"I think that's really what it comes down to, is intimacy": LGBTQ+ polyamory and the queering of intimacy

Emily Pain
University at Albany, State University of New York, emilypain@gmail.com

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
“I THINK THAT’S REALLY WHAT IT COMES DOWN TO, IS INTIMACY”:
LGBTQ+ POLYAMORY AND THE QUEERING OF INTIMACY

by

Emily Pain

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of Sociology
2018
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iv

Acknowledgements v

Chapter 1: Presenting the Study 1
    Describing the Study’s Purpose 3
    Organizing the Subsequent Chapters 6

Chapter 2: Introducing Polyamory 9
    Defining Polyamory 9
    Situating Polyamory in Social Contexts 18
    Conclusion 35

Chapter 3: Reviewing the Literature 37
    Applying Theoretical Perspectives 38
    Researching Polyamorous Partnerships 44
    Researching Queer Polyamory 64
    Conclusion 83

Chapter 4: Interviewing Queer Polyamorists 86
    Designing the Study 86
    Introducing the Participants 100
    Conclusion 122

Chapter 5: Practicing Queer Polyamory 124
    Initiating Poly Relationships 125
    Negotiating Poly Relationships 145
    Navigating Poly Relationships 164
    Conclusion 180

Chapter 6: Doing (Poly)Family 182
    Performing Polyfamily 183
    Navigating Polyfamily 194
    Imagining Polyfamily 210
    Conclusion 232
### Chapter 7: Queering Intimacy

- Reconfiguring ‘Relationships’ 239
- Reconfiguring ‘Family’ 253
- Reconfiguring ‘Sexual Citizenship?’ 264
- Conclusion 274

### Chapter 8: Queering (Research on) Polyamory

- Revisiting Key Findings 278
- Contributing to the Literature 285
- Addressing Study Limitations 288
- Proposing Directions for Future Research 290
- Conclusion Directions for Future Research 293

### References

296

### Appendices

- A: Glossary 313
- B: Recruitment Fliers 316
- C: Electronic Call for Participants 319
- D: Screening Questions 320
- E: Interview Guide 321
- F: Informed Consent Form 325
- G: Participant Identities and Characteristics 327

### Tables and Figures

- Table 1: Empirical Studies on Polyamory 68
- Table 2: Participant Demographic Characteristics 103
- Figure 1: Forms of Intimacy and Intimate Relationships 241
ABSTRACT

Polyamory is an intimate practice, identity, and philosophy that permits open and honest relationships with multiple partners and centers on values such as communication, trust, and egalitarianism. The limited body of existing research on polyamory has contributed important perspectives towards a sociological understanding of polyamorous relationship negotiations and family challenges; however, it has focused primarily on privileged groups, drawing participants from polyamorous communities that are largely comprised of white, middle-class, heterosexual cisgender men and bisexual cisgender women. LGBTQ+ (‘queer’) lives have been severely marginalized in this literature, reinforcing oppressive gender and sexual hierarchies and leaving many important questions unanswered. Moreover, the voices of queer people of color, of working-class/poor backgrounds, and of trans or gender-nonconforming identities have been virtually silenced in research on polyamory. The current study helps fill this gap in the literature by centering queer polyamory and offering special effort to voice the experiences and perspectives of queer polyamorists of diverse backgrounds and identities. I conducted 55 in-depth interviews with queer people who had experience with polyamorous relationships. I present my findings through the lens of queering intimacy, in which I emphasize processes of ‘practicing’ polyamorous relationships, ‘doing’ polyfamilies, and ‘queering’ sexual citizenship. I also question what queer polyamory means for contemporary lesbian/gay and queer politics, particularly its potential to disrupt assimilationism. This research informs the literature on the sociology of families, LGBTQ studies, and polyamory and contributes new and revised theoretical frameworks related to relationship dynamics, intimacy, and social forces of inequality.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am genuinely appreciative of the many people who supported me throughout this project. First, I would like to thank my wonderfully generous dissertation committee: Glenna, Kathy, and Chris. I sincerely appreciate all of the suggestions you offered for this project as well as your unwavering support. I am so pleased to have had you as mentors and as models for my future mentorship roles. I am particularly grateful to Glenna – thank you for devoting so much time and energy towards providing valuable feedback. From the early phases of this project, your enduring interest and support helped facilitate my progression even through the most trying times that I faced over the past several years. Second, I am appreciative of the support that my friends, family, and loved ones provided over the course of my graduate studies. Most importantly to Matthew: I dedicate this project to your memory. Your unconditional love and generosity made this work possible. You are my favorite, always and forever. I owe gratitude to those who carefully listened and talked me through my fears and anxieties. Chase, in particular, thank you for putting up with my stress, anxiety, pride, enthusiasm, crankiness, tears, and all else that accompanied the process of writing this dissertation. Finally, I am forever indebted to my participants. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share your stories and thoughts with me. You contributed so much to my personal growth, both as a qualitative researcher and a queer woman in a heteronormative world. I wish you all happiness and success as you continue the journeys you shared with me during our conversations.
**Chapter One**

**PRESENTING THE STUDY:**
Describing the Study’s Purpose and Chapter Organization

Polyamory is a sexual identity and intimate practice that involves open and consensual romantic, emotional, and/or sexual relationships with multiple partners. It is one of several forms of consensual nonmonogamy, where partners negotiate boundaries and rules about external relationships; however, polyamory is distinct in its emphasis on disclosure, honesty, love, commitment, and egalitarianism. These alternative relationships are situated in a social context of changing meanings of intimacy. Our traditionally marriage-centered culture has witnessed a considerable shift, now centering on intimate relationships. We have more options for relationship and family construction than ever in the past, with greater acceptance of cohabitation, visibility of same-gender relationships, the delay of marriage, more single-parent and blended families, and so on (Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2005).

This transformation of intimacy resulted in greater attention to mutual satisfaction and egalitarianism as part of the new ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens 1992) and partners now engage in the practice of ‘disclosing intimacy’ to understand each other more deeply (Jamieson 1998). In the new culture of individualized intimacy, people have greater choices of partners, and rights to define their own happiness and to negotiate individualized relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992). The fluid and negotiated nature of polyamorous relationships reflects this transition, as well as its values. For example, the new intimate culture values disclosure and constant democratic communication, which are essential to polyamorous partnerships.
In addition, the new culture of intimacy is rife with contradictory ideals that create tensions between the individual and the relationship. For example, conflicts exist between autonomy and relationship expectations, freedom and relational effort, and sexual or romantic attractions and commitment (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Cancian 1986; Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998). Polyamory offers one method of managing these tensions.

Polyamory is a relatively recent phenomenon; however, it shares historical roots with other forms of nonmonogamy. Nineteenth century religious communities practiced a form of nonmonogamy referred to as multiple marriage. More specifically, all men were married to all women in the Oneida community of New York and the Mormon Church encouraged polygynous marriage. Although these practices involve multiple simultaneous relationships, they are not aligned with contemporary polyamory due to differing values, particularly in terms of gender dynamics.

Polyamory later developed through secular routes, such as twentieth century sexual revolutions, nonmonogamous communes, and new literature on alternative intimate relationships. For example, feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s criticized monogamy as an oppressive hegemonic institution, the Kerista Village and similar communes promoted sexual expression and multiple-partner relationships, and both academic and fictional publications on nonmonogamies flourished. Finally, the past few decades have witnessed greater visibility of polyamory, via the internet, formation of communities, and media attention. The online site alt.polyamory contributed heavily to public use of the term ‘polyamory’ after it was coined in 1990 (Kraemer 2011; Zell 1990), with the formation of related organizations and online or physical communities following rapidly (Anapol 2010). Literature specifically on polyamory proliferated in this decade, with media attention via television shows...
and news articles soon following. Finally, empirical research on polyamory has increased in the twenty-first century, with clinical studies examining relationship issues and sociological studies exploring polyamorous life.

**Describing the Study’s Purpose**

The existing body of research has contributed immensely to our knowledge of polyamorous intimacies; however, it has centered heavily on groups that are tremendously privileged: white, middle-class, heterosexual cisgender men and bisexual cisgender women. Some literature highlights this issue in terms of race and class but neglects the areas of gender-normativity and sexuality. For example, researchers note that the poly communities they study are largely comprised of highly educated white people (Klesse 2007; Sheff 2014), discuss the ways that class and racial privilege serve to protect polyamorists from social stigma (Sheff & Hammers 2011), analyze how poly discourse in literature is centered on whiteness (Willey 2006, 2010), and call for greater attention to the connections between polyamory, social class, and capitalism (Klesse 2014a) or other areas of social location (Noel 2006). In contrast, little consideration is offered to important questions related to how polyamorists serve to reinforce gender hierarchies in terms of cisgender privilege or the ways that some polys take advantage of heterosexual privilege by ‘passing’ as straight couples.

Likewise, the voices of queer and trans or gender-nonconforming people who practice polyamory have been severely marginalized in this literature. Where studies involve bisexual participants, the discussion is often framed in a heterosexual context such as in Sheff’s (2005) work on poly women and (cis)gender dynamics, or same-gender partnerships are neglected, as Klesse (2007) rightfully admits. In addition, studies of gay men usually focus on nonmonogamy rather than polyamory (for example, Adam 2010; Coelho 2011; Spears & Lowen 2010) and
publications on lesbian polyamory are scarce and dated (for example, Kassoff 1988; Loulan 1999). Further, empirical work on trans polyamory is virtually non-existent, although there is some literature that discusses polyamorous partnerships as part of larger projects on trans intimacies (for example, Davidmann 2014; Richards 2010; Sanger 2010).

Thus, research on polyamory appears to exist at the intersection of heterosexism and cissexism. Studies on polyamory among LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming people (henceforth referred to as ‘queer,’ see below) are warranted for several reasons. First, we simply have limited sociological knowledge of queer polyamorous relationships and families. Second, queer voices have been virtually silenced in this literature, reinforcing oppressive gender and sexual hierarchies. Third, this research will inform us about how queer people continue to question and redefine hegemonic normative intimate practices. Fourth, studying queer intimacies and polyamorous relationships will contribute to the conversation on the development of contemporary relationships and families. Finally, this research could reveal what queer polyamory means for assimilationism, speaking to the future of sexual citizenship.

**Research Questions**

The current project seeks to address these issues by exploring polyamorous relationships and communities among queer people. Broad fundamental research questions include: *How is polyamory understood and experienced among queer people? What unique challenges result from the position of double-sexual marginalization of being both polyamorous and queer? In what ways do queer polyamorists resist or succumb to heteronormative practices? What does queer polyamory mean for contemporary lesbian/gay politics, assimilationism, and sexual citizenship?* More specifically, I seek to answer: *Do queer people understand polyamory as a sexual identity, relationship practice, or something else? How do queer people negotiate and*
manage poly relationships? Are there sexual or gender-identity specific issues or patterns related to queer polyamory? Is coming out as poly similar to coming out as queer? Is there a queer poly community similar to the ‘het/bi’ (heterosexual male/bisexual female) poly community? Do trans people experience marginalization in poly communities, and if so, how do they address those tensions? Do queer people engage in polyamory as a radical political act?

These questions will be explored through qualitative research involving a grounded theoretical approach. I will conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with queer people who are in or have had one or more polyamorous relationships. I will employ purposive and snowball sampling methods in order to maximize the number of participants and recruit at numerous physical and online sites to diversify the sample. Four sections organize the interview guide: general questions, relationships, community, and social issues, and questions are designed to elicit narrative responses fruitful for analyzing interview data.

Note on Terminology

Before proceeding further, I should clarify my use of the term ‘queer.’ The current study uses the umbrella term ‘queer’ to refer to gender and sexual minorities (GSM). Our cultural understanding of sexuality refers not only to gender of object choice (sexual minorities being those who have same-gender attractions or those who are non-heterosexual), but also to sexual practices (such as polyamory, swinging, or kink). It is true that the latter groups are ‘queer’ by way of their non-normative sexualities. In fact, Sheff (2005, 2011) argues that polyamorists are disadvantaged by their status as sexual minorities; however, we are largely unaware of the ways that being poly and queer – queer by way of gender of object choice or gender identity – impacts intimate relationships. In addition, although women are oppressed by the gender hierarchy and traditionally perceived as the ‘gender minority,’ this research conceptualizes gender minorities in
terms of gender-variance, focusing on those who are not cisgender. ‘Cisgender’ is a label that refers to people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. In other words, cisgender people are those who are not transgender or trans*. ‘Transgender’ refers to people who identify as a gender other than the one assigned at birth, but generally involves those who identify and present as either a woman or man. In contrast, ‘trans*’ is a larger umbrella term that refers to any gender-nonconforming persons, including genderqueer, bigender, transgender, and more. Thus, ‘queer’ in this project refers to GSM individuals falling somewhere along the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities (See the Glossary of Identities in Appendix A).

Organizing the Subsequent Chapters

In the chapters that follow, I provide an introduction to polyamory, a detailed literature review, and conclusions of data analyses that center on queer polyamorous relationships, families, and intimacy more broadly. Chapter Two, *Introducing Polyamory*, reviews how polyamory has been defined in the literature, positions it within consensual nonmonogamies, and describes the myriad forms of poly relationship and family forms. This chapter also situates polyamory within sociohistorical, sociological, and sociopolitical contexts.

In Chapter Three, *Reviewing the Literature*, I consider relevant theoretical perspectives, emphasizing heteronormativity. I also review literature on polyamorous partnerships, including poly values, relationship negotiations, and power and privilege in polyamory. I then review the limited research on queer polyamory, detailing what I identified as four main themes in the literature: Queer-specific reasons to practice polyamory, queer and polyamorous identity disclosure, involvement in and interactions with social institutions, and heteronormative expectations and relationship practices.
Chapter Four, *Interviewing Queer Polyamorists*, describes the study design. I discuss sampling, recruitment, data collection, and data analyses methodologies. I also include discussions of feminist interviewing, ethical considerations, and limitations and implications of the study design. In addition, this chapter introduces the participants. In this section, I describe my participants’ identities and demographic characteristics, which is supplemented by a more detailed table in Appendix G. I then provide an overview of how my participants understood and defined ‘polyamory.’ Finally, I illustrate the various poly relationship structures that my participants have been involved in.

Chapter Five, *Practicing Polyamory*, focuses on participants’ processes of initiating, negotiating, and navigating queer polyamorous relationships. I illustrate my participants’ initiation stories through four themes: discovery, fluidity, sexuality, and being perpetually poly. I then discuss how their narratives on relationship negotiations highlight the significance of honest communication and respect or consideration in relationship agreements, fluidity and flexibility in relationship boundaries and structures, and emotion work in negotiating and maintaining poly partnerships. In the navigating relationships section, I discuss challenges queer polys face in dating and relationships, particularly as they relate to social location. I propose the concept of *relationship negotiating influence*, adapted from prior work on queer relationships, to describe how social inequalities can permeate queer poly relationships.

In Chapter Six, *Doing Polyfamily*, I shift the focus from relationship to family practices. I borrow the notion of ‘doing family’ that describes practices of family performativity. I first provide a discussion of how my participants ‘do’ family via their familial roles, households, and networks. Second, I focus on how queer polys navigate a variety of family issues related to marriage, children, and separation. Third, I introduce the idea of ‘imagining’ polyfamily as a
cognitive form of family performativity. Queer polyamorists both enact and imagine their polyfamilies in creative and unique ways.

Chapter Seven, Queering Intimacy, takes a deeper consideration of how my participants reconfigure ‘relationships’ and ‘family’ in ways that have implications for sexual citizenship. I first describe the ways my participants reconceptualize intimacy and propose a conceptual model that exposes the reality of multiplicity behind what is commonly understood as an ‘intimate relationship.’ My participants prioritized emotional intimacy over romantic and sexual, emphasized fluidity in their narratives on intimacy, and expressed a degree of flexibility even when they had normative ideals or experiences. I then examine how queer polys reconfigure ‘family,’ paying special attention to how queer political ideologies were dominant in their family discourses. Finally, I build from these two sections to question whether the reconfiguration of relationships and family translates into a reconfiguration of sexual citizenship. My participants’ narratives revealed a political paradox and disclosure dilemma that speak to the ways social forces constrain queer poly identities, understandings, and practices.

