

Polyamory as a Cultural Identity: Implications for Clinical Practice

Abstract

Polyamory can constitute a complex, variable, and ever-evolving culture whose adherents must create for themselves new relationship styles, structures, and a language with which to communicate it all. Therefore polyamorous clients may present for therapy with unique challenges, needs and strengths compared to monogamous clientele.

Responding to a shortage of culturally competent care, this poster presents a polyamory literature review woven together with the present authors' ethnographic impressions, sample case vignettes and case conceptualization notes from clinicians both with and without experience serving this population. Clinical implications and recommendations are discussed and suggestions for further reading are provided.

What is Polyamory?

Polyamory is a lifestyle in which a person may have more than one concurrent romantic, sexual, or emotionally committed relationship, with the knowledge and consent of all parties involved (Weitzman, 2006).

Unlike infidelity, polyamory implies honesty and open communication between parties (Hymer & Rubin, 1982). Polyamorous relationships may or may not be sexual in nature and usually emphasize some form of emotional or romantic commitment between partners. Polyamory can vary widely in presentation and there are many similarly consensually non-monogamous relationships that do not identify as polyamorous.

Prevalence

- Though evidence suggests consensual non-monogamy is quite common among heterosexuals, such as Blumstein & Schwartz's (1983) finding that 15-28% of American heterosexual couples fit this description, data on polyamory prevalence in this population is practically nonexistent.
- Roughly 1/3 of lesbian women may be polyamorous or similarly non-monogamous (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Munson & Stelboum, 1999).
- Robust data suggest 50% or more of gay male couples are sexually non-monogamous, but a strictly *polyamorous* (i.e. emotionally non-monogamous) identification is likely less common (Adam, 2010; Bonello, 2009; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; LaSala, 2001).
- 30-68% of bisexuals may identify as polyamorous or similarly non-monogamous. Roughly half of polyamorous people (esp. female) identify as bisexual (Burleson, 2005; George, 1993; McLean, 2004; Page, 2004; Rust, 1996; Weinberg, Williams & Pryor, 1995; Wosick-Correa, 2007).

Common Misconceptions

Polyamory signifies dyadic maladjustment and is inherently unstable. Numerous studies have compared monogamous and non-monogamous relationships on measures of relationship happiness, satisfaction, and adjustment. No significant differences were found (c.f. Weitzman, Davidson, & Phillips, Jr., 2012). Longitudinal research has demonstrated no difference in marital stability between monogamous and polyamorous couples (Rubin & Adams, 1986), and that non-monogamous relationships usually end for similar reasons as monogamous ones (Ramey, 1975).

A polyamorous household is detrimental for children. Preliminary research of polyamorous families has found that children in poly households appear healthy, self-confident, and may benefit from a greater availability of love, nurturing, and resources (Sheff, 2010; 2011).

Polyamorous people are mentally ill, or have certain psychological deficits. A number of studies have compared consensually non-monogamous people to monogamous controls on a wide variety of measures, such as the MMPI, California Psychological Inventory, and many others. All studies reported no significant difference between groups on these measures (c.f. Weitzman, Davidson, & Phillips, Jr., 2012).

Clinical Implications

Common Presenting Issues

The vast majority of polyamorous clients seek therapy for reasons unrelated to their lifestyle (Weitzman, 1999; 2006). However sometimes polyamory-specific issues or needs may arise.

Some common examples:

- Struggling with stigma arising from polyamorous identity, or with issues around "coming out" to friends/family/work.
- Struggling with internal guilt or shame due to cultural heterocentric, mononormative biases.
- Assistance negotiating boundaries and needs, especially regarding issues such as introduction of new partners, shifting relational roles, task sharing, and rules.
- Assistance managing differing comfort levels and desires regarding emotional or sexual connections with others.
- Time management and avoiding "polysaturation," or having more relationships than one has time or energy for.
- Managing polyamory and children.

Microaggressions and Polyamory

Microaggressions are subtle expressions of bias or discrimination communicated through seemingly insignificant comments, non-verbal communication, or tones (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011), and often committed unintentionally by well-meaning parties.

Clinicians must be vigilant against committing microaggressions on polyamorous clients (c.f. Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2012). Some examples could include:

- A subtle sigh or eye-roll, or avoidance/discomfort, when a client mentions having multiple relationships.
- Minimizing the validity or importance of a client's polyamorous relationships, such as during a breakup.
- Expecting a client to be one's sole source of information on poly, instead of doing independent research.
- Focusing unnecessarily on a client's poly lifestyle.

