this person.

She is nice, she does this, and this, and this different and maybe this is okay because look at what she's doing and she's engaging in this behavior, or in this lifestyle.

C's hope is evident here, that one can prove people wrong and change minds by personal example. She also recognizes privilege and sees a need to use whatever power one's privilege provides to help others, which is the next category of meaning.

Using the power of privilege.

C's childhood experience of being bullied for being different made her deeply sensitive to any kind of discrimination or oppression. She repeatedly expressed dismay at how people judge others on the basis of difference.

I don't understand how you can hate someone, or shun someone, or deem something bad just because you don't understand it, you don't want to try to understand it. Like I get humanity's natural tendency, if they don't know something, they fear it. That's been proven repeatedly. But you have resources to educate yourself and you choose not to. And instead you just go, I don't know this, therefore I will hate you.

I don't understand it. It doesn't wrap around my mind. But again, that's because, part of my reason is because I've been made fun of my entire life for being different. And by different I mean back even before I was Pagan, I was ADD, overbite, glasses, my feet curved in so I had to wear special shoes for a while, with a speech impairment, who wants to be friends with everyone who also has a bad temper.

Despite such relentless bullying, C notes that being white afforded her some privilege and imagines that it could have been worse for her had she been a person of color. She is also active in LGBTQ rights actions and is an avid defender of feminist causes.

Not everyone can talk. Not everyone can stand up for themselves. Not everyone can speak for themselves, because of whatever reasons. I can. I know I'm not their torch, but I can be at least something for them.

She goes on to talk about the more general need for those with privilege to use it and refers to a recent example that received media coverage.

It was the Star Trek guy, bald guy, Picard. (He said) If you only listen to old white men, well, I'm an old white man. And he was referring to, I think, violence on women, or the rape culture on women. And that's the same thing. He's a rich, white, old man. They're going to listen to him before they listen to people that are directly involved and the actual people that are directly affected.

So his responsibility, if you want a community to be better, if you want a community to be stronger, if you want a community to survive, you have to fight along with the community. I'm going to say the illness right here is hatred and ignorance. You can't treat the hatred and ignorance by locking yourself away from it. You'll just survive while everybody else dies away. Versus you being out there and actually treating the sickness, and finding a cure for the sickness, and working for it to make it better. And that's what you need to do.

C is not actively out as polyamorous, which will be talked about more in the next category, but imagines she would be if there were more organized movements or if she

felt like there was active oppression happening. She notes she would want to talk with her partners first before being more openly out, as it could affect them too but, with their consent, says:

I would fight. I would be there. I would be a face. I would be, you know, on radio, camera, whatever social media you needed to, or meet all you need to. Why?

Because I'm a cute white girl. Media love cute white women.

While C has felt discriminated against much in her life, she would still want to use whatever power or privilege she may have to stand up to oppression. She also talked of coming out selectively someone if she thought it may help them. She recently came out as poly and bi to a niece who was coming out as trans because she didn't want her to feel alone and alienated. She talked of feeling it was helpful:

Because first off she was surprised, and then second of all she was happy that she could have someone to talk to about it, so if she does have problems and I talk to her, I'm coming from a place that can honestly understand what she's going through.

In addition to her own experience of being bullied, she says that she thinks about larger political issues from having a diverse group of friends in realms of race, class, and sexuality.

Because when you start being around people that are different because you're different, you start seeing the way that they're treated and you see the injustice they're going through. I'm not African American, obviously, but I have friends that are. I see what they go through sometimes in the streets, so I'm going to fight for them because I see what they're going through, and it's not right.

She went on to talk about the “platinum rule” as opposed to the golden rule, with the platinum rule considering empathy and empowerment over paternalistic charity.

As noted in previous sections, C has a history of being bullied and is outspoken against any kind of discrimination, perceived or real. The next category of meaning in this case is: fear of discrimination and screaming at a wall.

Fears of discrimination and screaming at a wall.

And when you’re not fitting society’s norm, you’re automatically pushed into a kind of shadow. Now you find your own cultures, your own subcultures, your own groups, we all do. And no matter you’re in, you’ll find a place to feel accepted. But in a whole society you’re pushed into a corner and saying that no, that’s not right, that’s not okay.

C is very aware of feeling outside of the cultural norm and feeling marginalized. She has found acceptance in her Pagan religion, “nerd culture,” and in polyamory but still feels misunderstood, stigmatized, and at risk for discrimination both for her religion and for being polyamorous. She worries about losing her job and has hypothetical worries for others who are polyamorous around parenting.

Because being a Pagan, I have to be careful on my resume because people may not hire me, because I run a not-for-profit, and it’s plastered on my resume everything I do. So if someone sees that resume, they may not hire me because of whatever their stigma against Paganism is. And if someone finds out that I’m poly, that don’t agree with it, and finds it a reason to get rid of me.

If I volunteer for my not-for-profits and they find out and they don't agree with it they can cast me because of defining it as unethical behavior. I have friends that are teachers that are poly. They can't come out because they will be fired on the spot. And it's this fear of being dragged to court, being told that we're unethical and we can't have children, or if you're in a divorce, the other partner's using that against you to take the kids away, or deeming you as somehow this horrible, unethical person just because you love too much, quote, unquote.