Chapter Eight, Queering (Research on) Polyamory, provides the final discussion and conclusion. I revisit the study’s key findings, consider its contributions to the literature, address its limitations, and propose directions for future research. My concluding remarks resituate queer polyamory within current sociocultural contexts and reaffirm my promise to the queer polyamorists in this study to transform this work into an accessible book in the near future.
Chapter Two

INTRODUCING POLYAMORY:
Defining ‘Polyamory’ and Situating Polyamory in Social Contexts

Polyamory is a relationship and familial form, practice, and identity that translates as “many loves” (Anapol 2010; Klesse 2006). Polyamorous relationships are those in which people engage in meaningful, ongoing, loving or sexual relationships with multiple partners. Defining polyamory is challenging because neither researchers nor members within the polyamorous community agree on how to define polyamory (Easton & Liszt 1997; Klesse 2006, 2007; Sheff 2011). In addition, practices and experiences of polyamory are complex and heterogeneous. Nevertheless, a critical understanding of polyamory is necessary to investigate queer polyamorous relationships. In this section, I review various conceptualizations of polyamory and provide a brief introduction to polyamorous intimacies.

Defining ‘Polyamory’

Researchers have offered varied definitions of polyamory. These descriptions generally focus on polyamory as a relationship form, rather than an identity; however, research suggests that it is understood by many polyamorists as an identity (Barker 2005; Klesse 2007). For example, polyamory has been defined as “a form of relationship in which people have multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners” (Sheff 2005:252), “a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously” (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse 2006:515), and “a type of nonmonogamous relationship orientation in which it is considered acceptable to love more than one person and emphasis is placed on openness and honesty within one’s relationships” (Barker 2005:75).
I use *polyamory* to describe the practice of being openly and honestly involved with multiple partners in meaningful romantic, emotional, and/or sexual relationships. In this study, *polyamorous relationships* are those in which one or more partners engage in this practice, whether or not they identify as polyamorous. Although definitions of polyamory tend to focus on polyamory in practice, researchers generally employ polyamory as identity in sampling methodologies by involving only self-identified polyamorists in their studies (for example, Bettinger 2005; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010). As research indicates that some people who practice polyamory reject that label (Frank & DeLamater 2010; Klesse 2007) or identify as monogamous despite being behaviorally nonmonogamous or polyamorous (Frank & DeLamater 2010; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), restricting samples to self-identified polyamorists fails to capture the full breadth of polyamory. The current study is inclusive of both polyamorous identifying and practicing adults.

*Polyamorous families* are those in which partners practice polyamory and self-identify as a family. *Polyamorous community* may refer to one of three areas: polyamory as a national movement (a more abstract term, similar to ‘the LGBT community’), local communities, or online communities. Further, *poly* is used to denote polyamorous relationships, families, community, people, practices, or values.

In addition, *queer polyamory* refers to the practice of polyamorous intimacies among people who identify as queer. *Queer* refers to both the umbrella term for gender and sexual minorities (that is, a convenient way of signifying the alphabet soup: LGBTQ+), and the anti-label adopted by those who reject normative sexualities and dominant identity categories (See Appendix A). Finally, there is a distinction between the marginalized queer poly community on which this project focuses, and the more documented *het/bi* poly community. The latter is
referred to as ‘het/bi’ because literature indicates that its members are comprised primarily of heterosexual men and bisexual women (Anapol 2010; Sheff 2011, 2014). In contrast, queer poly communities are comprised of queer (non-heterosexual and/or trans*) people where heterosexual (cis)men are largely absent.

**Consensual Nonmonogamies**

Polyamory is one of several types of *nonmonogamy*, which is any relationship form that involves multiple partners simultaneously. More specifically, polyamory involves *consensual nonmonogamy*, a relationship practice in which people actively negotiate and agree to relationships with multiple partners. Polyamorous relationships may differ from consensual nonmonogamous *open relationships* in important ways. First, open relationships are those in which partners may seek external sexual and/or romantic relationships outside of a primary partnership without disclosure of other relationships. Partners in open relationships generally agree that they may engage in external sex or romance but do not necessarily disclose feelings towards external partners or plans to spend time with other partners. For example, some couples employ a “don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT) policy in which one or both partners are able to have external sexual relationships so long as the other partner does not hear about it. Although some people in ‘poly/mono’ dyadic relationships (where one person is poly and the other remains monogamous) follow a DADT policy (Sheff 2014), people in polyamorous relationships generally provide disclosure of external partnerships. I would argue that partners who employ the DADT rule are not truly polyamorous, but rather consensually nonmonogamous, as honesty and disclosure are so heavily emphasized as polyamorous values. These values are discussed further in the following chapter.
Second, external partnerships of open dyadic couples are often thought of as relationships ‘on the side,’ whereas polyamorous relationships are more likely to de-emphasize dyadic couples or assign greater meaning to external partnerships. For example, ‘secondary’ poly relationships are often as meaningful and equally important as ‘primary’ relationships. In contrast, external partnerships of an open couple may not be meaningful, have any degree of commitment, or not even be perceived as a ‘relationship,’ because of the primary importance of the dyadic couple. However, it is important to note that many, if not most, poly relationships studied to date do involve primary dyadic structures (Sheff 2014).

In addition to conventional open relationships, polyamorists often distinguish their practices from those that imply promiscuity, such as lifestyle relationships, better known as ‘swinging’ (Klesse 2006). Couples who swing generally engage in short-term acts of casual sex with other couples or individuals. In addition, swingers emphasize the dyadic couple relationship, ensuring that their spouse/partner always comes first. In this sense, swinging may be more closely related to traditional monogamy than to polyamory (Denfeld & Gordon 1974). Swinging may be largely a het/bi phenomenon and less common among queer people; however, swinging could in some ways parallel practices of gay male nonmonogamies, such as in situations where gay partners agree that they can sleep with whomever they choose when they go out together to parties or bars.

Another major area differentiating polyamory from both conventional open relationships and swinging centers on sex. Plainly stated, partners in open and swinging relationships are more concerned with casual sex than polyamorists. The media’s emphasis on sexual poly relationships (Sheff 2014) has likely produced a public misunderstanding that polyamory is in line with other types of relationships that focus on sex. Rather, emotional connections are equally or more
important in polyamory (Klesse 2006; Sheff 2014), in sharp contrast to external open relationships or swinging relationships.

Nevertheless, swinging, open relationships, and polyamory may overlap heavily where additional emotional relationships are permitted and disclosure and honesty are involved regarding external partnerships. In fact, the term ‘swolly’ was coined to address the overlay between swinging and polyamorous communities (see Sheff 2014). Likewise, many polyamorists are also part of other sexual communities such as kink/BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism).

In addition to the distinction of ‘promiscuous’ relationship practices, polyamory should not be confused with infidelity or cheating, as polyamorous relationships are not secretive and belong to the consensual form of nonmonogamy in which infidelity is excluded. Although, it is possible to ‘cheat’ in poly relationships in two ways: if a partner betrays rules of honesty and disclosure of external partnerships or if a partner engages in sexual relations outside of a polyfidelitous relationship (Wosick-Correa 2010). Some polyamorists view these behaviors as “not poly” in terms of values and community members often punish this behavior via stigmatization or gossip (Sheff 2014).

Finally, group marriage, open marriage, and polygamy have some commonalities with polyamory because they may involve multiple long-term, committed partnerships; however, polyamory has a stronger focus on nonmarital relationships, partially due to lack of legal support for multiple marriage, and because the poly community is somewhat indifferent to marriage (Aviram 2007, 2010; Sheff, 2011); while group marriages, open marriages, and polygamy inherently involve marriage (Altman & Ginat 1996; Constantine & Constantine 1973).
Nevertheless, group marriage is strongly related to polyamory, in that it involves deep meaningful relationships with multiple partners. It is a practice commonly known by polyamorists as *polyfidelity*, or closed group relationships (Constantine & Constantine 1973; Nearing 1992). Open marriages may or may not be polyamorous, depending on the degree of disclosure and types of external partnerships. Like open relationships, these additional relationships may be ‘on the side’ or involve little meaning or commitment; however, other open marriages may involve high disclosure and meaningful external partnerships.

Furthermore, polygamy (having multiple spouses) may be considered a form of polyamory, although it differs substantially from the core values of polyamory in several ways, especially in the form of polygyny (having multiple wives). For example, polygyny enforces hegemonic patriarchal values and strict gendered marital roles and inequalities (Altman & Ginat 1996), and allows new partners to enter the marriage without the full consent of each existing partner. In contrast, polyamory emphasizes gender equality, balanced power dynamics, and consensual decision making in relationships (Klesse 2010; Sheff 2005). However, polyamory and polygamy share historical roots in nonmonogamy (I return to this in a subsequent section).

**Poly Relationship and Family Forms**

Polyamorous relationship structures are heterogeneous. Specifically, forms of polyamorous relationships may include one or two primary partners, several secondary or tertiary partners, triads, quads, intimate friends, and intimate networks (Anapol 1997; Barker 2005; Klesse 2006; Nearing 1992). Additionally, some partners maintain open relationships while others practice polyfidelity (Anapol 1997; Barker 2005; Frank & DeLamater 2010; Nearing 1992). Furthermore, poly partners often cohabit as families or tribes, while others practice short or extensive visitation but do not reside with their lovers (Anapol 2010).
Primary partnerships are long-term, fully committed, meaningful relationships between two or more individuals. These partnerships may reflect traditional monogamy; however, one or both partners may be involved in other meaningful relationships that are negotiated with and disclosed to the primary partner. Secondary partnerships may not possess the level of commitment found between primary partners; however, these relationships are meaningful and generally long-term. Likewise, tertiary partnerships are meaningful, less committed, shorter-term relationships (Anapol 1997; Nearing 1992).

The wedge or hinge in a V refers to an individual who is dating two people separately but simultaneously. Triads are generally comprised of three individuals who are each involved in a primary relationship together; however, a v-structured group may also consider themselves a triad, particularly when there is a deep emotional relationship between the two tips of the vee, what Sheff (2014) refers to as ‘polyaffectivity.’ Quads refer to partnerships in which four people are each romantically involved, or two couples are romantically involved (Barker 2005). For example, a quad may exist when one partner from a primary dyadic couple maintains a relationship with one partner from another primary dyadic couple. Quads and other larger group partnerships may adopt the label ‘moresomes’ (Sheff 2014) or have unique titles for their relationships.

Poly open relationships involve primary partnerships in which one or more persons have relationships with partners outside the primary group. The most common form of polyamorous relationship cited in research to date is an open relationship in which dyadic primary partners maintain external secondary-level partnerships. Sheff (2014) refers to these partnerships as an ‘open couple.’ As discussed above, it is important to remember that poly open couples may differ from other consensually nonmonogamous couples, particularly in terms of honesty and
disclosure. In contrast to poly open relationships, polyfidelity is a closed group relationship, in which partners do not engage in relationships outside of the primary group partnership (Anapol 1997; Barker 2005; Nearning 1992). Sheff (2014) distinguishes between ‘polyfideles’ (those in sexually fidelitous group relationships) and polyamorists (those in multi-partner relationships not involving group sexual fidelity).

*Intimate friendships* are often sexually involved; however, they do not necessarily maintain romantic relationships, and rather focus on upholding strong meaningful friendships. These relationships greatly blur the lines between friends and lovers (Klesse 2006; Sheff 2005, 2011). *Intimate networks* are social circles of individuals who are romantically or sexually involved with each other, without the level of commitment of partnerships. These networks are commonly formed by a web of close friends, lovers, and ex-lovers (Anapol 2010; Klesse 2006; Sheff 2005, 2011).

Any type of poly relationship may involve legal unions, cohabitation, or the presence of children. Poly partners who are symbolically married to more than one person often adopt the term *spice*, thought of as the plural of ‘spouse.’ Polyamorists may reside together as *poly families* (smaller, more intimate partnerships with or without children) or *tribes* (larger, more complex webs of poly partnerships, often involving children and/or multiple families) (Anapol 1997; Barker 2005). Poly families may be comprised of biological, legal, or chosen kin, as in ‘chosen families’ among the LGBTQ community (Sheff 2011; Weeks et al. 2001; Weston 1991). Of those who do not cohabit full-time, other forms of temporary cohabitation often occur such as short- or long-term visitation (Anapol 2010). Some polys use ‘nesting’ to refer to cohabiting relationships and ‘non-nesting’ for relationships in which homes and major life decisions are made independently (Sheff 2014).
Variation exists within each of the above mentioned poly relationship and family forms. For example, cohabitation is certainly not a requirement of identification as a poly family, and some relationships involve only one partner who seeks additional partnerships, relationships known as *poly/mono* or *mono/poly*. The complexity of polyamorous relationship and familial forms suggests that poly partnerships likely operate in unique ways in relation to normative monogamous relationships, and these complexities may contribute to the dearth of academic research on poly relationships.

Researchers have attempted to categorize poly relationships into various typologies. For example, Bettinger (2005) offered four models of poly relationships that center on the primary-secondary partnership distinction. A ‘primary/secondary model’ refers to a dyadic couple in which one or both partners seek additional secondary relationships. In a ‘multi-primary individual model’ or ‘multi-secondary individual model,’ the person of interest maintains simultaneous primary relationships or secondary relationships, respectively. The ‘multi-primary family model’ refers to group relationships in which all partners are considered primary. In an earlier article, Kassoff (1988) describes four typologies of nonmonogamous lesbian relationships: stable (reflective of polyamory), transitional (more in-line with open relationships than polyamory), self-oriented (emphasizing individual needs), and couple-oriented (emphasizing a primary dyadic partnership). Typologies such as these may be productive for a clinical perspective of polyamory, but are not adopted by polyamorists themselves.

Other psychological and sociological literature suggests that some people interpret polyamory as a sexual identity, in contrast to a relationship practice or form. Specifically, research indicates that individuals perceive polyamory either as something that they do (‘I *practice* polyamory’) or something that they naturally are (‘I *am* polyamorous’) (Barker 2005).
In addition, some literature distinguishes between those who do polyamory, those who are polyamorous, and those for whom polyamory is a belief system (Barker 2005; Sheff 2014). Studies also indicate that people often experience polyamorous identity similarly to other sexual identities. For example, a research subject in Klesse’s study assertively claimed, “I identify as bisexual and polyamorous” (2007:98). In contrast, some people use polyamory only as a label of convenience and others practice consensual nonmonogamous relationships that reflect polyamory without identifying as polyamorous (Frank & DeLamater 2010; Klesse 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), the latter producing sampling difficulties in research on polyamory. Before proceeding to a review of academic literature on polyamory, it is important to examine the practice within various social contexts.

**Situating Polyamory in Social Contexts**

A thorough discussion of the development of polyamory warrants special attention to sociohistorical, sociological, and sociopolitical frameworks. The section begins with a review of early practices that fall under the polyamory umbrella but are largely distinct from contemporary polyamorous practices. Next, I detail more recent development of polyamory via several institutions, such as politics, media, community, and more. Then, I offer a sociological perspective that situates polyamory within the changing culture of intimacy. Finally, I question how polyamory may fit into contemporary sexual politics.

**Sociohistorical Perspective**

Several communities and movements that promoted forms of nonmonogamy influenced the evolution of American polyamory over the past two centuries. Early development involved practices of ‘multiple marriage’ in specific religious communities, namely nineteenth century
religious inspirations of the Oneidas and Mormons. However, contemporary polyamory differs in important ways from these early practices of nonmonogamy (discussed below).

Under influence of John Humphrey Noyes’ efforts to construct a utopian society, the Oneidas constructed a community in upstate New York that practiced complex marriage, in which all men were married to all women of the community (La Moy 2012; Vickers 2013). Institutionalized in 1848, complex marriage was the center of Oneidan community organization and was practiced successfully for nearly 32 years (Foster 1981). Similar to the Oneidas, Mormon leaders were concerned with producing enhanced civilization through regulation of sexual and marital arrangements. Joseph Smith’s visionary convictions in the 1830s and other utopian thought of that period resulted in the practice of plural marriage in the Mormon Church (Foster 1981; Hardy & Erickson 2001). Smith introduced this form of polygamy as “a particularly exalted form of eternal or celestial marriage” commanded by God (Foster 1981:145). After Smith’s death, other Mormon leaders, such as Brigham Young, strongly advocated for polygamy and the Church eventually released a ‘public announcement’ in defense of plural marriage as a religious practice in 1852 (Foster 1981). On the surface, these early practices may be considered a form of polyamory – namely, *polyfidelity* – as they involve fidelitous group marriage; however, there are important distinctions in terms of values.

Although both forms of multiple marriage may fall under the ‘polyamory’ umbrella by involving multiple, simultaneous, committed relationships, present-day polyamory would reject the values of Mormon polygamy, which does not necessarily involve *consensual* nonmonogamy. This occurs in both household and cultural levels. Specifically, wives may not have any influence regarding their husband’s new partnerships, but more importantly, the hegemonic patriarchal culture and resulting ‘revolutionizing’ religious ideologies encourages a form of
coerced nonmonogamy that masks the repression of women’s agency (See Hardy and Erickson 2001 for a historical review of male justification for plurality in Mormonism). Further, Mormon polygamy is in conflict with polyamory as the former is purely polygynous, rejecting the possibility for women to have multiple husbands.