Consensual non-monogamy is very common, and many clients are reticent to disclose their alternative lifestyle with their therapist (Wright, 2008). Therefore clinicians must take care to avoid inadvertently discouraging disclosure by committing unintentional microaggressions.

Recommendations for Clinicians

- Examine your own culture-bound and socially constructed biases about relationships, monogamy, and sex.
- Be extremely mindful of your own countertransference, and especially how it may be subtly conveyed to clients.
- Seek consultation or supervision if inexperienced in working with polyamory, and refer out if necessary.
- Research and learn about polyamory independently to avoid surreptitiously invalidating its importance to a client.
- Bear in mind that polyamory varies according to each person and relationship, so be careful to not project your own conceptualization of the "right" way to do polyamory.
- Likewise avoid making assumptions about a client's lifestyle based on their gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- Be mindful of the detrimental mononormative societal, family, peer, and work influences a poly client may face.
- Do not focus unduly on a client's polyamorous lifestyle if it is not related to the client's presenting issues or goals.
- Be open to longer sessions for poly groups/families.
- Strive for a feeling of comfort, flexibility, and a spirit of open-minded curiosity when discussing polyamory.

Sample Case Vignettes

Alice and Bob are a middle-aged professional couple who have been happily married for 15 years. Longtime swingers, they opened up their marriage to outside romantic relationships a year ago when Alice fell in love with a woman. While that relationship continues, Alice has recently found a new male lover whom she focuses significant amounts of time and energy on. Bob reports feeling intense jealousy due to this, which he is ashamed of. Alice meanwhile claims Bob has been alternately granting his approval for her actions but then making her feel guilty afterwards. Both Alice and Bob report still loving each other and being generally happy together. However they feel frustrated by their seeming impasse and don't want to lose the new connections in their lives.

Regina and Catherine are a lesbian couple in their early thirties who decided to transition from monogamy to polyamory. Soon after this decision was made Regina slept with another woman for the first time, and Catherine felt overwhelmed with insecurity and fear and requested that they move into things slower. Since then they have gone to several gatherings with other poly women but each time Regina flirts with someone else she describes Catherine as becoming clingy and demanding. Catherine feels guilty for this, and reports turning down several other potential suitors herself during this time in order to protect Regina's feelings. Both partners feel resentful of these seemingly missed opportunities. The couple presents for therapy seeking a path forward.

Sam, Theresa, Mark, and Jane all live together as a "quad" where they all share equal standing with each other, and nobody is allowed to have sex with anyone outside the quad without first gaining everyone's permission. While this permission is usually granted, Theresa has recently been using her "veto" power repeatedly against several of the others, leading to growing consternation within the household. Theresa cites a desire to "keep things within the family." Mark generally agrees with Theresa's actions, but Sam and Jane feel increasingly frustrated and frequently commiserate together. All four members of the relationship present for therapy seeking an equitable solution.

Clinician Comments

Experienced working with poly

Inexperienced working with poly

"A therapist with no knowledge of polyamory may think that polyamory, itself, is unhealthy and symptomatic of problems within the relationship." – *Anonymous Marriage and Family Therapist*

"I am suspicious that she is using the polyamory idea just to go outside the marriage." – *Anonymous Psychologist "B"*

A pitfall an inexperienced clinician might face: "Being unfamiliar with how poly people conceptualize and resolve jealousy in different ways from how monogamous people do." – *Geri Weitzman, Ph.D.*

"I would at the very least want to know, statistically, whether or not such relationship arrangements 'work' in the long run." – *Anonymous Psychologist "C"*

"The interpersonal dynamics and emotions exchanged between the individuals are likely to be similar to any other kind of intimate relationship." – *Anonymous Post-Doctoral Resident*

"An inexperienced therapist might...assume that because there is jealousy, the arrangement cannot be tolerated." – *Beth Leedham, Ph.D.*

A pitfall an inexperienced clinician might face: "Judging the whole thing as inappropriate because it's not monogamous...or deeming the experiment failed and pushing the couple back toward monogamy." – *Beth Leedham, Ph.D.*

"Does polyamory differ in bisexual v. heterosexual v. homosexual couples?" – *Anonymous Psychologist "A"*

"I would...want to investigate how this couple deals with reassurance and the sharing of passion and support...and work with the couple to make room for requests for affection, reassurance and touch." – *Dossie Easton, LMFT*