C admits not having experienced this type of discrimination or knowing anyone in the polyamory community who has, but she fears it and states that her friends who are poly do too. She has experienced judgement and been ostracized from friends who, say, "poly is a bunch of bullshit and it's just you being greedy." C struggles with wanting to be a voice for polyamory and wanting people to understand, but she tires of trying to make them.

And you're trying to convince these people that you are stable, you are sane, you are healthy, you are happy, and they don't necessarily understand it, so they keep thinking that you are not, that you're just trying to justify it or that you're not really stable, and that you're not going to have steady partners, and you can't have a steady household. Even if you do, they keep acting as if it's temporary.

And it gets to the point that you're just tired of trying to listen and say okay, we're ending this conversation—I have my life and I'm obviously happy with where I'm at, and you can either believe me or not.

C says she feels like she is “screaming at a wall,” with the wall being society.

Here she tells about some of her frustration:

It’s whenever I’m out with my husband and my partner together, and I want to hold both of their hands, or I want to kiss both of them. And the person looks in disgust or makes a judgment that I’m a harlot. That’s my wall that I want to yell at. Because they are seeing something they don’t understand and making a judgment that they don’t understand and they don’t necessarily have a right to make. And I want them to understand that this is not just someone sleeping around. This is people that have relationships.

She imagines wanting to scream out:

Who gives a flying fuck who or what I’m sleeping with, why are you putting a judgment on me? If you don’t want to sleep around, then don’t do it. Am I hurting people? No. Is it because I’m a woman I shouldn’t be sleeping around, but guys it’s okay?

She then imagines that if she were not yelling the above then she would be explaining (in a calm voice):

I can love two people fully. I can want to marry two people fully. I could want to have a life with them and own or not own a house together the same. And why is that wrong? Why does that bother you? Why does it mean you have to cast judgment on me? Kind of just shake ‘em a lot and just, why?

C usually says nothing to people unless they confront her directly and talked about wanting to be a kind, calm reasonable face of polyamory so that she could maybe change people’s minds but not feeling like it is safe to have that discourse. She then

noted that that is part of the reason she wanted to participate in this study and her hopes that it would lead to greater understanding and acceptance of polyamory.

And that's partly why I'm here, is because I am telling those people, just not face-to-face, necessarily. But anybody that takes and wants to know are gonna have an opportunity, whether it's another scholar, another college student, somebody in the poly community, someone that's not in the poly community. Maybe it's a parent, somebody who finds out their child is poly, and what does that mean. I am telling them. All of us are telling them by coming in here and talking and telling our story and our experiences.

Interviewer: That it's a way to have a voice?

C: A safe voice at that, too. Because once you speak out about anything, no matter who you are, no matter what you are, you're vulnerable.

Community as safe space and source of power.

As alluded to in this and other sections, C sees hope for change in community building and in organized group political actions. She has found a sense of belonging in her religious community and in polyamory gatherings but finds it easier to find other Pagans because many wear an identifying symbol whereas she finds polyamory community online, and by looking for group events and occasionally by accident.

You'll go a party one day that's playing board games and you find out that their friend is poly because of just hanging out. And honestly, I'm finding out more of my friends are poly I didn't know before that we got together on either Paganism

or geeky stuff or something like that, and I'm like oh, you're poly? Oh, you're poly? Oh, well, okay, hey, cool.

What I truly enjoy finding are poly families with kids that are as stable as you're going to get. Because again, one of the negative stigmas is that you can't be poly and have families.

She sees the potential of community building as political action in that it challenges norms and increases visibility for polyamory. She also notes again here how talking about polyamory and awareness building feels like important action to her, how building community, finding a voice and avenues to build presence increase power.

By actively engaging in the behavior and then slowly coming out with people who we do trust. And also engaging in, any time that there's an opportunity, going—even going to poly meet and greets because that's increasing our social circles. It's increasing our connection, increasing our voice because we're now, I mean, we now see that we're not alone. We see this room full of, you know, 30 people, hypothetically, and that it's more people there. And by having...when given an opportunity to talk about it to talk about it. So with this project, you doing this interview, you're going to take the information that's being given and talk about it even further, so even bringing it up even more.

Ultimately, she sees community and collective action as necessary to gain acceptance for polyamory:

We have a long way to go before poly is something other than this evil, taboo subject. I think in some ways BDSM is accepted more than poly. We have a long fight ahead of us. But I think that there are more poly people out there than people

realize, that there's a larger community than they realize, and that even coming together for just coffee is going to make a difference in the end because you will have people you can ultimately talk with.

And not even flirting or engaging in anything other than hey, we're poly, let's talk about poly in the community and have coffee kind of thing. I think that's important for the entire world to basically know, is that there are more of us than you think there is and we are, you know, we're your next door neighbor and you don't even realize it, and you need to kind of understand that one, we're not going to go anywhere and we're going to actually keep fighting no matter how much you try to push us aside.

Polyamory as a benefit to society.