In addition, complex marriage among the Oneidas may also fail to meet present-day polyamorous standards, as it was practiced in an authoritarian, heterosexually-restricted context (Robinson 1997), was a requirement of membership in the society (La Moy 2012), and devalued exclusive emotional attachments (Foster 1981). In contrast, however, Oneidan complex marriage incorporated a feminist aspect in serving to protect women from being treated or abused as men’s legal property (Vickers 2013). Finally, there is a discrepancy in social goals between polyamory and the Oneidas and Mormons. While the latter sought to impose regulatory systems of sexuality on their respective communities (Vickers 2013), polyamory is not concerned with controlling sexuality on a social level and values independency and non-possessiveness.

In this sense, although the practice of polyamory shares nineteenth century historical roots with nonmonogamy, the distinction between values of polyamory and Mormon polygamy or Oneidan complex marriage practices must be made clear. Nevertheless, some contemporary polyamorous values reflect those of the earlier practices. For example, the rejection of both exclusive emotional relationships and possessiveness by the Oneidas was “a strategy of managing jealousy through creating an abundance of partners” that has persisted into contemporary polyamorous thought (Anapol 2010:46).

After these early practices, polyamory was heavily influenced by sexual revolutions, the development of nonmonogamous communes, and new popular and academic literature highlighting alternative intimate relationships. The first wave of the sexual revolution in the early
twentieth century encouraged freedom from oppressive patriarchal norms surrounding relationships. Anapol (2010) credits Emma Goldman, an early twentieth century free-love theorizing anarchist, with developing social thought that reconceptualized love as free and fluid, rejected societal constraints on relationship structures, and sought freedom from monogamy. However, polyamory as a distinct and specific form of consensual nonmonogamy may have stronger origins in the mid-twentieth century, although the term ‘polyamory’ was nonexistent at that point.

The second sexual revolution of the 1960’s and the feminist movement strongly promoted sexual liberation and various forms of nonmonogamies that had great influence over the development of polyamory (Anapol 2010; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse 2006). As feminism aimed to combat institutionalized heterosexuality and heterosexism, it challenged monogamy as an oppressive patriarchal institution. In addition, feminist activists highlighted the social construction of (hetero)sexuality, emphasizing our ability to construct new ways of forming intimate relationships.

In addition, gay and lesbian movements of the 1960s and 70s impacted the development of contemporary polyamory. For example, lesbian feminism scorned both heterosexual and monogamous relationships as patriarchal and hegemonic. As a consequence of each of these sexual revolutions, several alternatives to monogamy emerged in the public sphere, including open or multilateral marriage, swinging, communal living, and the counterculture’s notion of ‘free love.’

Communes in which members practiced nonmonogamy flourished at this time. Most visible in polyamorous history was the Kerista Commune of San Francisco formed in 1971, which was organized around several polyfidelitous families. Some claim that polyamory’s roots
are found in Kerista, as one of its members coined the term ‘polyfidelity’ (Kerista Village 1979). Kerista members report that the term ‘polyamory’ was later established (discussed in the subsequent subsection) as a more inclusive form of multi-partner intimacy that involved more options than group fidelity (Sheff 2014). Although not all of these new intimacies that developed through sexual revolutionary thought and communal living fell under the polyamory umbrella, some promoted practices and values of the poly community today, such as consensual and honest open relationships or polyfidelity.

Influenced by the sexual revolution, literature in this era began to emphasize consensual nonmonogamous marriage. For example, O’Neill and O’Neill’s (1972) Open Marriage and Constantine and Constantine’s (1973) Group Marriage were widely popularized, the latter involving a study of people in multilateral marriages. Likewise, academic interest in ‘nontraditional’ families and ‘alternative lifestyles’ began to flourish in this period (for example, see Macklin’s 1980 JMF review or Macklin & Rubin’s 1983 handbook).

On a subcultural level, Robert Heinlein’s early 1960’s Stranger in a Strange Land had an enormous impact on the development of polyamorous thought (Anapol 2010), particularly in the Pagan community where the term ‘polyamory’ later originates (Kraemer 2011). This science fiction novel describes an alternative form of intimate relating that promotes various ideals of the polyamorous lifestyle. Specifically, the story follows a human character, raised on Mars who returns to Earth, who eventually forms the Church of All Worlds that practices a form of intimate relating referred to as ‘nesting.’ In the story, nests are nonmonogamous groupings that practice ideals such as honesty and communal living and engage in open or group sex (Heinlein 1961). Though the term ‘polyamory’ had not yet been coined, Heinlein portrayed consensual nonmonogamous relationship values later cited by polyamorists. Heinlein was influential in
polyamory’s development by bringing these values into the realm of popular media. Since this work, Heinlein and other authors such as Robert Rimmer and Starhawk (Miriam Simos) have published numerous fictional stories that outline major polyamorous themes and challenge conventional ideals of monogamy (Anapol 2010; Kraemer 2011).

Since the 1980s, polyamory developed as a distinct practice of nonmonogamy, particularly due to new language, the founding of poly organizations, continuing nonmonogamies in queer communities, and public visibility via organizational publications and media interest in polyamory. Morning Glory Ravenheart coined the term ‘polyamorous’ in a 1990 issue of the Green Egg, a publication of her partner, Oberon Zell Ravenheart (Zell 1990). Well-known in the poly community, the Ravenhearts are Pagan spiritual leaders who have been in various forms of long-term, committed, consensual nonmonogamous relationships together. In fact, Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land heavily impacted the formation and values of Oberon Zell’s Pagan church, the Church of All Worlds (Aviram 2010; Kraemer 2011; Zell 2011). The use of ‘polyamory’ grew substantially once the online group alt.polyamory was formed in 1992 (alt.polyamory 2010; Kraemer 2011).

As the poly movement grew, publications and organizations continued to emerge that promoted advantages of polyamory, further increasing its visibility. For example, Deborah Anapol and Ryan Nearing founded Loving More magazine in the mid 1990’s to publicize and give voice to the poly community (Anapol 2010). This publication developed from Nearing’s 1984 newsletter, the same year she released The Polyfidelity Primer. Loving More is one of the primary contributing organizations in establishing the poly community. Apart from publications, this organization holds conferences, workshops, and retreats centered on polyamorous life (Alan M. 2013). In addition, they have teamed with other organizations to conduct national-level
studies on people involved in the poly community (see Cox II, Bergstrand, & Fleckenstein 2013). Also in the 1990s, several books were published that describe polyamorous or ‘responsible nonmonogamous’ life, values, and norms of the poly community (For example, Anapol 1992, 1997; Easton & Liszt 1997; Nearing 1992).

Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, polyamory continued to develop from lesbian and gay nonmonogamous practices of the 1960s and 70s. Lacking institutional guidelines and escaping dominant heterosexual forms of intimate relating, lesbians and gay men constructed their own ‘life experiments.’ Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan argue,

“the principle of ‘co-independence’ that structures the operation of same sex relationships, the break from heterosexual assumptions, and the abstract possibilities of separating sex from emotional ties, mean that non-monogamy is always (at the abstract or the practical level) a possibility for non-heterosexual relationships” (2001:150).

The gay male community particularly developed in ways that allowed and often encouraged nonmonogamous relationships. However, these relationships may be better labeled as ‘open relationships’ rather than polyamorous ones, because of the emphasis on casual sex, likelihood of emotional exclusivity, and potential lack of disclosure regarding sexual partners (Adam 2006; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001).

In addition, the gay male community may have influenced lesbians to experiment with nonmonogamies during joint efforts to address the AIDS crisis (Munson & Stelboum 1999). In the 1990s, lesbian polyamorists began to publish their own literature, indicating that the lesbian polyamory movement was underway. For example, Celeste West published Lesbian Polyfidelity in 1996, and Marcia Munson and Judith Stelboum released The Lesbian Polyamory Reader, which was co-published with the Journal of Lesbian Studies in 1999.
In addition, bisexuality has a historical connection with polyamory. Specifically, some leaders of the bisexual movement of the 1980s had branched out of lesbian feminism, arguing for a bisexual politics that rejected devaluation of women who desired relationships with both women and men (Udis-Kessler 1995). Polyamory is related to the bisexual movement due to a shared emphasis on ‘queering’ sexuality and rejecting compulsory monosexuality, a departure from the dominant lesbian/gay movement that increasingly emphasizes conventional relationships (Esterberg 2002). Anderlini-D’Onofrio suggests, “Polyamory … grew parallel to bisexuality, even as, while the latter was more visible as a movement and political identity, the former was more daring in the utopian practices it proposed, disseminated, and created hospitable spaces for” (2004:3). Further, the overwhelming presence of bisexuality in het/bi poly communities, particularly among poly women, suggests a strong connection between the two identities (Cook 2005; Sheff 2005).

The twenty-first century witnessed a media explosion on polyamory. Several films publicized on popular television channels portray the struggles and realities of polyamorous life, such as the television documentaries, MTV’s True Life and TLC’s Strange Sex (MTV 2009; TLC 2010). In fact, a Showtime series titled “Polyamory: Married and Dating” was released in 2012 (Garcia 2012). In addition, major news publishers such as the New York Times, CNN, and NPR have begun to cover various aspects of polyamorous life. Other media interest comes in the form of journalistic websites, such as Salon.com, and both independent and big picture movies (see Landman 2003 for a list of poly movies, and Alan M. 2014 for an exhaustive list of media coverage). Pairing recent media attention with the dearth of research on polyamorists illustrates the disconnect between public and academic interest in polyamory. Nevertheless, empirical research on the topic has multiplied in the past decade.
Today, several organizations, such as the Polyamory Society and Loving More, offer support for poly relationships and families, in terms of legal issues, conferences, retreats, community gatherings, and so on. The internet has had an enormous impact on the development of sexual minority groups. The internet offers individuals space to investigate and realize their own sexual preferences and encourages social organization, particularly for stigmatized groups (Ross 2005). A Yahoo Groups search of “polyamory” yields 360 (valid) online groups, with the great majority including ‘poly’ in the title. However, the poly community is not necessarily unified. For example, there are organizations that center only on LGBT polyamory (such as a group in Manhattan that formerly hosted NYC Poly Pride). In contrast, Sheff’s (2014) major study on polyamory came from a community comprised primarily of heterosexual cismen and bisexual ciswomen. In fact, Sheff (2011) briefly mentioned the inability to obtain access to the lesbian poly community. Thus, there appears to be a divide between queer and het/bi poly communities. Likewise, there is a spiritual component of some poly groups, as influenced by the Ravenhearts, while other groups are secular or lack attention to spirituality. In addition, there are numerous local poly groups spread over the country, indicating that development and practices of various communities may differ.

Although polyamory has been a known practice in America for at least two hundred years (albeit not by that name), recent development of the poly community has likely increased both its visibility and prevalence in the past two decades. Paralleling visibility and acceptance of the LGBT community, the poly community has gained great momentum and will likely continue to do so over subsequent decades. However, difficulties in counting the current poly population arise from diversity in defining who is polyamorous. Sheff (2014) noted that online poly sites estimate that the American nonmonogamous and/or polyamorous population stands between 1.2
and 9.8 million people. This is an extremely large range; however, even the more modest estimates highlight that this is a significant population. This development speaks to broader social changes in the meanings of intimate relationships.

**Sociological Perspective**

Literature on our shifting intimate culture is fruitful for examining the development of polyamory. From this literature, we can question how polyamory is situated in changing meanings, practices, and ideals of intimacy. Contemporary polyamory may have further developed as a result of the transformation from a marriage-centered society to a relationship-centered society. The norms and ideals regarding the sole appropriate relationship form of marriage are weakening (Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2005) and with that, individuals are offered greater options in intimate relating (Giddens 1992). Alternatives to monogamy are receiving greater visibility and acceptance, as a relationship-centered society is a safer place to explore or practice nonmonogamy than a marriage-centered society. However, this new emphasis on relationships continues to uphold the culture of monogamy, designating the couple as the ideal relationship form (Jamieson 1998).

Alongside this relationship-oriented cultural shift are new meanings of intimacy. For example, Giddens (1992) describes the transition from the *romantic love* ideal, based on ‘projective identification’ that emphasizes wholeness and intuitive understandings of the other, to the ideal of *confluent love*, which is contingent and relies on mutual self-disclosure. Giddens introduced the notion of the *pure relationship* as the form of intimacy that expresses confluent love:

“It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it” (1992:58).
Likewise, Jamieson presented the notion of ‘disclosing intimacy’ as a defining characteristic of contemporary intimate relating: “The good relationship is a relationship of disclosing intimacy, a mutual relationship of close association between equals in which really knowing and understanding each other are the crux of the relationship” (1998:19). Giddens’ work reflects this focus on disclosure by emphasizing how confluent love develops from processes of ‘revealing concerns’ and ‘opening out’ in intimate relationships through democratic communication.

This literature on new meanings of intimacy is overwhelmingly mononormative and heteronormative, offering broad conceptualizations of intimate relationships that generally continue to rely on the heterosexual couple. For example, Giddens refers to ‘both’ parties to describe relational satisfaction and finding ‘a’ special person in the context of confluent love, and Cancian (1986) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) focus on heterosexual coupled love. However, some ideas in this literature point to nonmonogamous possibilities. For example, Giddens explains,

“Unlike romantic love, confluent love is not necessarily monogamous, in the sense of sexual exclusiveness. What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, ‘until further notice,’ that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile. Sexual exclusiveness here has a role in the relationship to the degree to which the partners mutually deem it desirable or essential” (1992:63).

Note here that Giddens only allows for the potential of sexual nonmonogamy, disregarding any possibility of emotional nonmonogamy or polyamory. This mention of a nonmonogamous pure relationship may appear to contradict his conceptualization of the pure relationship as only existing when ‘both’ parties are satisfied; however, it is clear that Giddens has continued to rely on dyadic coupling even if the couple is nonmonogamous. He dismisses the potential for non-dyadic intimate relating or nonmonogamous intimate configurations that deemphasize the primary couple relationship.
Giddens (1992) does, however, slightly weaken his heteronormative focus in presenting gay and lesbian relationships as existing in the realm of the pure relationship. In addition, Cancian offers a conceptualization of contemporary love that is not mononormative:

“my working definition of enduring love between adults is a relationship wherein a small number of people are affectionate and emotionally committed to each other, define their collective well-being as a major goal, and feel obliged to provide care and practical assistance for each other. People who love each other also usually share physical contact; the communicate with each other frequently and cooperate in some routine tasks of daily life” (1986:694).

Nevertheless, Cancian’s discussion is limited to heterosexual love, negating potential for many forms of polyamorous relationships. Polyamory’s position in the cultural transformation of intimacy deserves more consideration in this literature.

Polyamory’s fluid nature mirrors the shift to a relationship-centered intimate culture that aims for the pure relationship. In the new culture of individualized intimacy, people have greater choices of partners, and rights to define their own happiness and to negotiate individualized relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992). Polyamorists have constructed a vast realm of relationships structures with flexible boundaries, including any combination of commitment and type of relationship (romantic, sexual, intimate friendship), in any form (open dyadic, triad, networks) such that self-fulfillment may be achieved through an array of alternate routes apart from exclusive dyadic intimate relating.

In addition, polyamory address several contradictory ideals of contemporary relationships. Specifically, tensions exist between:

- Freedom and relational effort (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995)
- Self-disclosure and relationship codependence (Giddens 1992)
- Sexual or romantic attractions/infatuations and the ideal of long-term commitment (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992)
• Relationship contingency per satisfaction and promises of commitment (Giddens 1992)
• Expectations of male masculinity in withholding communication and feminine ideals of mutual disclosure (Cancian 1986; Jamieson 1998)

These clashes each pit the individual against the relationship. Polyamory may have developed in part as a response to these contradictions. For example, the conflict between desire for individualized identities and maintaining meaningful partnerships may be resolved by having multiple simultaneous partners. Because we partially define our identities by our partner(s), being attached to more than one person means that any one particular person cannot monopolize how we define ourselves, allowing room for greater individualization. Another more obvious solution is that polyamory addresses the conflict between long-term commitment and sexual or romantic excitement by allowing partners to acquire new sexual/romantic partners while maintaining commitments to long-term partners.

Another example of how polyamory addresses tensions in contemporary intimacy is related to the degree of effort or success in achieving intimate ideals. Jamieson argues that couple relationships often fail to uphold relational ideals as a result of “men’s lack of emotional openness, their unwillingness to participate in disclosing intimacy” (1988:157). Likewise, she found that relationship or domestic negotiations were gendered: women often initiate them and generally put forth greater effort in negotiations. The feminization of love has produced gendered conflicts in relationships (Cancian 1986) that result in a clash between new ideals of intimacy and men’s expectations of masculinity. As many polyamorous men redefine traditional notions of masculinity (Sheff 2006), poly relationships may achieve more success in reflecting contemporary ideals of intimacy. In other words, poly men’s willingness to combat hegemonic masculine styles of intimate relating addresses gendered tensions in new ideals of intimacy.
Polyamorous values overlap tremendously with ideals frequently discussed in the literature on new meanings of intimacy. For example, communication (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Cancian 1986), self-disclosure (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1988), and negotiations (Jamieson 1988) are cited defining characteristics of intimacy. The heavy emphasis polyamorists place on these ideals (see for example, Frank & DeLamater 2010; Klesse 2007; Ritchie & Barker 2007; discussed in the following chapter) coupled with the ways in which polyamory addresses contradictions of contemporary intimacy suggests that polyamory may be at the forefront of the intimate revolution.