"I would validate the sadness and frustration about missed opportunities and the difficulty of the process, and look for ways that Regina and Catherine can support each other in grieving." – *Tori A. McDougal, M.Ed., Registered Intern*

"I am not sure that I would be able to leave my own personal bias enough at the door to treat the couple." – *Anonymous Psychologist "A"*

"I would need to do some research. Are there rules or standards people agree to follow? What are the basic rules?" – *Anonymous Psychologist "B"*

"I would want to assess where this family is in their development. Are they looking at buying a home or engendering children?" – *Dossie Easton, LMFT*

"I would anticipate jealousies and competitiveness for attention and affection among these four individuals would be ongoing and persistent features of this 'relationship,' and that eventually a 'quad' would not be sustainable." – *Anonymous Psychologist "C"*

"Safer sex and concerns about being 'out'...might be playing a role here." – *Tori A. McDougal, M.Ed., Registered Intern*

"The aspects of my knowledge of poly that might help me conceptualize this case include...knowing what are generally accepted vs. non-accepted reasons for a veto." – *Geri Weitzman, Ph.D.*

"While [my clients] can rely on my familiarity with a multiplicity of lifestyles...only they get to vote on their lives. So I would be extra careful not to indicate my own opinions with this quad, and would watch attentively for my own countertransference." – *Dossie Easton, LMFT*

Polyamorous Culture

In contrast to monogamy, polyamorous individuals have no social models upon which to base their relationships. As such, they must re-conceptualize mono-centric concepts and create a language to communicate new ideas:

- For example, *compersion* is a core poly concept. Considered an antonym to jealousy by some, it means a feeling of joy in seeing one's partner enjoying a *metamour* (another partner of theirs) (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).
- Polyamory also re-conceptualizes jealousy. In general, polyamorous people do not consider jealousy to be as catastrophic, monolithic and intolerable as monogamous people. Instead it is viewed as a normal, unpleasant, but useful tool to help deduce areas in one's self or relationship which may require attention (Easton, 2010).
- The poly community places a very strong emphasis on open (and frequently copious) communication, honesty, and personal ownership of one's feelings (e.g. jealousy), needs (e.g. reassurance) and actions (e.g. boundaries).
- Polyamory rejects false relational dichotomies such as friend vs. lover, monogamous vs. open, sex vs. love.
- Perhaps the most simple but powerful cultural difference is that polyamory generally rejects the dominant conceptualization of love and sex as resources in an economy of scarcity, whereby if one person has more, another person must therefore have less (Easton & Hardy, 2009). Instead love and sex are approached from a philosophy of abundance and viewed as regenerative, expansive and inclusive.

Further Reading

"What Psychology Professionals Should Know About Polyamory"
<https://ncsfreedom.org/component/k2/item/495-poly-paper-a-professional-guide.html>