C spoke often of her vision that if polyamory were widely accepted and the values it represents such as skillful communication, community, honesty, and love were widely practiced that the world would be a better place. This is a distinct category with socio-cultural, political meaning. She imagines that if homosexuality and polyamory were widely embraced it would result in, "more adoptions, more businesses, more stable economics because stable households equals better economics." She feels that society does itself a disservice by not being inclusive:

I think that hinders society that doesn't accept everyone that's there and really acknowledges that people are there and that they are different, and how they can actually benefit society as a whole, and by society, say, just cutting it off or whatever it is, you're cutting off part of your people, and your people that are

paying taxes to your country, and are paying their dedication by working, or volunteering, or doing anything they can to better the community that they're in. And by cutting them off, you're basically saying we just want your money, but we don't want you to be around, and you need to go away in every other aspect of that, and we're going to make sure you go away by making these laws and making it harder for you to do certain things.

She very much dreams of a loving, inclusive society, which also seems in line with her religious beliefs. She feels that if society could accept polyamory:

I think society would flourish. I think there would be stronger relationships, and I think people would work together more, because you wouldn't have this idea that this person doesn't fit in this box, and so they're bad. And so I think communities would actually thrive better, and we wouldn't be necessarily scared of each other as much because oh, this person is blank, and therefore doesn't fit in my box, and so is therefore this.

And I think more art would be made, more beauty would be made. And I think we would accomplish more. Usually societies that embrace individualism like that, it actually does flourish and tend to grow versus places that force that cookie-cutter state on everyone.

Polyamory is feminist is political.

C's feminist values were evident throughout her interviews in many areas including right to choose around parenting, to concerns about the way western medicine is approaching child birth and in talking about polyamory. She dislikes the way

polyamory is portrayed on television, especially in the way she sees it as perpetuating heterosexism. C sees polyamory as empowering and equalizing for women and rails against polygamy and against the cultural norms that it's o.k. for men to have many partners but not women to which C says, "that pisses me off, 'cause if a husband is pleasing four other women, he's definitely not pleasing my needs."

C further talks about her anger at ideas that women are less sexual than men or that they should want to be monogamous and be mothers and be satisfied with domestic duties.

And no! Life is fun. Life is exciting. Life is experiences. You don't live in a room. You live out in the world with people. Having multiple people in your life is that. My partners are different people. Vastly different or slightly different, it doesn't matter. They both will see things differently. We will both go to the same event. All three of us will go to the same event and they both will react to it differently. And having that dynamic with that person is just as meaningful and just as important as one or the other.

And putting women into little boxes where we can't, or we're not allowed to, or we just don't because we are simple women, is putting us in these things and telling us that we're supposed to be this, and trying, again, going back to the old society mind, the old world mind, where we just stay home in the kitchen and cook and clean and raise the children. We don't do that.

That culture is fully changing now because we're less and less having children, and more women fighting for what they want, and being out of the household. But there's still that idea that women are not supposed to be sexual,

that our sexuality is bad. But men's sexuality is put on a pedestal. That men are supposed to sleep around, but we're not supposed to. Polyamory changes that.

As we've seen throughout this case, for C, polyamory is many things; a way to challenge gender norms, a place of acceptance, and a possible vehicle for socio-political progress.

Chapter V

Discussion

Introduction

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical meanings of polyamory to those who are living it and think about it in those terms. The previous chapter presented the cases of four individuals I interviewed who identify as polyamorous and who think about the socio-political meaning and context of polyamory. I presented their individual stories of polyamory and the categories of meaning relating to the socio-political that arose from their interviews. In this chapter, I will present findings from across the cases and discuss negative case findings. I will then discuss how the findings from this study can inform how psychoanalytic clinical social work might engage and converse with non-monogamies in the section on the theoretical, clinical, and research implications of this study.

Cross Case Findings

I began this study without expectation of what I might find. It surprised me to have more a sense of wonder than of expectation; really not knowing, but feeling it important to consider polyamory in a way that was not power evasive or de-

contextualizing. I wondered if I would even find any participants who thought about their non-monogamy in terms of the socio-political and didn't know how they might think about it or what they would have to say. After a slow start recruiting, partly due to having recently relocated and not having ties to the polyamory community in my new location, a contact in another city shared my posting and I received over 50 replies in two days. Part of me wanted to change my methodology and talk to all of those who responded. Not all who responded did think about polyamory in the socio-political, which will be discussed in the section on negative cases but I was surprised by how many people from one general (not politically focused) polyamory message board wanted to talk about their experience and further academic research on the topic. For those I was able to talk with, the cases that were presented here, I was struck by the depth of their thoughtfulness about the socio-political meanings of their polyamory and somewhat surprised that the cross case analysis revealed so many common themes and that these themes were reflective of many of the themes discussed theoretically in the literature review.

Each participant's stated motivations for participating in the study were discussed in their case section. However, it is significant to note that all of the participants expressed that part of the reason they wished to participate was because they felt research on polyamory is important and wanted to contribute to it. Also, as will be discussed further in the category of "Discourse for Better or Worse" they were all troubled by the portrayal of polyamory in mainstream media, seeing it as a facile at best and, at worst, as damaging and oppressive in its erasure of those who are not white, not hetero, and not middle class, along with the erasure of women's subjectivities. They all felt it was

important to contribute to a nuanced, complex understanding of non-monogamy in a larger socio-political cultural context.