In fact, in its disassociation with dominant familial, relational, and sexual practices and ideals, polyamory has a strong connection with revolutionary movements. For example, John Humphrey Noyes was associated with a mid-nineteenth century ‘counterculture’ that involved “individuals who had been among the most extreme in their sexual and marital experimentation” (Foster 1981:73). Likewise, the sexual revolutions and free-love movements of the 1960s and 70s were a response to social constraints on sexual and marital behavior. Polyamory conceptualized as queer politics reflects these prior revolutionary visions, in its ability to imagine and attempt a ‘quertopia’ (Wilkinson 2010). In other words, polyamory reflects nineteenth century Oneidas’ and Mormons’ and twentieth century sexual radicals’ utopian visions that challenged dominant sexual and familial relations.

**Sociopolitical Perspective**

A sociopolitical inquiry positions queer polyamory as having the potential to disrupt the gay normalization movement and reimagine sexual citizenship. Queer Theory is a postmodernist perspective that aims to deconstruct dominant understandings of sexuality and identity categories (see Butler 1990; Foucault 1978). Its political sister, Queer Politics, questions and challenges
social norms and institutions that inhibit intimate practices and relationships. The queer political movement is in direct contrast to the dominant ‘normalization’ movement that requires sexual minorities to assimilate into heterosexual culture in order to achieve social respectability and sexual citizenship (discussed further in Chapter 3), although they have a common origin.

Specifically, lesbian and gay politics prior to the 1980s, particularly in New York City, sought to dismantle the gender binary and challenge limiting sexual identity categories. They celebrated differences from their heterosexual counterparts, “seeing themselves as the embodiment of the liberation potential” (Bernstein 1997:546). However, a shift occurred after the 1970s that placed focus on similarities, such that lesbians and gay men began arguing “we are just like you” rather than “we are different and unique.” This shift divided lesbian and gay politics into two camps: the queer movement that continued to celebrate difference, and the identity movement that emphasized normalization. Identity politics then sought to gain civil and social rights through a narrow ‘ethnic model’ (Seidman 1993) eventually resulting in assimilationism. In contrast, queer politics was far less politically organized and uninterested in legal rights. Rather, this movement centered on questioning the very social institutions that award rights, in addition to deconstructing sexual and gender identity categories. It is important to mention, however, that the development of these movements is more complex than I am able to discuss here. For example, resources, institutional dynamics, and local political climates influence political strategies, and movements often employ various political strategies over their life cycle (Bernstein 1997).

Researchers have theoretically and empirically examined the ways in which polyamory is a queer political practice. Sheff notes that some people “use poly relationships as a statement on social and sexual liberation” (2014:43). Specifically, some researchers demonstrate the potential
of polyamorous intimacies to challenge normative relationship practices and sexual and gender binaries. For example, as polyamorists deeply value balanced gender dynamics (Klesse 2010), they attempt to redefine relationship functioning and gender roles in ways that challenge dominant gender expectations, positioning them outside dominant relationship constructs (Pallotta-Charolli & Lubowitz 2003; Sheff 2005, 2006).

Polyamorists also challenge normative relationships by focusing on interdependence (Iantaffi 2010), rather than dependence, which is a characteristic of dominant gendered roles in heterosexual monogamous relationships. Likewise, Klesse (2006) highlighted the potential of polyamory to challenge platonic friend relationships. A drastic break from romantic friendships of the Victorian era, contemporary heterosexual monogamous culture draws strict boundaries around who is allowed to have emotional or even physical intimacy (in terms of cuddling or other similar acts): those behaviors are reserved solely for one’s sexual/romantic partner. In contrast, polyamorists redefine these strict borders to allow intimate friendships, in any combination of a deep emotional, physical, or sexual level. In doing so, they engage in the radical act of blurring the borders between friends and partners that define heteronormative relationships (Klesse 2006; Sheff 2005, 2011). In addition, researchers note that poly relationships are highly diversified, making them inherently politically progressive in relation to the strict boundaries that surround monogamy. In fact, Klesse notes, “Many polyamorists see polyamory as a critical discourse that aims at diversifying intimate and sexual cultures” (2006:579), reflecting queer political efforts of lesbian and gay partners who act as ‘boundary-strippers’ and characterize their relationships via flexibility and choice (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001).
In contrast, however, some people may practice polyamory without the intention of challenging normative practices and ideals. For example, Wilkinson (2010) points to the differences between rejection of monogamy (a personal, individualized act) and rejection of mononormativity (a radical political act). Klesse questions the extent to which ‘challenges’ to oppressive cultural forces present an idealistic view of nonmonogamies:

“It is simply not tenable to argue that all of my non-monogamous interview partners were engaged in setting up counter-normative discourses. Many may have challenged some heteronormative assumptions, while they were at the same time willing to embrace or reproduce others. Thus, the conceptualisation of queer non-monogamous or polyamorous practice as resistance or transgression appears to be too one-dimensional to take account of this ambivalence” (2007:149).

Likewise, although some poly values are inherently politically progressive, the extent to which they are achieved in practice should be questioned, an issue discussed further in Chapter Three.

In addition, although polyamory is most often theoretically framed in terms of queer politics, those who devote energy to achieving legal rights and addressing cultural misunderstandings of polyamory may be more in line with identity politics – the movement responsible for gay assimilationism. These ‘polyactive’ polys attempt to politically organize in ways similar to the dominant gay and lesbian movement; however, they have achieved far less success, likely due to the fluidity and ambiguity of the practice (Sheff 2014). Likewise, polys are not unified on social and legal issues in the same way people active in the dominant lesbian/gay movement are. A major discrepancy between lesbian/gay and poly identity politics centers on marriage equality. The gay normalization movement set a framework for the fight for same-sex marriage that has exploded into one of the most significant political debates of the current decade. Polyamorists, however, are largely indifferent to plural marriage (Sheff 2014). For example, Avarim’s (2007) study of Bay Area polyamorists suggests that the institution of marriage is often perceived as counterproductive as many poly activists employ a radical
political agenda, rejecting the emphasis on ‘rights’ inherent in identity politics. Other participants in this research were ambivalent towards marriage due a variety of issues such as mistrust of government, having roots in counter-cultural movements, or doubts about the practicality of legal marriage.

Further, employing identity politics would require polyamorists to frame polyamory as a sexual identity, which some do (Barker 2005; Klesse 2007, 2014). However, Klesse warns against conceptualizing polyamory as a sexual identity:

“The incorporation of polyamory into sexual orientation frameworks is more likely to damage radical politics of non-monogamy and polyamory than to enhance accurate representations of the diversity of erotic experience. Operating along a minoritising logic, sexual orientation models refashion polyamorous people as a distinctive sexual minority. This is likely to undermine alliances across different non-monogamous identities and other forms of oppression. It carries the risk of reinforcing reductionist and exclusive identity-political currents within poly politics” (2014:95).

Additionally, in adopting identity politics, polyamorists would reinforce ‘essentialist assumptions’ (Bernstein 1997), a phenomenon the queer movement seeks to dismantle by revealing how identities are performative and socially constructed. In contrast, the queer political act of polyamory carries the potential to destabilize dominant forms of intimate relating in ways that ameliorate the oppression of queer and polyamorous relationships. Yet, the success of queer poly politics is difficult to measure for two reasons: queer political acts focus more on social change than legal change and the absence of an organized movement renders political efforts largely indiscernible in the public eye.

**Introducing Polyamory**

Polyamory has a complex history due its development from other forms of nonmonogamy in the nineteenth century and from various movements and communities over the
latter half of the twentieth century. The practice developed within a changing culture of intimacy and may be a response to new contradictory ideals of contemporary relationships. Polyamory has implications for current understandings of sexual citizenship. More specifically, queer polyamory has the potential to weaken expectations of assimilationism that bind the gay normalization movement and combat hegemonic heteronormative relationship and familial practices. In the following chapter, I frame queer polyamory within a theoretical framework of heteronormativity and review relevant existing literature.
Chapter Three

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE:
Applying Theoretical Perspectives and Researching Polyamory

A sizeable amount of literature on polyamory comes from studies involving participants who are active in the ‘het/bi’ poly community that is comprised largely of open primary relationships among heterosexual cismen and bisexual ciswomen (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010; Sheff 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010). Thus, much of this literature discusses polyamory within a heteronormative framework, neglecting queer or trans poly relationships. However, these studies provide information imperative for a basic understanding of polyamorous relationships, and offer some insights into queer polyamory where they do discuss same-gender relationships. Likewise, other studies focusing on same-sex (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), trans (Sanger 2010), or nonmonogamous (Adam 2006; Coelho 2011) intimacies offer important, albeit limited, insights into queer polyamory. For example, some literature on GSMs suggests that there are queer-specific reasons to practice polyamory (Richards 2010; Sanger 2010; Scherrer 2010) but that these relationships may be constrained by heteronormativity (Kassoff 1988; Klesse 2007, 2011). These and other themes highlight the need for further empirical research on queer polyamory.

In this chapter, I first situate queer polyamory within a theoretical framework. Next, I review important literature on polyamorous relationship negotiations, much of which comes from studies involving the ‘het/bi’ community. Then, I focus on existing studies of queer polyamory, supplementing this discussion by drawing from various areas of research that may inform our knowledge of queer poly relationships and communities, such as trans intimacies or other queer nonmonogamies. Finally, I summarize gaps in this literature and offer several research questions that will be explored in the current study.
Applying Theoretical Perspectives

Monique Wittig once wrote, “To live in society is to live in heterosexuality” (1992:40). This statement has profound implications for understanding contemporary sexual culture and citizenship; however, it must be deconstructed in a way that addresses the interlocking systems of power and oppression that privilege heterosexuality. In fact, Berlant and Warner argue that “heterosexuality is not a thing” (1998:552), but rather there is a complex amalgamation of normative practices that comprise heterosexual culture. In addition, as Kimberle Crenshaw explained in an influential piece on intersectionality, “When one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of [an]other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened” (1991:1282), we must examine each force of power that serves to reinforce and privilege the institution of heterosexuality, particularly in terms of monogamy and gender.

One such system of power is compulsory monogamy, a concept adapted from Rich’s (1980) fruitful work on compulsory heterosexuality (and Rubin’s 1975 ‘obligatory heterosexuality’). Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the multitude of ways we are socially and institutionally coerced into heterosexuality. As part of this process, heterosexuality is ubiquitous, assumed, encouraged, and esteemed. Likewise, under compulsory monogamy, we are pressured into abiding by dominant monogamous relationship ideals. Heckert explains, “Intertwined with the lie of compulsory heterosexuality is the lie of compulsory monogamy, that desire for romantic and erotic intimacy with only one other person is natural, unaffected by economic, social, and political patterns of a culture” (2010:264). This process conceals the naturalization of monogamy, creating the illusion that monogamous romantic and sexual desires are inherently normal.
Similarly, our culture is monocentric, idealizing monogamy and suppressing or punishing other forms of sexual expression. Monocentrism has a long and complex history in the West, deeply imbedded in institutions that are highly influential in social thought, such as religion and medicine (Bergstrand & Blevins Sinski 2010). Moreover, as part of heterosexual hegemony, queer relationships are situated in a context of systemic oppression originating from heterosexism and cissexism, which award social and legal privileges to heterosexuals and cisgender people (respectively) that are largely inaccessible to queer people. I argue that a fruitful concept for examining the intersection of these systems of power and oppression is heteronormativity.

**Heteronormativity**

Iantaffi and Bockting describe heteronormativity as an “effort to theorise how power relations shape and normalise only certain types of sexualities” through various social institutions, that also “describes processes like the legitimising of relational practices, such as monogamy, through a complex set of social systems” such as law (2011:356). Heteronormativity demands investigation of how cultural and institutional systems of power and oppression shape identities and everyday experiences, and in doing so, emphasizes the ways that heterosexual norms and practices are naturalized in relation to queer lives (Ward & Schneider 2009; Warner 1993).

In addition, heteronormativity regulates and naturalizes gender divisions, producing the ideology of two opposite, complementary genders. Rubin explained, “The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is therefore a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women” (1975:180). The tight link between heteronormativity and gender oppression also extends to transgender
bodies, identities, and experiences. Our culture historically equates humanity with heterosexuality (Warner 1993), yet in the 21st century, to be fully human is to be heterosexual and cisgender. Even more so, heteronormativity requires both cisgender and transgender alike to present as gender-normative, prohibiting space for trans* bodies. In other words, both our gender performativity (Butler 1990) and morphology must be normative. Thus, heteronormativity serves to reinforce binary gender divisions (Rubin 1975) and gender identities as ‘fixed entities’ (Davidmann 2014).

Additionally, as heteronormativity coerces individuals into marital, monogamous, dyadic relationships (Rubin 1984), this phenomenon is strongly related to normalization (Smith 1994b, 1997; discussed below), having heavy implications for contemporary lesbian and gay politics. As the ‘inner circle’ of normative and naturalized sexualities defines sexual legitimacy (Rubin 1984), heteronormativity is centered on the ‘good heterosexual’ (Seidman 2002), a monogamous cisgender heterosexual – the embodiment of the sexual citizen. This image of the good sexual citizen is circulated through the public mind via the state, particularly in terms of access to legal marriage and related benefits. Sanger argues,

“Framing intimate partnerships with respect to heterosexuality and the assumptions this implies – monogamy, vanilla sex, partnerships revolving around gender inequalities – works to erase other possibilities within people’s minds and with respect to public policy” (2010:24).

This cyclical process upholds heteronormativity even as queer people gain closer access to sexual citizenship. To be sure, this very process is defined by heteronormative rules of partnering: queer people are beginning to become sexual citizens by way of normalization – that is, assimilating into heterosexual culture.

Queer people have begun to gain social respectability only by way of publically venerating normative relationship practices and desires. In other words, one must present as a
monogamous, marriage-seeking, family-oriented individual in order to achieve any degree of sexual citizenship. This process of assimilationism serves to not only reinforce heterosexual hegemony, but also to limit the multitude of intimate possibilities for straights and queers alike and to create a hierarchy among queer people themselves. For example, queer people have become subjected to the ‘good homosexual / dangerous queer’ dichotomy. Anna Marie Smith argued,

“The new homophobia in a sense promises inclusion in return for our transformation from the ‘dangerous queer’ into the figure of the ‘good homosexual’ who is closeted, disease-free and monogamous, white, middle-class and right-wing. The ‘good homosexuals’ ask only for limited inclusion, distance themselves from the sexual liberation movement and feminism, abandon the critique of heterosexism, remain content with the so-called democratic system as it now stands, avoid all forms of solidarity with progressive struggles, and promise to express homosexual difference only within state-approved private spaces” (1997:221).

No longer limited to the closet or conservative politics, the good homosexual is now visible in the fight for marriage equality. As the strongest evidence of normalization, queer people have devoted much energy to achieving the right to marry by arguing, “we are just like you and deserve the same rights.” Here, to be worthy of those rights means to be normal. Consequently, the new ‘normal gay’ (Seidman 2002), as Smith notes, fails to criticize the ways heteronormativity bounds both their access to sexual citizenship and options for intimate relationships and families.

A related aspect of heteronormativity is the potential to adopt the ‘other’ into its realm; however, the ‘other’ is merely tolerated rather than accepted. In fact, this ‘tolerance trap’ (Walters 2014) serves to mask queer oppression: “the new homophobia’s pretence of ‘tolerance’ only conceals its actual vicious bigotry” (Smith 1997:221). Suzanna Walters warns against
deception of tolerance as it relates to marriage equality, arguing that we have reduced queer rights to marriage rights as if the two are synonymous. She explained,

“There is, of course, some value in the normalizing and universalizing move, in demystifying and even accepting that which has been hidden and rejected. In other words, normal and tolerated looks pretty good compared to weird and excluded! But the sociopolitical costs are many and variegated. … What is also lost is a critique of the limitation of heterosexual family forms as well as a validation of how queer and feminist families can model challenging alternatives for all of us” (Walters 2014:229).

Furthermore, even the assimilable normal gay may be no more than an ‘imaginary inclusion’ that serves to conceal homophobia through a tolerant, inclusionary discourse (Smith 1994b, 1997).