National Coalition for Sexual Freedom
<http://www.ncsfreedom.org>

Bay Area Open Minds
<http://bayareaopenminds.org>

"The Ethical Slut: 2nd Edition" – by Dossie Easton & Janet W. Hardy

"Opening Up" – by Tristan Taormino

Polyamory and LGBT

LGBT Relationships May Support Polyamory

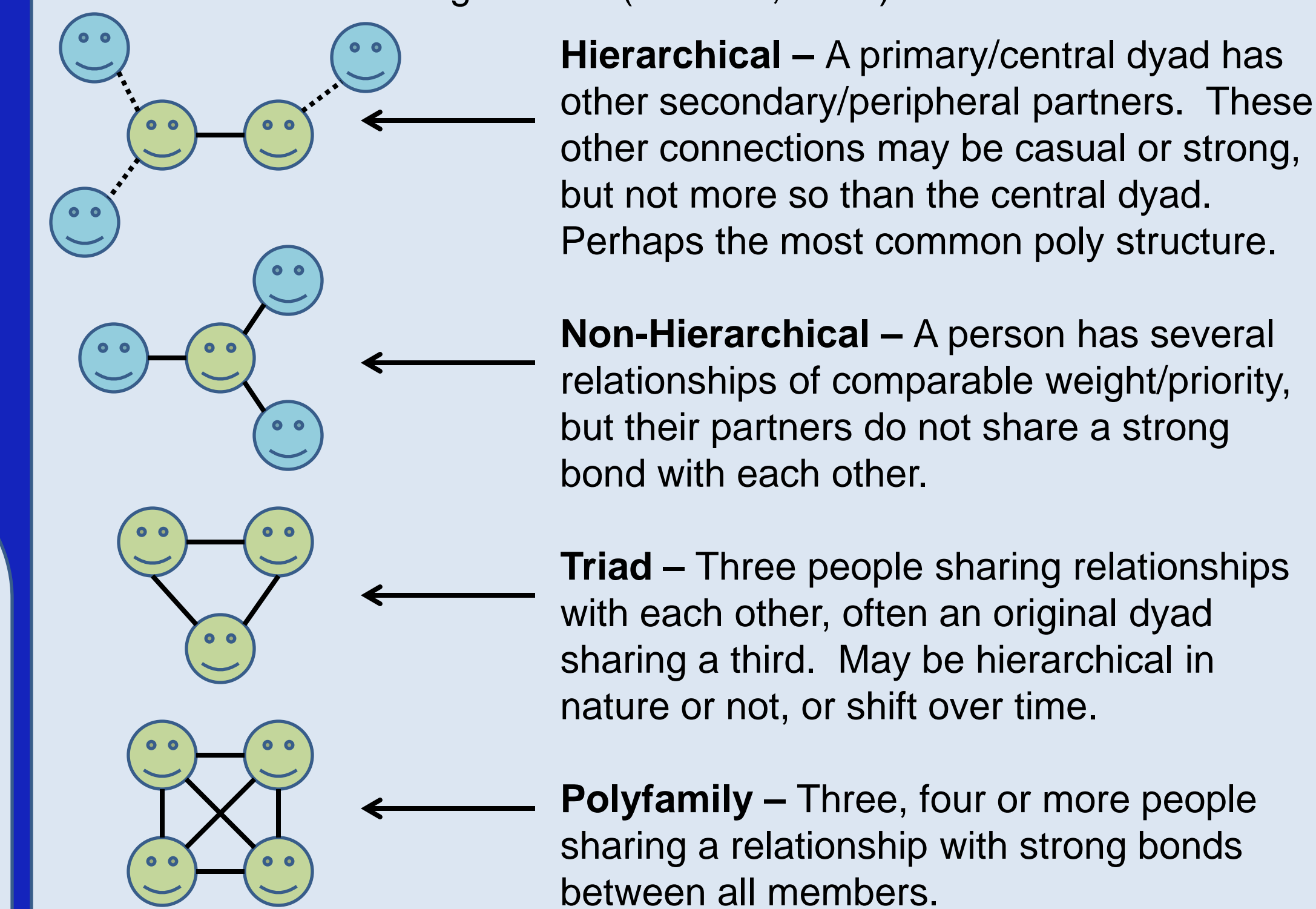
- Much of the polyamory/consensual non-monogamy research has focused on LGB populations, in part due to higher poly prevalence.
- As with polyamory, LGBT relationships lack existing models and therefore must be innovative in their approach to relationships.
- This approach results in greater dialogical openness between partners and fewer assumptions (e.g. monogamy often not a given).
- LGBT couples often reflect a "friendship model," emphasizing co-independence, egalitarianism (Heaphy, Donovan, & Weeks, 2004).
- LGBT persons often rely on families of choice for emotional support: partners, friends, ex-partners, lovers, etc.
- These trends are all convergent with, and may facilitate, polyamory or similar forms of non-monogamy.

Influence of Gender Identity on Lesbian/Gay Male Polyamory

- Increased emphasis on loving friendships vs. pure sexuality in lesbian community (Rothblum, 1999).
- More common to form loyal, tight-knit friendship groups and to mix concepts of friend/lover/ex-lover/partner.
- Represents an example of feminine re-framing of non-monogamy; often resembling polyamory even if not identified as such.
- Gay male poly often less emotionally open/focused. Influenced by masculine scripts of autonomy; sex as adventurism (Adam, 2010).
- Suggested that sampling limitations, mononormative assumptions in literature may obscure true nature of gay male extra-dyadic relationships (Adam, 2010; Spears & Lowen, 2010).

Common Types of Polyamory

Polyamory comes in all shapes and sizes. These are just some of the more common configurations (Labriola, 1999).



Tribe/Pod – Sometimes synonymous with polyfamily, otherwise denotes a web of relationships larger and less exclusive than a polyfamily, but more interconnected and interdependent than a loose network or community.

Polyfidelity – When members of a polyamorous relationship are sexually and/or emotionally exclusive with each other.

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