Three main conceptual categories emerged from the cross case analysis of interview data and the researcher's experience interviewing participants. First, is how the participants conceptualize the sociopolitical meanings of polyamory, what they see as essentially political about polyamory. The second is how they put their beliefs into action, how they challenge mononormativity. Finally, are the functions of the ever changing discourse around non-monogamies.

Sociopolitical meanings of polyamory.

Interweaving of the personal and the political.

Most noteworthy is how inextricable the personal and political are for the participants. The personal is very much political and vice versa. It doesn't seem possible to determine which came first for these participants as their personal and political subjectivities seem to have developed not just in tandem, but interwoven together. Identity is not static and, as Layton (1998) put it is, "mutually negotiated and renegotiated," in concert with internal and external forces.

What was clear is that, for these participants, being outside the norm was almost automatically political and influential to their larger socio-political worldviews. It was also clear that none of the participants had chosen polyamory as a tool of political resistance, rather, it was just who they are and what works best for them. However, having a larger socio-political view or representational world and discourse around non-

monogamy serves many intrapsychic functions for the participants, as will be discussed the section below on discourse.

Polyamory is marginalized (but it's all relative).

All of the four participants presented the belief that polyamory is marginalized by society and judged to be abnormal. This seemed to be a given for them, that if you don't fit in the norm of being monogamous, or at least striving to be, then you are marginalized. All of the participants also talked about some version of how it can be easy to be closeted when you are polyamorous and their concerns for marginalized populations who can't "pass," namely due to race. While they all felt that polyamory was marginalized and involved oppression, it seemed to be on the less severe end of an oppression spectrum of identity politics including race, class, gender, and LGBTQ sexualities. While the participants in this study see polyamory as marginalized and therefore political, they were all much more concerned with the active oppression they see around them; all mentioning race and trans issues and several of them mentioned anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate crimes. This is closely related to the next category, "intersectional links."

Mint (2004) wrote about the similarities and differences of the polyamory and queer movements and noted, similarly to the participants of this study, that while there are many similarities, there are also many differences. Specifically, Mint noted that polyamory does not have the long history of medical and legal oppression as homosexual and queer categories, including that polyamorous gatherings are not raided by police or

subjected to violent acts of hate which is very similar to T's statement about, 'not being dragged from our homes.'

Intersectional links.

All four participants expressed their experience that being non-conforming in one way or another raised their awareness of oppression on a broader scale. They made statements about how once you open your eyes, you can't close them or of not being able to imagine that you could compartmentalize or, as R noted, 'open one door of oppression and not open the other ten.' They all expressed sensitivity to and a kinship with oppression/marginalization that extend beyond their personal experience. All of the participants brought up race, gender, LGBTQ, and class issues. For them, any marginalized population is linked with broader human rights issues, "broader liberation issues" in K's words.

I was particularly struck by how consciously and directly all of the participants identified their own areas of privilege. While they were speaking about the areas in which they felt marginalized they were all quick to name the areas in which they had privilege. All of them named white privilege, T named male privilege, K named privilege of having a stable economic upbringing and education, R named being a white, cis, straight passing woman with education and a secure job, and C named being a, "cute white woman." They also all connected privilege with power and identified a felt imperative to use whatever power their privilege affords them to fight for human rights issues. They are attempting to pave the way for others, trying to create safety, community, acceptance, visibility and language so that options for many ways of being and loving are accessible

for those who come behind them. In these ways, even though the stakes may not be as high, it is much like the black, feminist, and LGBTQ movements.

Political action/challenging normativity.

One research question of this study was, “how do subjects navigate in a culture intent on de-contextualized and de-politicizing”? The subjects in this study navigate this by self-examination, challenging themselves, others, and the broader culture. They do this by breaking down their own and others' facile assumptions, and bringing a gentle (usually) critical investigative eye. Disruption and de-centering are central practices that challenge norms and challenge the discourse on non-monogamies. The three main themes that emerged in this category are, challenging normativity is inherently political, raising consciousness and community building.

Challenging normativity as inherently political.

This category is not extensive as it is so closely related to the above, but is important to note separately. It seemed to be almost a given reality for all four participants that to be outside the norm is inherently political. They were all aware of people who are non-monogamous and don't think about it as political, but it was difficult for them to conceive of how those people could not think about the larger socio-political meanings of their choices. They all alluded to a sense of active denial, of choice to remain unaware. Their feelings varied towards those who aren't politically aware or identify as poly but work to “pass” or fit into a normative lifestyle in every other way which will be discussed below in the section on divergences.

One of the sub research questions of this study was, “What does it mean to participants to reject or challenge mono-normativity? For the participants in this study, there is a sense that challenging mononormativity or any normativity is political in nature and a form of resistance. A large way they do this is by being out. What choice does someone have if they don’t fit into the norm? How does one negotiate their sense of self—do they feel ‘less than’, pathological, or do they “blow up the category” that doesn’t have a place for them? Many of the participants in the study have chosen to actively blow up, disrupt, or reject the categories that do not have a place for them. Another way they challenge mononormativity is by building community and, as discussed in the next section, “raising consciousness.”