Thus, heteronormativity problematizes both queer relationships and nonmonogamies, encouraging institutional exclusion of individuals who practice queer polyamory from sexual citizenship (Klesse 2007). Studies have demonstrated the ways that “heteronormativity shapes the production of identities, relationships, cultural expressions, and institutional practices” (Ward & Schneider 2009:435). For example, some research suggests that trans realities are strongly bound by heteronormativity in both intimate and other forms of relationships (Iantaffi & Bockting 2011; Schilt & Westbrook 2009). In addition, polyamorists have been found to hypersexualize bisexual women (Klesse 2005, 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005), enact conventional gender roles (Deri 2015; Sheff 2006), and idealize romantic love (Klesse 2011; Kassoff 1988; Loulan 1999; Wilkinson 2010), reinforcing heteronormative expectations and relationship practices.

In contrast, some research highlights the ways that queer people challenge heteronormative intimate practices. For example, Davidmann’s research exposed how “self-image, bodies, gender, sexuality, and time intersect in trans partnerships in complex ways that exceed trans-normative, homo-normative, and hetero-normative tropes” (2014:650) and Richards
(2010) suggested that polyamory offers trans people liberation from oppressive strictures of heteronormative partnerships in ways that allow their bodies to be seen as positioned outside the gender binary. In addition, the act of compersion (being glad for your partner’s relationships rather than jealous) is a form of resistance to heteronormative strictures of intimacy (Deri 2015). Further, studies on polyamory suggest that partners often redefine oppressive gender expectations in ways aligned with feminist ideologies (Deri 2015; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005, 2006), directly combating heteronormativity.

Research is limited that applies these processes specifically to queer polyamory. Using a framework of hegemonic heteronormativity, Klesse (2007) examined gay male and bisexual male and female nonmonogamies. Building upon Anna Marie Smith’s (1994a) conceptualization of heterosexuality as a hegemonic construction that normalizes the idea that there are no intelligible nor possible alternatives, Klesse demonstrated how discourses of promiscuity serve to regulate the hierarchical ordering of sexualities, preserving the systems of power associated with monogamous heterosexuality and perpetuating queer and polyamorous subjugation. Klesse also highlighted how other systems of power, such as those associated with class or racial privileging, permeate polyamorous relationships thought to be egalitarian. However, some of his work does not focus specifically on polyamory and he does not include lesbians in the study nor offers attention to bisexual women’s relationships with other women. Nevertheless, the current study builds on Klesse’s work, aiming to analyze how heteronormativity confines, or is challenged by, queer polyamorous relationships. In doing so, I seek to discern what queer polyamory means for assimilationism and contemporary sexual citizenship.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I first provide a general discussion of polyamorous relationships, and then detail existing literature on queer polyamory, focusing
heavily on Klesse’s work and the few other studies that specifically examine polyamory among queer people. This review also draws from other related areas of study, such as literature on trans intimacies or other forms of consensual nonmonogamy.

**Researching Polyamorous Partnerships**

Research on polyamory heavily emphasizes how partners manage their relationships. Polyamorous relationships and practices are vastly heterogeneous, and there is no one particular manner in which poly relationships are constructed; however, literature highlights several core poly values and indicates that all poly relationships involve continual processes of negotiating relationship rules and boundaries (Bettinger 2005; Coelho 2011; Frank & DeLamater 2010; Klesse 2007; McLean 2004; Pallotta-Charolli & Lubowitz 2003; Wosick-Correa 2010). While these values appear to be universal across poly relationships, the precise rules adopted by partners widely varies by relationship.

**Polyamorous Values**

Poly practicing adults overwhelmingly cite honesty (Deri 2015; Klesse 2006, 2007; McLean 2004; Sheff 2010, 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010), communication (Deri 2015; Klesse 2007; McLean 2004; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005, 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010), and egalitarianism (Klesse 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005, 2011, 2014) as vital to their relationships. Klesse labeled honesty as “the basic axiom of polyamory” (2006:571). Honesty regarding polyamorous relationships involves appropriate disclosure of desires, feelings, or partnerships. Poly partners negotiate the extent to which disclosure is expected in their relationships (Coelho 2011; Deri 2015; Jamieson 2004; Wosick-Correa 2010). For example, some partnerships may involve absolute full disclosure. One partner in Jamieson’s research described the rule of honesty in his primary nonmonogamous relationship: “Nothing is not
acknowledged. No part of each other’s conduct is to be withheld” (2004:47). In contrast, others may reject these strict boundaries, relying on a more implicit form of honesty. In fact, Deri (2015) found that full disclosure was neither common nor idealized among queer poly women, as it can be perceived as a sign of disrespect. Rather than offering details of each external relationship, partners are expected to disclose their own feelings and emotions. In addition, partners may negotiate that each are to disclose any strong romantic feelings towards new potential partners, but that there is no need to disclose each external non-romantic sexual relationship.

Polyamorists engage in open and frequent communication with the goal of ensuring that rules and boundaries are entirely consensual among partners (Klesse 2007; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001). Some partners schedule recurrent discussions to ensure consistent communication (Sheff 2014). Communication centers on expressing feelings or emotions regarding the relationship at hand, partners’ other relationships, scheduling and time conflicts, renegotiating boundaries, and more.

Research suggests that polyamorous relationship dynamics are often structured around the goal of egalitarianism (Klesse 2010), reflecting feminist values (Ritchie & Barker 2007). Many poly partners especially value gender equality and poly women in the het/bi community are often able to achieve a degree of power absent in heterosexual monogamous relationships. For example, poly women report a division of labor such that all tasks are shared equally or in which task allocation results in parity (Sheff 2005, 2011, 2014). This is reflective of Carrington’s (1999) discussion of lesbian and gay couple households. These core values may be an unintended result of becoming polyamorous, as becoming active in the poly community means being socialized into core poly values (Sheff 2014). For example, Sheff interviewed a couple
who restructured an imbalanced power dynamic into greater egalitarianism that “leveled the playing field” as a result of transitioning from a traditional monogamous to polyamorous relationship in the threat of divorce (2011:505; 2014:178). Likewise, another respondent explained how becoming polyamorous resulted in more successful communication and honesty:

“It really opened up communication between us. Because we’ve been together for nine years and that was my biggest complaint about him was you don’t talk to me … it really helped us learn how to be completely honest and communicate” (2014:69).

However, it is likely that most people enter poly relationships with egalitarian goals. Klesse refers to his subject’s narratives as ‘[post] feminist’: “They assume that feminist interventions have effectively implemented elements of a feminist egalitarian sexual ethics in certain social ‘pockets’ and subcultures” (2010:111). The important point here lays in the assumption that poly or queer communities are egalitarian. Klesse argues that these narratives create an ‘image’ of feminist egalitarianism that obscures the realities of relationship power dynamics (2007, 2010).

Although poly values are thought to structure partnerships and are perceived by polyamorists as present in many of their relationships, they may not be a solid reality. Literature has emphasized lesbian and gay relationships as egalitarian in principle (Carrington 1999; Giddens 1992; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), reinforcing the image of these relationships as existing outside of power dynamics (Klesse 2007). However, partners in various types of relationships often report greater egalitarianism than is observed by researchers. For example, Hochschild (1989) utilized a mixed methods approach that involved both in-depth interviewing and intense family observations to find that the heterosexual partners she studied constructed family myths that created a perception of equality in the division of labor. Carrington’s (1999) work, which modeled Hochschild’s methodological approach, suggests that lesbian and gay families function similarly.
In addition, Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan note, “The egalitarian relationship might be the ideal, but almost all of our participants identified factors that had the potential to cause inequality” (2001:114). Researchers suggest that coupled intimate partners often cite relationship egalitarianism in order to avoid stigma (Carrington 1999; Duncombe & Marsden 1996) or portray their relationships as consistent with feminist sexual ethics (Klesse 2010). However, Klesse found that bisexual polyamorists are “in tune with a feminist ethics of egalitarianism,” but fail to realize how ethics does not necessarily effectively translate into practice (2010:109). The myth of egalitarianism (Carrington 1999) highlighted in these studies has implications for our understanding of power balances and how values and negotiations play out in queer polyamory.

Likewise, Wosick-Correa (2010) notes that emphasizing core poly values can be problematic as they obscure possibilities of rule infractions. As noted in the previous chapter, it is possible for polyamorous people to ‘cheat’ by engaging in relationships that were not negotiated or consented to by other partners. However, Wosick-Correa suggests, “By referring to rule violations as ‘breaking the rules’ rather than ‘cheating,’” polyamorists consciously subvert mononormativity not only through structuring their intimate lives but also in constructing alternative narratives for relationship struggles” (2010:45). Thus, it is important to investigate both the ways that poly values may not always become solid realities in relational life and the language polys employ in describing these ‘struggles.’ The ways in which ideals of egalitarianism, communication, and honesty are reflected in negotiation processes and how these values play out in polyamorous relationships is understudied.

**Negotiating Partnership Boundaries**

The bulk of research on polyamorous relationships focuses on issues discussed in relationship negotiations (Barker & Langdridge 2010). Partners in these relationships undergo
explicit processes of negotiation and boundary demarcation (Frank & DeLamater 2010; Jamieson 2004; Wosick-Correa 2010). Specifically, research illustrates that these relationships involve rules regarding sexual or emotional exclusivity. For example, some partners negotiate that external emotional attachments are forbidden (Klesse 2007) or are only acceptable when they involve both members of the primary couple, resulting in a triadic relationship formation (Coelho 2011; McLean 2004). Sheff (2014) differentiates these types of sexually exclusive poly relationships, polyfidelitous partnerships, from ‘polyamory’ itself.

Likewise, partners negotiate the number or kinds of additional partners that are permitted. For example, of (heterosexually-paired) bisexual couples, one partnership in McLean’s (2004) study followed the rule that they could each only see other men but not other women, while another placed more restrictions on the male partner - he could only see other men while she was allowed to see both women and men. Some partners negotiate the possibility of ‘veto power,’ such that a partner may veto their partner’s developing relationship (Sheff 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010). Partners also negotiate degree of disclosure regarding external relationships. One gay male participant stated, “I would feel he would be unfaithful if he never told me about [the relationships]” (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001:122). Likewise, a married bisexual woman explained, “We have an open marriage on both sides. The condition is that nothing is hidden between us. We both must know everything” (McLean 2004:91). These phrases highlight the emphasis on honesty and communication in polyamory.

Poly partners also discuss spatial or timing boundaries for sexual encounters. For example, some negotiations involve whether secondary partners are prohibited or welcome in shared households (Coelho 2011; Jamieson 2004; Kassoff 1988; Klesse 2007), and others involve when external encounters may occur, such as during holidays or special events (McLean
2004) or when the primary partner is not home (Coelho 2011). Finally, partners discuss desires to integrate or maintain distinct social, emotional, or sexual worlds. Many partners agree that socioemotional worlds be shared, constructing close networks or families of partners and friends (Barker 2005; Jamieson 2004; Sheff 2011), although some partners negotiate separate lives (Jamieson 2004; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001).

In contrast, other partnerships forgo specific rules of behavior for one rule of honesty. For example, a bisexual woman respondent in Wosick-Correa’s study explained,

“I do not give my partners lists of allowed and prescribed behaviors. Instead, I tell my partners that I expect them to be honest with me at all times in all things. Provided that I feel my needs from the relationship are met and that they are behaving honestly and responsibly, they are able to determine for themselves what actions they engage in” (2010:50).

The language employed by this participant suggests that some polys view rules or expectations as individualized, rather than relationally negotiated among partners.

Finally, some researchers utilize specific frameworks that emphasize skills required for successful negotiations. For example, Bettinger (2005) discussed a set of skills necessary for gay male poly relationships to properly function, including handling jealousy, respecting other partnerships, organizing time, having a sense of one’s needs, setting boundaries, and more. Likewise, Wosick-Correa employed a framework of ‘agentic fidelity,’ which involves “an acute self-knowledge that informs one’s ability to articulate needs, desires, and boundaries to a partner while exercising agency” (2010:45).

**Power and Privilege**

Relationship dynamics that result from partners’ differing social privileges should not be overlooked in polyamorous relationships despite the image and goal of polyamory as egalitarian and entirely consensual. Klesse notes, “This undermines the intelligibility of power relations
around race/ethnicity, class, age, disability, gender, and sexuality. Complex power relations structure all intimate and/or sexual relationships” (2007:115). Research on polyamory that empirically examines experiences of power imbalances within poly relationships or communities is scarce; however, theoretical literature and content analyses highlight the prevalence of privileges that surround polyamory. For example, Willey (2006, 2010) revealed the hegemony of whiteness in polyamorous literature, framing it as problematic for antiracist feminist theorizing of nonmonogamies. Likewise, Noel concluded from content analysis of recent works on polyamory, “the texts, written by and geared toward and assumed audience of white, middle-class, able-bodied, educated, American people fail to address how nationality, race, class, age, and (dis)ability intersect with gender and sexuality in the theory and practice of polyamory” (2006:602).

Studies involving polyamorists themselves also highlight these issues. Research indicates that polyamorists are greatly race- and class-homogeneous and generally have access to white middle-class privilege (Klesse 2014a; Sheff 2014; Sheff & Hammers 2011). Results of the Loving More survey supported these findings. Specifically, 82% of respondents had furthered their education after high school, with 25% having completed a graduate degree (Cox, Bergstrand, & Fleckstein 2013). More interestingly, no mention to race or ethnicity was made in the overview of data released online and presented at conferences. This failure to provide any attention to race is substantial and reflective of white privilege carried by both the researchers and poly community. Having so few low-income and people of color active in poly (and queer) communities should make race and class issues more salient in their experiences. Conversely, the protective effect of coupling (white) race and (middle) class privilege guards many poly individuals from social discrimination (Sheff & Hammers 2011). The privilege of being able to
openly practice polyamory among white middle-class people contrasted with oppressions faced by working-class or low-income polyamorists of color means that partners in interracial/interclassed relationships come to the negotiation table with freedoms or frustrations that may impact how negotiations occur or play out in relationships.

Klesse highlights how privilege is related to polyamory on multiple dimensions, particularly in terms of race and class:

“In the context of polyamory, privilege is a pressing issue on various accounts: (a) the structural exclusivity of poly communities in terms of class and race, (b) the marginalisation of certain groups within poly communities and (c) the difficulties of intersubjectively negotiating power differentials within crossclass or crossracial intimacies. The latter two issues are important, because even if poly communities are predominantly white, highly educated and middle class, they are not necessarily exclusively so. Tensions regarding class and racial/ethnic differences thus do occur within polyamorous communities and relationships” (2014a:208).

These privileges and tensions also relate to other areas of social location. Research suggests – by omission – that poly communities are overwhelmingly cisgender, awarding many poly practitioners with yet another layer of privilege. Literature on gender in polyamory focuses on dynamics between (cis)women and (cis)men, neglecting the existence of trans individuals; however, this could be in part because het/bi poly communities may have far fewer trans individuals than understudied queer poly communities. Nevertheless, power dynamics and tensions within trans/cis relationships and poly communities are as worthy of investigation as power differentials across race and class. Further, some research indicates that community ties may be related to power dynamics in relationship negotiations (Klesse 2007; Sheff 2014).

Yet, Kleese’s work suggests that polyamorist’s discourses on negotiations in their relationships diverge on the topic of power differentials. For example, some respondents explicitly discussed power struggles in negotiating intimacy boundaries with partners, whereas others claimed that power is an inappropriate concept to apply to poly relationships (Klesse
As polyamorous individuals value egalitarianism and balanced power dynamics (Klesse 2010; Sheff 2005), a distinction should be drawn between intentional use of power in negotiations and the ability to influence negotiations as a result of certain social or relational characteristics. Klesse calls the latter ‘differential positioning’: “Differential social positioning in terms of class, race/ethnicity, gender, age and disability may result in unequal power between partners when they are negotiating questions around non-monogamy” (2007:124). The extent to which partners are aware of their potential to influence negotiations is questionable; however, if lesbians and gay men are aware that their relationships are not ‘power-free’ despite their egalitarian ideal (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), poly partners may also be aware of potential power dynamics. For purposes of the current study, relationship ‘power’ is used to describe the ability to exert influence in processes of relationship negotiation and management as a result of social characteristics, similar to Klesse’s ‘differential positioning.’ Power here is equated neither with control nor with dominance. Rather, it is the socially ascribed ability to influence negotiations, whether or not that ability is deliberately utilized in practice.

Framing polyamory as egalitarian or without imbalanced relationship dynamics ultimately neglects the dominant and coercive manners in which social and institutional privileges and oppressions permeate polyamorists’ relational lives. Poly relationships do not exist in a vacuum free of the constraints of social hierarchies. Understanding how these social privileges impact poly relationships is important sociological work. Queer polyamory may prove an interesting case here, as both the queer and polyamorous communities greatly value egalitarianism. Power imbalances in queer poly relationships may speak to ways that social privileges and inequalities continue to pervade even the most egalitarian-oriented intimate relationships. The following discussions outline literature on how significant areas of social
location (race, class, gender, and community) and relationship characteristics (structure and cohesion) may result in power imbalances within relationships or adverse experiences among marginalized queer polyamorists.

Studies on polyamorous relationships neglect direct attention to experiences of people from racially disadvantaged groups. This lack of attention is partially due to overwhelmingly white samples reflecting the racial composition of many poly communities. In a meta-study of research on polyamory and kink, Sheff and Hammers (2011) found that the percent of people of color in research samples across fourteen polyamory studies varied between zero and thirty percent; however, these studies were not limited to the West and several are unpublished graduate theses. In my analyses of published studies involving queer polyamorists, people of color generally comprised around only ten percent of interview participants (for example, Klesse 2007; Sheff 2014; Wosick-Corra 2010); however, the majority of articles offered no detail on racial composition (for example, Bettinger 2005; Deri 2015; Kassoff 1988; McLean 2004; Pallotta-Chiaroli & Lubozitz 2003; Richards 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2007). The racial homogeneity of whiteness in poly communities highlights the privilege that whites are afforded to be able to openly practice nonmonogamies (Sheff 2014; Sheff & Hammers 2011). In addition, white privilege allows study participants to evade discussing race in interviews (Klesse 2005), leaving researchers with minimal data about racial issues in polyamory.

**Race.** People of color may experience difficulties engaging with particular groups, whether it be a local pride organization, poly community, or other group. For example, black sexual minorities may be rejected from both black communities for being gay or LGBT communities for being black (Cahill, Battle, & Meyer 2003). Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan describe one black lesbian nonmonogamist who reported, “The lesbian community has never
given any kind of sign that it accepts or even allows black lesbians to exist” (2001:32). In fact, some black polys reported tokenism and an issue in interactions with poly communities, such to the extent that they avoid poly events (Sheff & Hammers 2011). Queer racial minorities are even more underrepresented in het/bi polyamorous communities. Sheff (2014) interviewed bisexual male primary partners who reported feeling isolated and awkward at a national conference on polyamory because attendees were overwhelmingly white and straight (men) or bisexual (women). However, queer communities are often more progressive than traditional lesbian and gay communities, emphasizing diversity and addressing needs of queer people of color (QPOC). Nevertheless, QPOC surely experience poly relationships and community different from white queer polys.

In addition to interactions with poly communities, people of color may be reluctant to adopt a stigmatized identity, thus practicing polyamory without employing that label. Sheff and Hammers highlight the many layers that come with the intersecting oppressions of being a person of color who practices polyamory: “The disadvantage of a stigmatised identity, coupled with the added weight of racial strain that white or ethnic majorities do not experience, as well as feelings of discomfort or lack of belonging in the setting, can contribute to people of colour’s reluctance to identify with kink and poly subcultures” (2011:213).

Social Class. People from working-class or low-income backgrounds may have unique experiences in poly relationships and communities. Because working-class individuals may be socialized from childhood to be passive or submissive and are less likely to be taught skills of negotiation than middle-class children (Laureau 2003), working-class polyamorists may have greater difficulty gaining influence in relationship negotiations with middle-class partners; however, empirical work on social class in polyamory is severely limited. Ritchie and Barker
(2007) briefly mentioned that one polyamorous woman discussed polyamory in the context of her childhood working-class background; however, there are no details as class was not part of their analyses. Likewise, Sheff (2006) discussed a working-class poly man’s frustration with his marginalized status within a primarily middle-class community but did not expand on this issue.

In addition, income may impact how partners experience poly relationships. For example, a lesbian respondent in Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan’s study claimed, “until I’m working and earning the same amount of money that she is, it can never be equal, in certain ways” (2001:116). Likewise, Klesse (2007) reported on a gay male poly partnership in which one member felt he had less weight in household negotiations because of his weaker financial situation. Research on lesbian and gay coupled families found that income and other employment characteristics influence the division of labor (Carrington 1999), which may likely hold true for queer polyamorous families. Further, homeownership may contribute to potential for influence in negotiations. For example, homeownership can create tensions regarding commitment (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), leaving one partner feeling less comfortable with the relationship than the homeowner. For example, a queer woman in Deri’s (2015) study reported feeling insecure and worried about being replaced because she lived with her partner who owned the home with his other partner. Finally, in terms of poly community, Sheff and Hammers (2011) explain that low-income individuals may lack the monetary resources necessary to participate in community events. Klesse (2014a) highlights how there is a dearth of literature that examines social class in poly relationships and community, and calls for a critical analysis of capitalism and class in research on polyamory.

**Gender.** Research suggests that polyamory has both positive and negative implications for ciswomen and cismen in het/bi poly communities. For example, Sheff found that many poly
women “embraced forms of sexual subjectivity that allowed them to redefine mores and social institutions such as sexuality and monogamy to better fit their own needs” (2005:262), which should be true of transgender women (Richards 2010). In addition, some poly cismen redefine traditional hegemonic masculinities (Sheff 2006), a finding that should hold true for trans men as well. In contrast, many women in the ‘het/bi’ community are hypersexualized as a ‘hot bi babe’ (Klesse 2005, 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005, 2006) and bisexual men are sought out for only sexual but not emotional partnerships (Sheff 2005; Klesse 2007). We have little knowledge of experiences of bisexual women and men in a queer context (i.e., in same-gender relationships or queer poly communities). For example, bisexual women may not be hypersexualized in queer women’s poly communities, but may face hostility from lesbians for their attractions towards men.

Further, we have no knowledge of how cis/trans partner differentials impact poly relationship negotiations. As trans polys are highly reflective of the ways their gender, sexuality, and intimacies are constructed and managed, they may be more likely than cisgender polys to challenge oppressive relationship norms, particularly in terms of heteronormativity (Richards 2010; Sanger 2010). More research is warranted that examines how trans people experience polyamorous relationships and community or how cisgender privilege may translate into power imbalances when trans people negotiate relationships with cis people.

Finally, butch/femme gender dynamics may impact poly relationship negotiations, particularly when these roles are strongly heteronormative. Deri found that some queer polys “unconsciously buy into gender roles about appropriate behavior for men and women, where a butch person is cast in the man’s role” (2015:79). In addition, she found that those in the poly kink community (discussed further below) often viewed butches and tops to have more power
because they are rarer thus more sought after. Although Deri’s study involved only queer women, this pattern is likely to hold true for queer men, as gay male culture has a long history of employing a masculine/feminine dichotomy (Chauncey 1994).

Community. Sheff (2014) identifies several ways the het/bi poly community provides assistance to its members: primarily in terms of finances (fundraising, direct monetary assistance, free residence) and emotional support (advice, groups discussions, role modeling). Being part of a community generates social capital (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), which may impact poly negotiations (Klesse 2007). For instance, Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan describe one gay male respondent who expressed how his LGBT network was advantageous; “There are a lot of things that potentially make it very imbalanced in terms of power because I’m more experienced in gay life and more comfortable in it than he is” (2001:118). The respondent felt that having a close community gave him a sense of security and support that his partner lacked. Likewise, Sheff (2014) found that people less connected to their poly community had fewer role models and often felt confused or alone, and those who found the community subsequently learned communicative skills necessary for successful poly relationships. Lack of guidelines and skills of communication among people new to poly relationships or lack of experience among those new to the queer community may translate into difficulties or imbalanced power dynamics in queer poly relationships.

However, Klesse (2007) found that his poly and consensually nonmonogamous bisexual and gay male participants had an ambiguous relationship to community. Some felt heavily connected to specific communities, while others were skeptical to the very idea of ‘community,’ particularly people of color who are marginalized in both poly and queer communities. Sheff and Hammers (2011) list several barriers that working-class and low-income people face in being
part of sexual minority communities. These findings suggest that the benefits of being backed by a community may further privilege queer polyamorists who are already privileged by their social class.

**Intersections.** Analyzing issues surrounding social location, power, and privilege separately may be fruitful in exposing unique experiences among marginalized queer polyamorists; however, the intersections of multiple areas of social location should be central in any research that examines relationship dynamics. Heavily influenced by both critical race studies and feminist studies, intersectionality examines experiences of individuals positioned at two or more social location sites. More importantly, intersectionality emphasizes the interlocking systems of oppression and power (Combahee River Collective 1979) behind these experiences, such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism.

Literature has addressed the intersection of race and class in terms of polyamorous community privilege (see Sheff & Hammers 2011); however, studies largely neglect how systems of oppression intersect to produce unique experiences for marginalized polys. For example, literature on poly sexualities fails to discuss the ways in which sexuality among people of color is unique or stereotyped in American culture. Sheff (2005) notes that poly women of color in the het/bi community perceive social stigma as a greater threat than white poly women, which may impact relationship negotiations (Klesse 2007); however, we have no concrete knowledge of how these perceptions impact relationships or whether polyamorists of color from queer communities have similar perceptions. This position of triple marginalization (being a queer, poly, person of color) will certainly produce differing meanings and experiences, even within the queer poly community.
Another example relates to the ways sexual stereotyping of people of color may impact relationships. Damaging stereotypes of black sexuality that has persisting roots in slavery and maintains existing systems of inequality (Hill Collins 2000). Specifically, sexual legacies of slavery characterize black men as sexually aggressive or animalistic, which translates into contemporary stereotypes that black men are wildly hypersexual and unable to commit to one partner. Black men’s engagement in polyamory may fuel the stereotype that they are sexually untamable, even if it is a form of consensual nonmonogamy. This may be particularly true for black gay men, as gay men have also been stereotyped as promiscuous. The ‘racialization of promiscuity’ (Hill Collins 2004) as a sexual legacy of slavery applies also to black women as a result of the history of high fertility encouraged by slave owners and sexual stereotyping that produced sexualized images such as the ‘jezebel.’ Thus, black poly women and men may be guarded and private about their relationships as form of protection from sexual stereotyping. These and other interlocking systems of oppression deserve more attention in research on polyamory, as well as in theoretical perspectives of contemporary intimacies.

**Relationship Structure.** In addition to social location, relationship characteristics such as structure, cohesion, and kink may impact experiences or create challenges with queer polyamory. Both relationship structure and individual positioning within that structure may impact influence in poly relationship negotiations. For example, the ‘wedge in a V’ may exert more power in the group and secondary partners may have weaker negotiation influence, or primary partners may have greater influence over secondary partners. In Ritchie and Barker’s study, one woman in a v-configuration felt she might benefit more than her (male) partners because she is the “centre of a household” where she enjoys being the “queen bee” (2007:146).
In addition, research suggests that persons who join dyadic partnerships to form triads often feel as if they have weaker power in these relationships than the two who were already partnered (Sheff 2005). For example, Klesse (2007) illustrates the frustrations of a polyamorist who lacked power in his intimate group because he had moved in with two men who were already in a primary relationship and owned their home together and felt as if he was the third relationship member. Likewise, a woman who enjoys triads expressed often feeling as if she were the “disposable partner” in these relationships (Sheff 2005:270). This type of ‘couple privilege’ exists among dyadic primaries who seek a third partner. Sheff defines couple privilege as “a narrow focus on the couple’s needs and desires as the primary or sole determinant of a relationship at the possible expense of the [third person’s] feelings, desires, or even full personhood” (2014:83).

Finally, relationship structure involves the size of the poly group. Most het/bi poly partnerships appear to involve a primary dyadic couple who has external relationships (Sheff 2014); however, partnerships may also take structure in vees, triads, quads, or ‘moresomes’ (larger groupings). The size of the group may be related to experiences of polyamory. For example, Sheff (2014) found that more tensions existed among larger poly families, which creates more need for constant communication and negotiation. Likewise, the more ‘active’ partner (the one who has the most partners) may have more negotiating power. Although most polys do not perceive number of partners to be related to power dynamics, some find it easier to navigate their emotions when they are the person who dates most actively (Deri 2015).

**Relationship Cohesion.** Sheff touches on the concept of relationship cohesion in a brief discussion on family resilience. ‘Family cohesiveness’ is one protective process for families, defined as “the balance between family separateness and connectedness” ([Patterson 2002:240](#))
Sheff 2014). Other research touches on cohesion in addressing the extent to which partners negotiate share or separate social worlds (Jamieson 2004; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001). Some polyamorists and nonmonogamists share most aspects of their social lives. For example, Jamieson (2004) describes partnerships in which primary partners spend holidays and celebrations together with their secondary partners. Both polys and queer people are likely to have close networks or families of friends and ex-lovers (Barker 2005; Sheff 2011; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), suggesting that social worlds may be heavily interconnected in queer poly communities.

In contrast, some poly practicing individuals prefer to keep separate worlds and avoid prioritization of various types of relationships. For example, a gay male nonmonogamist noted, “there is no one person who’s the most important person in my life” (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001:31). This respondent did not wish to live with his primary partner, nor did another respondent, a lesbian who was in a nonmonogamous relationship with her partner for three years. She explained, “it is very important to remain individuals and to keep our independence and our separate lives” (2001:32). This emphasis on individualism far exceeds that of traditional monogamous couples whose lives are heavily intertwined (Jamieson 2004). Further, some polyamorists reject any hierarchical categorization of partnerships (eg, primary/secondary), arguing that they “relied upon the same distinction: the degree of practical interdependence was the truly important quality, rather than emotional depth” (Sheff 2014:19). Iantaffi (2010) also notes that polyamorists emphasize interdependence rather than dependence; however, research on this phenomenon is virtually nonexistent.

Similarly, the extent of cohesiveness between partners and partners’ partners may impact how people experience polyamory. For example, Sheff distinguished between ‘polyaffective’
and polyamorous partnerships, defining polyaffectivity as “the nonsexual emotional ties that bind people in poly families together” (2014:207). More specifically, Sheff explained,

“Polyamory, the most flamboyant version of poly identity, is explicitly sexual in that it centers on being open to multiple sexual partners. A quieter version of poly identity, polyaffectivity appears to be more durable and flexible – able to supersede, coexist with, and outlast sexual interactions. Relationships that have such a multitude of options for interaction and define emotional intimacy as more significant than sexual intimacy allow poly people to craft a wide selection of possible outcomes. Most importantly, they allow polys to establish significant nonsexual relationships and maintain relationships over time even if their sexual content changes” (2014:279).

The polyaffective relationship may be even more important among queer polyamorists as queer people have a long history of maintaining close relationships with ex-partners and ex’s current partners and friends (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001; Weston 1991). One respondent in the Spears and Lowen study on gay men’s relationships described his poly family in terms of cohesion: “The five of us are very, very close. There are a variety of relationships, not all sexual, but all intimate” (2010:27, unpublished). Here, he stresses that each member of the family has strong emotional ties with all others, despite lack of sexual or romantic involvement.

**Kink.** Finally, kink is important to examine in studies on poly relationships as it can be a defining characteristic of relational dynamics. Often synonymous with ‘BDSM’ (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism), kink involves power play between two or more people that is often erotic in nature but may or may not involve sex. Some research suggests that kink is central to some poly partnerships. For instance, a participant in Sanger’s research who was in a triadic poly relationship explained, “I think for me [dominance and submission] has become the most defining element in my sexuality. For me it’s far more important that my partner be dominant than whether they’re male or female” (2010:100). In addition, there is considerable overlap between poly and kink communities (Deri 2015; Sheff &
Hammers 2011). In fact, two-thirds of Deri’s (2015) queer poly women participants were involved with BDSM, and several others reported that kink discourses informed their poly relationship practices.

Kink has been reported as an organizing factor in domestic labor (anonymous personal communication) and for the household (Klesse 2007) or relationship more generally (Davidmann 2014; Klesse 2007) among polyamorists. For instance, Klesse noted that the restructuring of one consensually nonmonogamous partnership in his study actually relied upon reconceptualizing the relationship in terms of dominance and submission. The participant claimed, “dominance/submission gives you a very special [tool] for handling problems of poly” (2007:123). This participant’s partner was uncomfortable with the transition into a polyamorous relationship until she understood their partnership in terms of a master/slave relationship in which she must be obedient to his every decision. Similarly, presenting trans partnerships through photography and brief descriptive narratives, Davidmann wrote of a trans kink triad:

“DK described her partnership as a ‘leather family’ and her household as ‘a traditional family with an unconventional framework.’ DK explained that their relationship is ‘a hierarchical DS [domination/submission] arrangement.’ DK is number one, Rachel is number two, and Lu is number three” (2014:643-4).

Sexual fantasy is played out in routine everyday life in these ‘24/7’ BDSM relationships. For example, the ‘Dom’ (dominant) may set rules for which ‘Sub’ (submissive) partner washes dishes, does laundry, cleans house, and so on, with these tasks being eroticized as part of ‘power play.’