Raising consciousness.

While this category was the most prevalent in the cases of T and R, the others spoke of this theme as well. Participants all talked about the importance of being conscious in one’s choices whether they are choosing monogamy or polyamory. Several of them also noted how monogamy is rarely a conscious choice and how they would like to see people being more ethical and considered in their relationship choices as well as more explicit about what that means to each partner and the values we hold in our relationships, whether they are monogamous or non-monogamous. As seen particularly in the case of T, his own critical thinking and helping others think critically was an important theme. The capacity for critique has political meaning.

All noted that it starts with oneself, with confronting realities of oppression around them and in their own histories and then choosing how to interact with that.

Internally, this means therapy, education, and/or spiritual practices. Externally, for some this means being actively out, for some this means organizing within the polyamory community, for some this means educating those within the polyamory community about intersectionality and why it is important, for others it means educating others about non-monogamies and polyamory, and for others it is directly challenging others about their behaviors and beliefs.

Community.

As discussed in the literature review and by participants, polyamory and community go hand in hand. Polyamorist values are those of community-- equality, sharing, honesty, cooperation, and an anti-proprietary, non-exclusive sentiment relationally and materially. Consciously living these values is inherently political as it is subversive to patriarchal and capitalist interests, which value exclusive possession, ownership, competition, and individualism.

Overall, community was a crucial theme for participants. They described community as providing safe places, a sense of belonging, and identity. It also provides mechanisms for raising consciousness through education, collaboration, and discussion and direct political actions in solidarity with intersectional oppression. All of the participants described a sense of solace found in community, for K and T it almost felt like a life saver, finding community came with a huge sense of relief and validation. T and R also expressed frustration at times with community when they see people perpetuating norms and being generally unaware or unreflective towards the socio-political realm.

Discourse for better or worse.

I learned directly about the changing nature of discourse while completing this project. The newness of the discourse around polyamory and the tensions inherent in the creation of a new discourse were discussed in the literature review and I observed the changes in discourse over the three years I worked on this project. Discursive issues will be further discussed in the theoretical implications section below. Here I will present the findings across the cases in this study that are related to this theme.

As mentioned above, having a larger socio-political view or representational world and discourse around non-monogamy serves many intrapsychic functions for the participants. For some it is essential to preserving themselves in a world that would otherwise be quite hostile and fragmenting. The political discourse serves an organizing function, helping participants understand themselves. It is a form of sense making and meaning making. The political discourse also legitimizes, helps them to have shared language, and to connect with others and build community, which gives them power to stand against the normative, capitalist cultural pull to de-contextualize and depoliticize.

To the people I interviewed, having the word polyamory and the language around it was of great importance to them in their process. They all described how it defined, explained, and gave meaning to their experiencing. As mentioned above, it also helped in identifying themselves and others and building community around shared experience. Finding the language and finding community had a similar feel of being deeply relieving to participants; that there was a way to explain themselves other than being weird, pathological, immoral, or failed monogamists.

However, all of the participants commented on their disappointment, disagreement, and discomfort with how the dominant culture has appropriated the term. They noted that most depictions of polyamory are not only de-contextualized and de-politicized but perpetuate heterosexist, racist narratives. They explained to varying degrees that media depictions give polyamory a white, middle-class, hetero look which then perpetuates the silencing the voices of black, LGBTQ individuals, and those with less economic resources. K, R, and T also all critiqued how some of this silencing is unexamined and therefore replicated within the organized polyamory community as well. K, R, and T, all made note of moving away from the polyamory label that was once so helpful to them, feeling that it no longer adequately represents them because it now means something else, that the political is erased from the word. While they still use the term sometimes, they all spoke of moving towards just using the term non-monogamous or poly-queer which for them takes into account the political. This shift can similarly be observed in the larger polyamory/non-monogamy community.

Participants' active critical engagement with the discourse is a clear form of resistance to normative forces. There is something about the discourse being ever changing and by participants refusing to be codified, restricted, minimized, de-contextualized, degraded, or co-opted by normalizing forces. Something about it defies, sort of an ongoing assertion of freedom. A rejection of being appropriated by "assimilationist ideologies" discussed by Klesse as noted in the above literature review. Another sub-question of the study was how participants navigate in a world intent on de-contextualizing and de-politicizing and this is one way they do so, by constantly

challenging themselves, the discourse, and others. Always de-centering a bit to remain authentic.

Divergences.

In this section I will discuss areas of divergence among the cases presented in this study. I will also discuss the data and my experience of what could be called negative cases in the study, which were significant findings in themselves.

As previously mentioned, the participants presented in the cases above varied somewhat in their experience of felt marginalization, their sense of polyamory as a form of resistance, and in the amount of their political activity. Another area of divergence was their perspective on and feelings towards those who identify as polyamorous and don't consider the socio-political context. All of the participants expressed dismay at how people could possibly not consider the socio-political context but had differing attitudes towards them. T and K both expressed a generous compassionate attitude towards people who are polyamorous and who either don't think about it in the larger context or who aren't politically active in any way. K states:

People have a lot of variation in how much energy for political activity they have.