It is important to note that although kink involves power dynamics, these seemingly imbalanced relationships should not be equated with power inequalities. Although relationships and domestic life may be structured via dominance and submission or other kink roles, the intimate relationships themselves remain modeled on egalitarianism (Klesse 2007). For example,
although the Dom may give orders to Subs to compete domestic tasks, the Dom is responsible for sustaining the safety and well-being of the Subs – a full time job that requires much effort and attention. In addition, power dynamics are equalized as the Subs continue to allow the Dom to give commands. Power and egalitarianism here are redefined: Subs are thought to have the ultimate power by allowing the Dom to be dominant, and egalitarianism is maintained via the continuous monitoring of every partners’ emotional and physical well-being. These relationships should not be perceived as unequal or nonconsensual, as autonomy and consent lie in the agreements that occur to construct and maintain boundaries of the kink relationship. In this way, kink is closely related to polyamory. Both involve careful and deliberate negotiation of relationship rules and boundaries.

**Researching Queer Polyamory**

Although I have presented findings from some studies that involve queer polyamorists, research on polyamory focusing solely on queer subjects is scarce. There is a bulk of literature devoted to bisexuality and polyamory; however, much of this research comes from the het/bi poly community and fails to address how bisexuals who identify more closely with queer culture experience polyamory (for example, Klesse 2007; McLean 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz 2003; Sheff 2014). There is also a severe dearth of research that focuses specifically on lesbian or gay male polyamory. Existing articles may present a single case study (for example, Bettinger 2005), emphasize clinical issues (for example, Kassoff 1988), or be theoretical or personal in nature rather than empirical (for example, Loulan 1999). In addition, interest in lesbian polyamory appears to have waned in the 21st century, with the exception of Deri’s (2015) new book on queer women’s polyamory, and interest in gay male polyamory has been neglected as literature focuses heavily on other forms of consensual nonmonogamy – namely, open
relationships involving casual sex (Adam 2006; Coelho 2011; Spears & Lowen 2010, unpublished).

Other sexual identities that fall under the queer umbrella have been nearly absent from literature on polyamory, with the exception of asexuality (see Scherrer 2010). Researchers may provide participants’ alternative identities, but offer no critique of how that identity relates to polyamory or produces unique relationship or community experiences. I argue that neglecting these identities in studying queer relationships is to reinforce hegemony of gay/lesbian and bisexual identities, marginalizing all other identities along the queer spectrum. However, it is important to note that some people who identify as pansexual or fluid often employ ‘bisexual’ in conversation due to the complexities of explaining those terms (Callis 2014; Sanger 2010).

Finally, research specifically on trans polyamory is virtually non-existent. Some studies on transgender relationships neglect mention of nonmonogamy altogether (for example, Hines 2006; Meier et al. 2013), while others briefly mention nonmonogamy or provide little insight into how trans people experience nonmonogamy. For example, one study on transgender relationships found that one-third of the sample did not identify their relationships as monogamous, with nearly a quarter identifying specifically as nonmonogamous and nine percent as ‘other’ (Iantaffi & Bockting 2011); however, this study dichotomized relationships into basic categories of monogamy and nonmonogamy, giving little indication of how many relationships were specifically polyamorous, and the authors offered little attention to nonmonogamy in their discussion. The dearth of literature that focuses on trans polyamory is surprising, given the research evidence that there are in fact many nonmonogamous trans individuals.

There appears to be a great divide in community between het/bi and queer polyamorists. Many of Klesse’s (2007) study participants emphasized the lack of both same-sex primary
relationships and participation of sexual minorities in poly communities. In addition, researchers have been quick to dismiss queer polyamory. For example, regarding lesbians, Sheff noted that she had not yet “gained access to their ranks for interviews.” She then claims,

“The practice of multiple-partner relating is so common among gay men as to constitute non-monogamy as a regular feature of gay community, thus negating the need for an additional identity and separate community organized around a polyamorous sexual identity” (2011:497).

Here, Sheff appears to portray gay male polyamorous relationships as inaccessible to researchers because there is no gay male poly community; however, as some literature indicates, there are many gay men who practice polyamory whether or not they have formed a unified community. Sheff also notes, however, that homophobia may be in part responsible for the absence of gay and bisexual men in poly communities. In addition, literature on gender in polyamory centers solely on cisgender men and women, wholly neglecting experiences of trans people.

The complexities in locating research subjects is likely one reason for the dearth of research on queer polyamory. Wosick-Correa (2010) conducted a large-scale survey on intimate relationships, with 343 respondents identifying as polyamorous. Of this sub-sample, only seven percent identified as gay, lesbian, or queer/other and only one percent identified as transgender. In contrast, 38 percent identified as straight with the majority as bisexual (54%), and an overwhelming 99 percent identifying as either ‘female’ or ‘male.’ It is possible that queer people are less likely than straights or bisexuals to self-identify as polyamorous, rather engaging in the practice without labeling themselves as a polyamorous person. In addition, although there are some queer poly organizations (such as Poly NYC), it appears as though the het/bi community is more visible and organized, allowing researchers to access these polyamorists more easily than those from queer poly communities. Further, as with any research on marginalized subjects, queer polys may be less trusting of researchers than more privileged people, and thus less willing
to participate in studies. Finally, many queer people reject static labels and may find social science research problematic in its use of infinite categorizations.

Nevertheless, some existing research on polyamory specifically involved queer participants, and studies from the het/bi community are certainly relevant in many regards and are discussed below. Table 1 below presents an overview of empirical studies that directly examine polyamorous partnerships or communities. Only four of these studies focus specifically on queer participants (Bettinger 2005; Deri 2015; Klesse 2005-2014; Richards 2010). Of these, Christian Klesse offers the greatest insight into polyamorous experiences and practices among queer people. I find this research substantial for three reasons: first, it addresses an immense gap in literature by specifically examining queer polyamory; second, it emphasizes power dynamics, an area that is often dismissed in research on polyamory; and third, it places polyamorous practices in a larger social context of hegemonic heteronormativity and sexual politics.

In addition, Jillian Deri’s work on queer women’s polyamory is imperative as she studied a heavily marginalized group; however, her primary focus was within the sociology of emotions. Other work on poly relationships is heteronormative. For example, Sheff’s (2005-2014) longitudinal study of polyamorists and their families provided essential analyses on polyamorous partnerships, but is limited primarily to individuals from the ‘het/bi’ community. Thus, her discussion of gender issues is largely framed in terms of hetero-cis gender dynamics. Likewise, Ritchie and Barker (2007) highlighted important gender issues, particularly as they relate to feminist polyamorous practices, but offered little insight into same-gender partnerships. In addition, some research on polyamory involving queer participants has been limited to exceedingly small samples sizes or one case study (Bettinger 2005; Richards 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2007).
Table 1. Empirical Studies on Polyamorous Intimate Relationships, Families, and/or Community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Sample; Country</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avarim (2007-)</td>
<td>Polyamorous activists' approaches to marriage</td>
<td>35 activists from the Bay Area polyamorous community; US</td>
<td>In-depth interviews; community/event observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bettinger (2005)</td>
<td>Gay male polyamorous family</td>
<td>1 poly-identified gay male family; US</td>
<td>No detail (likely clinical notes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deri (2015)</td>
<td>Jealousy &amp; compersion in queer women’s poly pairs</td>
<td>22 self-identified poly queer, lesbian, &amp; bisexual women; CA</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klesse (2005-)</td>
<td>Gay male &amp; bisexual polyamory &amp; nonmonogamy</td>
<td>44 adults in gay male or bisexual nonmonogamous or polyamorous relationships; UK</td>
<td>In-depth interviews; 4 focus groups; discourse analysis; observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pallotta-Chiarolli (1995-)</td>
<td>Polyamorous families</td>
<td>94 bi or poly youth and teachers, multi-sexual or poly parents or their children; AU</td>
<td>Face-to-face or email interviews; participant observation; content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richards (2010)</td>
<td>Theoretical intersections of trans and polyamory</td>
<td>13 people self-identified as both trans*/transgender &amp; nonmonogamous; UK</td>
<td>Online questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritchie &amp; Barker (2007)</td>
<td>Polyamorous women</td>
<td>8 poly-identified women (including the researchers); UK</td>
<td>1 focus group (co-led by participants); content analysis of online forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheff (2005-)</td>
<td>Polyamorous families and relationships</td>
<td>81 poly-identified adults (40 in wave 1 &amp; 56 in wave 2); US</td>
<td>In-depth interviews; community/event observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wosick-Correa (2010)</td>
<td>Polyamorous agreements and rules</td>
<td>343 poly-identified adults; US</td>
<td>Taken from large-scale survey; including 12 in-depth interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other useful literature not listed in Table 1 informs our knowledge of queer polyamory, despite being centered on broader areas such as nonmonogamous or queer relationships. For example, Sanger’s (2010) work on trans partnerships offers some critical insights into trans polyamory. In addition, *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*’ special issue on polyamory (Hetherington et al. 1999; Loulan 1999) is informative in terms of personal accounts of lesbian poly relationships, and Kassoff’s (1998) clinical research on lesbian nonmonogamy helps inform our knowledge of queer women’s poly partnerships, albeit this literature is dated. Further, research on gay male open relationships (Adam 2006; Coelho 2011; Spears & Lowen 2010, unpublished), bisexual nonmonogamies (McLean 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz 2003), and queer intimacies involving some participants who are consensually nonmonogamous (Davidmann 2014; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001) are fruitful for speculating how queer people may experience polyamory or what unique challenges they face in a heteronormative culture.

As Table 1 reveals, there is a dearth of research specifically on queer polyamory. Thus, I draw from related areas (as discussed in the preceding paragraph) to review relevant literature on queer polyamorous relationships and community. I identified four broad themes in my reading of this literature: Reasons to practice polyamory as they relate to specific identities, queer and poly identity disclosure practices, involvement in and interactions with social institutions, and heteronormative expectations and relationship practices. I now turn to a discussion of each of these major themes.

**Queer-Specific Reasons to Practice Polyamory**

Literature on polyamory suggests that there are queer-specific reasons why people have polyamorous relationships. Some reasons rely on specific sexual/gender identities or
experiences, while others can result from cultural histories. For example, polyamory and asexuality have in common the inclusion of a ‘romantic dimension’ (see Sherrer 2008), in which people form intimate relationships that do not involve sex. This ‘philosophy of friendship’ is central to polyamory as it blurs the boundaries between lover, partner, and friend (Klesse 2007). Thus, polyamory has been described as a suitable practice of intimacy for asexual-identified individuals who desire romantic relationships. Scherrer found that “concepts, such as monogamy, are socially imbued with sexual connotations” in ways that may encourage some asexuals to consider polyamory (2010:158). Polyamory also allows sexually active partners of asexual people to achieve sexual fulfillment. For example, Sanger explained,

“Jenny emphasised her lack of interest in the sexual aspects of intimate partnerships, and had found that polyamory offered her the opportunity to be with partners who were sexual despite her relative asexuality: ‘having different libidos from some of my partners is not a problem, because they have other partners’” (2010:123).

Likewise, Davidmann (2014) briefly noted how a member of a queer-trans polyamorous triad came to identify as asexual – the development of the partnership accommodated her asexuality without affecting any emotional bonds.

In work investigating the theoretical intersection of trans and nonmonogamies, Richards argued that trans people who have moved beyond binary thinking face challenges inherent in heteronormative intimacies: “trans bodies are perhaps better able to fall outside of the sex/gender dyad when trans people are part of a polyamorous relationship structure” (2010:121). Referencing Judith Butler, Richards noted that trans people who practice polyamory have greater opportunities to perform gender than those bound by monogamy. Polyamory offers trans people a way to express gender fluidity by assuming varying gender presentations depending on which partner they are currently spending time with. Furthermore, some transgender people find
polyamory imperative to transitioning. For example, Sanger’s (2010) study involved two couples whose marriages were strained when one partner transitioned. One couple no longer had a sexual relationship but continued to live together and remained married while the non-trans partner dated a man. The other couple negotiated a triadic poly relationship as a way to stay together while ensuring the satisfaction of both partners. One respondent in Richards’ study explained, “I feel that my transition would have been very difficult if I was in a forced monogamy situation, because I could not explore my changing sense of self, body, and sexual attraction” (2010:126).

Interestingly, as sexual identities influence decisions to have poly relationships, transitioning from monogamy to polyamory can evoke a reimagining of one’s sexuality that results in adopting a new sexual identity. Sanger’s (2010) research highlights an important connection between sexual fluidity and polyamory. For example, one participant’s sexual identity evolved from heterosexual to bisexual as a result of becoming polyamorous with her long-term partner who transitioned to female, and other nonmonogamous participants discussed altering their sexual identities in order to be harmonious with their partners’ changing genders.

Additionally, cultural norms may influence some queer people’s decisions to engage in polyamory. Gay male polyamory has a complex history due to nonmonogamous practices as a normative feature of gay male culture. Although many nonmonogamous relationships among gay men are negotiated in a manner that centers on sexual non-exclusivity (Adam 2006), reflecting consensual nonmonogamous ‘open relationships’ that require emotional exclusivity (Coleman & Rosser 1996 [Bettinger 2005]), some of these relationships reflect polyamory with an emphasis on honesty and full disclosure, while others are self-identified specifically as polyamorous partnerships or families (Bettinger 2005; Spears & Lowen 2010, unpublished). Nevertheless, it appears that nonmonogamy in the form of casual sex with external partners is more common
among gay men than polyamory. In fact, Adam noted, “the only male study participant to raise this idea [of polyamory] in interview did so as a result of having had a lesbian therapist” (2006:24). Gay men may simply be less likely to than other queer people to adopt the label ‘polyamorous,’ or they may understand that their arrangements do not reflect polyamory by way of emphasizing casual sex and emotional exclusivity.

Finally, some people are sure to practice polyamory as a result of being bisexual; however, it is important to note that bisexuality is not synonymous with nonmonogamy – an issue discussed in a subsequent section. Nevertheless, polyamory offers bisexual people a way to maintain meaningful simultaneous relationships with both women and men. Although, this point could be extended to any non-monosexual identity – meaning, anyone who is attracted to more than one gender – such as pansexual or fluid.

In contrast to the reasons discussed above, some people report that there is social pressure to be polyamorous in their queer communities. For example, some people report a homogenizing trend towards nonmonogamy in bisexual communities (Klesse 2007), such that nonmonogamous relationships are normative in those communities. Likewise, I have been involved in discussions in which trans people describe their communities as overwhelmingly polyamorous. For example, a trans woman once expressed concern regarding pressure to be polyamorous, such that monogamy is considered a lesser form of intimate relating in her trans community, and a trans man once proclaimed, “I know! Everyone is poly!” in a conversation about the lack of research on trans polyamory.

**Queer and Polyamorous Identity Disclosure**

Queer people who have poly partnerships are in a position of double sexual marginalization and must tread carefully when disclosing their identities and practices. Coming
out as queer or poly in a heterocentric and monocentric culture may result in devastating consequences, such as loss employment or family ties. In fact, some polyamorous families have lost custody of their children due to being perceived as unfit parents (see Sheff 2014). Further, Deri (2015) suggested that some polyamorists internalize polyphobia, causing them a sense of shame.

The bulk of literature on polyamory that discusses issues such as coming out, passing, and social stigma centers on bisexuals. Bisexuality is uniquely stigmatized in greater culture, as the public has misconceptions about bisexuals being inherently nonmonogamous. Bisexual polys may then be perceived as engaging in polyamory solely by default, dismissing individual agency or interest in the practice for its own sake. Public discourse has also painted ‘authentic bisexuality’ as only achievable when a person maintains simultaneous relationships with a man and a woman (Klesse 2005), again neglecting the reality of agency and flexibility in sexual identity and practice. Klesse (2005) found that bi poly women employ ‘anti-promiscuity discourses’ as a protective measure in order to differentiate themselves from ‘sluts’ or ‘whores,’ a finding that reflects the use of the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘responsible nonmonogamy’ (Lano & Parry 1995) as part of the development of polyamory. I suspect that queer people may be less likely than heterosexuals to equate ‘bisexual’ with ‘slut’ or ‘nonmonogamous’ as queer people appear to have more flexible understandings of sexual intimacy (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001).

In addition to sexual stereotyping, cultural homophobia and biphobia may deter some queer people in polyamorous communities from coming out as bisexual or gay. For example, bisexuals are often rejected in traditional lesbian and gay communities and perceived as confused or selfish (Esterberg 2002). In fact, Klesse (2005) reports that many bi poly women experience
marginalization in lesbian spaces. Additionally, some bisexual men report frustrations with other poly men’s avoidance of emotional partnerships. One of Klesse’s bisexual male participants explained this pattern in terms of heterosexism and internalized homophobia in bi and poly communities: “[Men] know that if they face up to the emotional side of the relationship, then they will have to finally admit that they are bisexual or gay” (2007:91). By denying same-sex emotional desires, poly men are freer to claim privileges associated with hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality.