I think that it's hard work, in a lot of ways, to be politically engaged. And it's also just hard work to be alive and get through a life.

He spoke about how he feels he can be generous with his time and energy right not but feels understanding of those who don't:

I feel everyone has a discrete amount of stuff they can do, and some people just don't have the bandwidth to be really politically engaged, and that's okay.

They're spending their energy in ways that makes sense for them.

T expressed similar understanding of those who are not politically aware and active and both T and K spoke about feeling access to political education is limited systemically. T especially sees himself as trying to educate people about the larger socio-political contexts and issues. This brings to mind authors such as Cushman (1995) who note the pull towards a consumerist identity and away from being informed, critically thinking citizens. R on the other hand, as discussed in her case, is less kind towards those who are less aware and politically active, seeing their silence as perpetuating oppression. She is far more likely to "call people out than call people in," whereas K and T do more "calling in," or a gentler form of educating rather than confronting.

Negative cases.

As described in Chapter III, I screened for participants who self-identified as polyamorous and as thinking about polyamory in a larger socio-political context. Yet, I had many volunteers for the study who stated that they did think about polyamory socio-politically yet when I interviewed them they had little to say about the larger cultural or socio-political meanings of polyamory. After a few interviews where people really wanted to talk about polyamory but turned out to not think about it politically, I began screening more pointedly, attempting to ensure that people did want to talk about the socio-political meanings of polyamory and not only polyamory in general. Despite this, I interviewed three more people who when we sat down had little to say about the socio-

political meanings of polyamory or who seemed to be stretching to think about what that might mean, most thinking about legal rights such as marriage or how polyamory might be taken up in divorce or child custody cases.

I took a few things from these interviews with people who, despite not having a political narrative, had a strong felt need to talk about polyamory. More than just simply wanting to talk about themselves, these individuals seemed to genuinely want to help advance research on polyamory that presented a complex, nuanced understanding. In addition, there seemed to be a hunger for contact and to be seen, understood, and legitimized. One interpretation of this is in line with the cross case finding that participants feel polyamory is marginalized and that these participants desperately want to be heard. This contributes to the cross case finding that polyamory is in fact marginalized.

Implications

As discussed in the review of literature, there is a noted the absence of consideration of power or social construction when considering non-monogamies. As mentioned throughout, it was my aim to conduct a study that was not power evasive, decontextualizing or de-politicizing. To stay true to this aim, I did not engage in a deep analysis of the participants' subjectivity. The field of psychodynamic clinical social work and the larger context of normative monogamy were the objects of my analysis. Subjects' conceptions of the socio-political meanings of polyamory and their lived experiences were intended to inform the analysis. Therefore, it makes sense that the

analysis and discussion would center around these concerns as well as from the lessons to be learned from the participants of this study.

How psychoanalytic social work interacts clinically and theoretically with polyamory is important and needs to take issues of power and the larger socio-political context into account. To recognize and confront the context we and our clients find ourselves in and the embedded political meanings and implications within that context. We consider and take on power implications by viewing polyamory systemically, and not reducing it to simply an intrapsychic choice or process. I have attempted to consider polyamory in this way by interviewing participants who are polyamorous and also consider the systemic landscape of non-monogamies. I found it important to stay close to the data from the interviews. The participants of this study are the experts of this subject matter and I wanted to let them speak for themselves. Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry, I wanted their words to inform the field and to guide an opening to further questions as well as implications for how psychoanalytic clinical social work might begin to consider non-monogamies. Put another way, I found myself wary of over interpreting or over analyzing or focusing primarily on the intrapsychic lives of the participants until there is a non-pathologizing foundation from which to do so. I imagine this study as a beginning layer of that foundation which includes a deconstruction of normative monogamy and the ways psychoanalysis has been complicit in perpetuating mononormativity. There are important lessons and further questions that inform the implications to be gleaned from this study. Here I will discuss the theoretical, clinical and research implications of my findings.

Theoretical.

Just as participants spoke about the importance of consciousness of both the inner and outer world, we would do well to consider the same in our approach to theorizing about non-monogamies. The internal being how we acknowledge, think about, conceptualize, formulate, and write about non-monogamy as a field as well as an awareness of our personal reactions, biases, and countertransference. The external including being aware of the varying ways larger culture views and portrays polyamory and the possible implications of this. In this section I will discuss the theoretical implications of this study.

First and foremost, there is an implication of a need for psychoanalysis and clinical social work to consider and problematize the embedded mono-normativity in our theories. At the very least, it seems we should include monogamy/non-monogamy when theorizing about identity and normative practices. One theoretical implication of this study is that non-monogamies (inclusive of polyamory) could be best considered as a distinct identity category similarly to race, class, gender, and sexuality. While there has been considerable recent debate over the usefulness of such categories, there does seem to be some importance to at least broadening the possibilities through categories as a starting point. Perhaps this is a useful step as we evolve into post-binary, post-categorical conceptions. There is room to acknowledge and identify ever widening categories while still problematizing them.

It is crucial for scholars, theoreticians, and clinicians alike to understand the social and identity politics as they influence our ideas of personality and health. For me, this enlivens concerns that many others have noted around a split between politics and

psychoanalysis (Altman, 1995; Aron & Starr, 2013; Cushman, 1995; Layton, Hollander, & Gutwill, 2006; Tolleson, 2009). It also brings to mind Samuels (2010) aforementioned assertion that psychoanalysis is far more likely to analyze the defenses involved in non-monogamy than those employed in monogamy, which is an insertion of our own unconscious mononormativity. This study also reignites the following questions about psychological health: What do we consider healthy? Is health indicated by conforming/fitting well into our current society? Or is considered, critical thinking and consciousness the ideal? Certainly in mainstream culture anything that doesn't fit that norm is shamed, hidden, trivialized, sensationalized, etc.... rather than truly considered. All complexity and nuance is collapsed. Yet, isn't the ability to hold complexity and ambivalence a sign of psychological health? What amount of dissociation does it take to be 'healthy' in our society, especially if one does not have class and race privilege? It's important for psychoanalytic social work to consider our role and influence on these questions. As will be discussed further in the clinical implications section, I am advocating for an activist stance in theory and in practice, that we cannot take a position that social issues are taboo topics.

The findings in this study would suggest that our theories may have to become a bit more fluid themselves as they stretch and/or evolve to include changing paradigms. Similarly to the discourse around identity politics, the discourse around polyamory is complex and not easily reducible or static. It seems to me there may be something to learn from polyamory in our consideration of such issues. The participants in this study try, as does the general discourse around polyamory and non-monogamies, to hold many tensions and realities along with the belief that they can be worked out and made

meaning of, in community, without collapsing. The participants in this study modeled holding these tensions, of being fierce and passionate yet holding it gently. My hope would be a place in theory where there is room for polyamory and many other possibilities on a monogamy/non-monogamy spectrum to be viewed as valid relationship choices with as much potential for fulfillment or defense as any other relationship choice. The psychoanalytic paradigm has a powerful capacity for creating space to explore and elaborate the richness and depth of human experience and can contribute to the discourse on non-monogamies.

While psychoanalysis struggles in articulating sociocultural relevance, there are some distinctly psychodynamic implications of this study. As discussed in the literature review, contemporary psychoanalytic relational theory provides a space in which we can consider non-monogamy theoretically. This consideration starts with the position that our collusion with normative processes is largely unconscious (Layton 2002). Given that we and our clients are therefore unaware of the ways in which we participate in normative processes, this becomes fertile ground for interpretation (starting with ourselves) and offering these interpretations potentially widens the possibilities of ways of being for clients (Tolleson 2009; Tolleson 2017, personal communication)

While this study did not look at the intrapsychic subjective experience of relationship and the issues of desire, longing, aggression, passion, etc. that weave through relationships, they “surely pierce the experience of monogamy and polyamory equally—if not differently” (Tolleson, 2017, personal communication). Every form of relationship on the monogamy/non-monogamy spectrum supports different self-states and subjective experience, while obscuring or disallowing others. The findings of this study support

postmodern psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the self as changing, historied, contextual, multiple and fluid. These changing conceptions of self make all identity forms possible, pleasurable, and fulfilling, as the participants in this study demonstrate. None of them problematized their polyamory, they problematized presumptive monogamy and marginalization of non-normative identities. Practice from this standpoint is suggested in the next section on clinical implications.

Clinical.

There are several important implications for clinical practice to be gleaned from the findings of this study. It seems likely that non-monogamies will continue to emerge and that relational identities will continue towards being less dichotomous and more fluid. As clinicians, we owe it to our clients to consider the larger socio-political implications of non-monogamies as well as other marginalized identities even if our clients do not. It is also important for clinicians to consider and challenge our own normative thinking around monogamy/non-monogamy. Otherwise, we can too easily and unwittingly pathologize or be reductionistic or oppressive to the possibilities for ways of being available to our clients.

Psychoanalytic social work values (as stated by AAPCSW) include, “to integrate concerns for social justice with clinical practice, promote inclusivity and affirm the diverse identities of our colleagues and of those with whom we work, and to cultivate a community of professionals that advocates for open inquiry and respect for difference.” In addition, they express the aim to, “bridge social work and psychoanalytic discourses by integrating concerns for social justice with clinical practice, and to conceptualize

psychoanalytic theory and practice within its broader social-political context.” Clinically, we do this by acknowledging and questioning our own biases and norms and by considering the broader socio-political context when sitting with our clients. This would certainly include educating ourselves further on non-monogamies, as mentioned in the above section and, at the very least, to not focus on polyamory as an issue or problem unless the client presents it in such a way and even then to have an open sense of inquiry. There is also an argument to be made for being out as clinicians, either with our own identities or, at the very least as affirming of choices, including non-monogamy.

There is also a clear implication of the importance of our considering the interaction of the personal and political and allowing space for that in the consulting room. Acknowledging the dialectic between holding the larger view and awareness of socio-political meanings and the intrapsychic is crucial. It is important that clinicians don't contribute to the de-contextualizing and de-politicizing of dominant culture. One way we do that by using the language our clients use and understanding what they mean when they use it. We also do it by remaining aware of the larger social and political contexts that marginalize, oppress, and de-humanize and by engaging in our own self-examination and countertransference around non-monogamies.

One of the aims of psychoanalytic clinical social work is to help clients increase their self- knowledge, including the ways the ways their sense of self have been shaped by social constructions. Ideally, psychotherapy expands the possibilities for ways of being for clients that facilitate them engaging more deeply with themselves and the world. T gave a lovely example of a clinical encounter that raised his awareness and allowed him to make choices for himself outside of restrictive social constructions that

lead him to greater feelings of well-being. Pansulla (2015) offers a nuanced way of being with ‘category problems,’ that combines the best from psychoanalytic thinkers around how we listen and are present with clients. He suggests that clinicians “unhinge” their thinking and listening from categories, a surrender of sorts, a suspension of normative categories (in this case monogamy/non-monogamy) so that we might be with our clients in a different way and find our way together. This is in line with a postmodern informed practice that places an emphasis on many ways of being, many possible perspectives, and many ways sense and meaning making all while honoring and privileging the client’s perspective.

Research.

The psychoanalytic case study methodology utilized in this study was well suited to the research questions, which were hermeneutic and phenomenological in nature. The method allowed for an in-depth and contextualized inquiry of a complex phenomenon through the individual subjective narratives of participants. The small sample size in this study was helpful in obtaining richness and depth. It could be interesting and informative to do a study with more participants and perhaps fewer interviews to discover similar or new categories of meaning relating to the topic.

While the participants in the study were diverse in gender and sexuality, one limitation of the study is that all of the participants in this study were white and within the late 20s to late 30s age range. As stated by the participants, they have the privileges that come with being white and this affects their worldview and experience of polyamory.

Further research that includes more diversity in race and age would likely glean further important perspectives and findings.

As there has been no other research of polyamory from a psychoanalytic social work perspective that I am aware of, there are many possibilities for future research. My hope is that future studies also include a critique of mononormativity and a consideration of the socio-political context in which non-monogamies are embedded.

Appendix A
Informed Consent

**Institute for Clinical Social Work
Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral
Research
Sociopolitical Meanings of Polyamory**

I, _____, acting for myself agree to take part in the research entitled: Sociopolitical Meanings of Polyamory.

This work will be carried out by Lindsay Cusack, MSW, LCSW under the supervision of Jennifer Tolleson, PhD. This work is sponsored by and conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work; At Robert Morris Center, 401 South State Street; Suite 822; Chicago, IL 60605; (312) 935-4232.

Purpose

The purpose of this psychoanalytic case study research will be to develop an in depth understanding of the socio-political meanings of polyamory to those who are living it. Results may be used to contribute to and expand upon the academic literature on polyamory and may help clinicians obtain an increased understanding of socio-political context when working with polyamorous clients.

PROCEDURES USED IN THE STUDY AND DURATION :

Procedures: Data will be collected through both in depth semi-structured and flexible face to face intensive interviews. There will be at least two (2) and no more than five (5) interviews lasting approximately 1 hr. each. Interviews will be audio taped.

Benefits: There are no tangible benefits associated with participating in this study, though participants may derive satisfaction from sharing their stories and benefit from the knowledge that they have contributed to academic and clinical bodies of knowledge that may benefit other polyamorous people who encounter clinical social workers.

Costs: The only cost incurred to the participant is the time that it takes to complete the interviews.

Possible Risks and/or Side Effects: Potential risks to participants are psychological discomfort, including feeling vulnerable, exposed, or anxious resulting from sharing personal information during interviews. The researcher will make every effort to create an interview environment that feels comfortable and safe but should you feel any of the above you have the following rights: You have the right to refuse to answer any question I ask for any reason. You have the right to withdraw from the research project at any time. If you experience any of the above feelings or other

discomfort, please inform me and I am happy to refer you to a clinical colleague to process such feelings.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your identifying information is confidential and will be protected. You may choose an alias by which you will be referred to in transcripts and study results. If you decline to choose an alias one will be assigned. After transcription, the digital recording of your interview will be erased. No identifying data will be included in the transcripts or the final report. All research related information will be stored on a password protected computer.

Subject Assurances

By signing this consent form, I agree to take part in this study. I have not given up any of my rights or released this institution from responsibility for carelessness.

I may cancel my consent and refuse to continue in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. My relationship with the staff of the ICSW will not be affected in any way, now or in the future, if I refuse to take part, or if I begin the study and then withdraw.

If I have any questions about the research methods, I can contact Lindsay Cusack at 312.912.4845 or Jennifer Tolleson, PhD at 312.935.4232.

If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact John Ridings, Chair of Institutional Review Board; ICSW; At Robert Morris Center, 401 South State Street; Suite 822; Chicago, IL 60605; (312) 935-4232. irbchair@icsw.edu

Signatures

I have read this consent form and I agree to take part in this study as it is explained in this consent form.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have explained the research to _____ and believe that they understand and that they have agreed to participate freely. I agree to answer any additional questions when they arise during the research or afterward.

Signature of Researcher

Date

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