Likewise, some bi poly men are reluctant to reveal their bisexual identity in certain settings. Sheff found that some bisexual poly men “reported feeling constrained by potential social disapproval when considering disclosure of their sexual orientation,” suggesting that male-male sexual possibilities “raised the specter of homophobia” (2014:85-86). Not surprisingly, tolerance or rejection of male bi polys are related to the local environment of poly communities. For example, poly communities in areas such as San Francisco that are heavily populated by queer people have more acceptance of male-male sexual behavior than other areas (Sheff 2014), and organizations such as Poly Pride in New York City specifically center on LGBTQ people. Research is warranted that examines bisexual-identified people who practice polyamory in queer communities such as these.

As discourses of bisexual promiscuity and other forms of social stigma may deter bisexual polys from coming out as polyamorous, bi polys are able to pass as straight couples in public when partnered with the ‘opposite’ gender. Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz found that most women and their bisexual male partners “pretend to the outside world to live conventional heteronormative monogamous lives” (2003:74), indicating that many nonmonogamous couples do in fact employ ‘passing’ rather than coming out. Rambukkana (2004) draws parallels between
coming out as bisexual and coming out as polyamorous, noting tensions that exist between having the ability to pass (as either straight for bisexuals or monogamous for polyamorists) as a measure of protection versus promoting tolerance or acceptance of bisexuality and polyamory by publicly coming out. According to a 2012 online survey of over 4000 self-identified polyamorists conducted by Loving More magazine, bisexuals were less likely to experience discrimination for being polyamorous than lesbian and gay polys (Cox, Bergstrand, & Fleckstein 2013), a finding that supports the notion that passing offers social protections. Although passing as straight monogamists protects some polyamorists, it also perpetuates the hegemony of both monogamy and heterosexuality, reinforcing heteronormativity.

Other research indicates that coming out as bisexual may be easier than coming out as poly. Klesse (2007) labeled one participant’s process of coming out as polyamorous ‘deep crisis.’ This participant explained that coming to terms with her polyamorous identity was much more challenging than accepting herself as bisexual. In addition, another participant was reluctant to come out to the lesbian community as a bisexual polyamorist, as a result of lesbian ‘distrust’ of bisexual women stemming from the fear that these women will take up with (cisgender) men.

Speaking of queer identities more generally, Klesse stated, “Many of my interview partners explained that it would be particularly difficult to communicate a range or combination of marginalised sexual identities (such as, for example, bi, BDSM, and polyamorous), rather than to just come out with being not heterosexual” (2007:135). Similar complications exist with other queer identities. For example, Sanger’s study suggests that many people who identify as pansexual or queer use bisexual for convenience because of the public’s limited understanding of pansexuality. One participant explained,
As people may encounter similar difficulties explaining polyamory to those who are unaware of the practice, many queer polys may forgo the latter identity for convenience (Deri 2015). Publicly identifying only as only ‘bisexual’ or ‘gay’ surely requires less effort than claiming to be a ‘pansexual polyamorist.’

One article in an older publication on lesbian polyamory highlights issues of social acceptance and coming out as polyamorous (Hetherington et al. 1999). This work is not empirical, but rather comes from personal journals written by four polyamorous ‘dykes;’ however, it does offer some insights into issues that lesbians face in polyamory. One author questioned whether it is necessary to come out to her family as nonmonogamous after already having come out as a lesbian. Another described greater anxieties about coming out to her family: “I react with horror: come out to my parents as non-monogamous! No way! They still haven’t accepted my lesbianism and I’ve been out to them for over ten years” (1999:113), while a different author stressed about coming out to friends and acquaintances: “One of the things I crave is the approval of other people. … Why do I care so much what people think? Isn’t it good enough to approve of what I’m doing myself?” (1999:119).

From personal observations of a queer women’s community, it seems that lesbian polyamorists face such great difficulties in coming out as polyamorous to the extent that many choose not to, justifying polyamory as ‘nobody’s business but your own’ – unlike being queer. This raises the question of whether contemporary queer polyamorists view polyamory as a radical political act or as something private and individualized. Deri’s (2015) work suggests that queer poly women may avoid disclosing their poly identity due to the potential of facing harmful
microaggressions. For example, monogamists react with statements accusing queer women of not loving their partner enough, lacking commitment, or engaging in cheating. Some reactions are aligned with antiquated cultural expectations of female sexuality purity and the virgin/whore dichotomy. It is no surprise then that many queer poly women employ anti-promiscuity discourses.

Finally, the extent to which gay men practice polyamory without being ‘out’ as polyamorous is unclear. Klesse appears to suggest that some researchers may be reluctant to investigate gay male polyamory as a protective measure due to the history – and primarily the assumption – of nonmonogamy among gay men. He explained,

“Dominant representations of gayness have remained over-determined by an assumption of an excessive, contagious and promiscuous sexuality. … The fact that anti-promiscuity stereotypes are such an important element of anti-gay prejudice has complicated the communication of gay male non-monogamous knowledges and practices. It has contributed to a situation in which it appears to be problematic to claim non-monogamy as an integral part of gay male culture” (2007:59).

Klesse highlights an excellent point about the tensions between cultural norms among gay men and societal expectations of monogamy. Some gay male partners may describe their relationships as monogamous or strongly emphasize emotional exclusivity despite being behaviorally nonmonogamous (Adam 2006) due to these frictions. In other words, gay men may label their partnerships as ‘monogamous’ as a protective measure, in a sense actually being closeted polyamorists. This phenomenon could help explain why polyamory appears to occur much less frequently among gay men than other queer groups.

However, it may also be the case that many gay men are simply unaware of the term polyamory or are indifferent to the technicalities that differentiate it from nonmonogamy. Spears and Lowen (2010, unpublished) found that only six percent of their gay male respondents
explicitly identified as polyamorous, yet eighty percent practiced nonmonogamy with either full (40%) or varying (40%) degrees of disclosure. In addition, many participants discussed poly values such as communication, negotiation, deep emotional connections, and love as they relate to multi-partner intimacies. These findings indicate that many more gay men practice polyamory than identify as polyamorous, but the reasons for this discrepancy are unclear.

**Involvement in and Interactions with Social Institutions**

Researchers have illustrated the connections between social institutions such as family, marriage, education, and medicine and queer polyamory. Some of this literature describes experiences or issues regarding involvement in the institution, such as being a queer poly family, while other literature focuses on polyamorists’ interactions with social institutions.

Sheff (2014) offers the greatest wealth of information on poly families; however, her study relied on polyamorists from het/bi communities rather than queer communities. Other literature describes queer poly families (Bettinger 2005; Spears & Lowen 2010, unpublished), but provides minimal analyses. For example, Bettinger (2005) details a large polyamorous gay male family, framing a discussion of functioning in terms of a family systems approach. Although this study offers important insights into the complexities of poly family life, it fails to question what it means to be a *queer* poly family. Some men in the Spears and Lowen (2010, unpublished) study reported being part of a polyamorous family. These participants discussed polyamorous values of honesty and love, reflecting the findings discussed in the beginning of this chapter; however, we learn little else about these families.

In a comparative study between polyamorists and lesbians, bisexuals, and gay males (‘lesbigays’), Sheff (2011) found that the most notable similarity between polyamorous and lesbigay families concerns the disadvantages they face as stigmatized sexual minorities. For
example, lesbigay and poly people must make cautious decisions regarding raising children, negotiating custody, and disclosure of their sexuality, may encounter challenges in relationships with institutions (such as marriage and educational systems) and families of origin, and struggle with language that is overwhelmingly heteronormative. These difficulties result in polyamorists’ adoption of similar adaptive strategies that have been employed by lesbigays, such as having close networks or families of friends and ex-lovers (Barker 2005; Deri 2015; Klesse 2007; Sheff 2011; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001). These ‘families of choice’ (Weston 1991) legitimate bonds between people who are not romantically or sexually involved, but may share a partner or household.

Queer poly families face unique difficulties with other social institutions, particularly educational systems. Poly parents must tread carefully in interactions with their children’s schools. Many families are hesitant to disclose that they are polyamorous (Sheff 2010, 2014) instead passing as queer or heterosexual couples; however, some actively “decide to ‘pollute’ the mono-normativity of the school by being ‘out’ as a polyfamily” (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:183). When poly parents or children do disclose their family structure, they can be met with disapproval, stigma, or harassment. A mother in Pallotta-Chiarolli’s research complained,

“It’s really hard when the schools treat our kids as if we might contaminate the school with some polyvirus. Meanwhile, some kids at that school come from families where drug addictions, domestic violence and child abuse are rife but they’re treated as ‘normal’ … We’re not aliens from some other planet launching a major invasion and contamination of earth families!” (2010:185).

Research to date that investigates the relationship between polys and educational institutions comes from the het/bi community. Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) found that most of her respondents chose to pass as straight monogamists in interactions with children’s schools in order to protect their families, but we have no knowledge of whether queer poly families generally make similar
decisions. As queer people gain visibility and acceptance, more and more people feel comfortable being out; however, whether this means they may also be more comfortable disclosing their polyamorous identity or more reluctant to due to the double oppressions of being queer and polyamorous is unknown.

In addition, queer polys must decide whether to disclose their relationship practices to doctors and other medical staff. A trans man in Sanger’s study reported encounters with medical staff that the author refers to as “patronising dismissal of polyamorous partnerships.” The participant explained, “so yes, tell people that you have two partners and they become ‘friends’” (2010:123). Experiences such as these may be a common occurrence among transgender people as they often require frequent visits to medical offices to receive scripts for hormones or other related appointments.

Further, while some research suggests that many polyamorists are indifferent to legal marriage (Avarim 2007; Sheff 2014), results of the Loving More survey indicate that many polys are interested in plural marriage: 67% reported being open to multiple marriage were it legal and 92% agreed with the position that multiple marriage should have the same legal recognition and privileges as dyadic marriage (Cox, Bergstrand, & Fleckstein 2013). Additionally, some transgender people who were unable to legally marry their partners before transitioning find an interest in legalizing one of their partnerships once identification documents are updated. For example, one of Sanger’s participants will be able to legally marry his (trans)woman partner after his documents are changed to male, although he may choose to begin a civil partnership with his cisgender male partner. This situation highlights the complexities between polyamory, gender, and forms of legal relationship recognition.
Heteronormative Expectations and Relationship Practices

Literature on bisexual polyamorists repeatedly indicates that they experience hypersexualization in ways reflective of heteronormative culture. For example, research suggests that female bisexuality is heavily sexualized in the het/bi poly community. Specifically, ‘hot bi babes’ are sought out as prizes for primary heterosexual poly partnerships (Klesse 2005, 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005, 2006), a paradox that has both positive and negative implications. It appears as though being hypersexualized may result in a greater status within the poly community but a lesser status in relationships. For example, Sheff (2014) argues that women’s bisexuality translates into social advantage for poly women because they are sought after and highly regarded in the (het/bi) community. This is the case in swinging communities, where single bisexual women are most highly valued and women in general are reported to “hold all the power” (Bergstrand & Blevins-Sinski 2010:62).

However, Sheff implies that bisexual poly women may not be fully respected within these partnerships in stating that some primary heterosexual partners wish to find their ‘unicorn,’ an unpartnered bisexual woman to “help raise the children, clean the house, have sex with the couple, and disappear when it would be inconvenient to explain her presence” (2014:29). This phenomenon certainly highlights a way that bisexual-identified queer women may experience polyamory differently than other queer people. Specifically, the experience of oppression in having relationships with (cis)men who enact hegemonic masculinities may prove challenging for bisexual queer women. In addition, it is important to note that sexualizing bisexuels is a phenomenon not limited to women. Sheff (2005) found that bisexual poly men are often sought only for sexual, rather than emotional, relationships.
Despite research indicating that polys may hypersexualize bi women and men, discourse on polyamory is highly invested in the ideal of love rather than sex. As love, emotional connections, and commitment are defining characteristics of normative monogamous relationships, polyamory can be viewed as engaging in heteronormative practices by adopting these dominant relationship values (Klesse 2007, 2011; Wilkinson 2010). Klesse (2011) examines this issue in a content analysis of literature on polyamory supplemented with his own interview data. Clearly underscoring the common perception of polyamory as ‘responsible’ or ‘ethical’ nonmonogamy, one participant stated, “I guess polyamory’s more about love and non-monogamy’s more about sex” (2011:13). However, polyamorists have varying interpretations of what poly love means. Although fragmented and contradictory at times, Klesse found several themes surrounding poly love discourses. For example, love as the basis for eroticism, love as freedom, love as realized in care or commitment, love as work or dedication, and so on. Klesse concluded that although love is essential to polyamory, “the discourse on poly love is eclectic. It collects tropes from romantic love discourses, humanist psychology, feminist ethics, queer family ideologies, sexual liberationism and diverse forms of spiritualism and religion” (2011:20). Thus, these discourses uphold (at least various aspects of) the idealization of romantic love.

In an older publication, Kassoff (1988) notes that lesbian nonmonogamy may emphasize love more than gay male nonmonogamy due to gendered patterns of socialization; however, nonmonogamous and poly gay men also employ discourses of love (Spears & Lowen 2010, unpublished). Loulan (1999) later furthers Kassoff’s position by labeling lesbians as ‘luvbeins,’ noting that lesbians traditionally equate sex with love. Although polyamory may be an inherently radical act due to its sexual non-exclusivity – particularly for lesbians (Loulan 1999) and the ways it challenges compulsory monogamy (Klesse 2011), discourses on poly love reflect
dominant heteronormative ideals. Specifically, the ‘idealization of heterosexual romance’ (Rich 1980), or what Chrys Ingraham (1994) refers to as the *heterosexual imaginary* – our obsession with romance and conviction that passionate love is necessary to well-being – permeates other forms of relationships as well as polyamory. For example, Wolkomir (2009) found that the ideology of romantic love shaped mixed-orientation marriages (i.e., ‘gay-straight’ marriage), including nonmonogamous ones. Wilkinson notes, “Polyamory often describes itself as a radical way of loving differently, yet in doing so fails to see many of the ways it echoes prevailing ideas surrounding monogamous love” (2010:245), thus reinforcing the essence of dominant heteronormative intimacies.

In addition, heteronormative practices arise in poly relationships as a result of gendered interactions and expectations. For example, masculine-identified people – whether cisgender, trans, or butch – may minimize femme partner’s relationships with other women, reflecting a form of misogyny common in heterosexual culture that devalues female-female relationships. For example, a bisexual woman participant reported about her cisgender boyfriend, “He’s internalized a little of the heteronormative stuff in that he is more comfortable if I am dating women,” and a butch lesbian admitted that her femme partner dating other femmes was easier than if her partner dated other butch women (Deri 2015:85). Butch/femme gender dynamics not only reflect heteronormative relationship expectations, but they also have the ability to produce power imbalances between partners when negotiating polyamorous relationships.

**Reviewing the Literature**

Academic research on polyamory has multiplied in recent years; however, empirical studies on queer polyamory are scarce and the existing body of literature appears to exist at the intersection of heterosexism and cissexism. That is, studies to date have focused primarily on
polyamory in a heterosexual context – even when the discussion centers on bisexual polys – and are limited to overwhelmingly cisgender samples. Where this research involves gay men, the focus is primarily on other forms of consensual nonmonogamy such as coupled relationships involving external casual sexual encounters with a “don’t ask don’t tell” policy. In addition, research on lesbian polyamory is dated, draws from clinical samples, or also focuses on nonmonogamy rather than polyamory. Further, research on poly relationships among trans people is virtually non-existent. Finally, existing studies on polyamory tend to focus on the ‘het/bi’ community that is comprised largely of open primary relationships among bisexual ciswomen and heterosexual cismen, having little to offer in regards to queer relationships.

Research neglects the ways that double sexual marginalization of being queer and polyamorous may result in unique experiences and struggles within our heteronormative intimate culture. The intersecting oppression of polyamorous and queer has been largely dismissed as if those categories are mutually exclusive. In addition, perspectives of trans individuals, people of color, and those from working-class or poor backgrounds deserve more attention in research on polyamory. Relatedly, social location offers privileges to some polyamorists while disadvantaging others, resulting in potential tensions in poly relationships and communities. Finally, relationship-specific characteristics likely further complicate partnership interactions and negotiations.

The current study will investigate these issues through a lens of heteronormativity. Broad fundamental research questions include: How is polyamory understood and experienced among queer people? What unique challenges result from the position of double-sexual marginalization of being both polyamorous and queer? More specifically, I seek to answer: Do queer people understand polyamory as a sexual identity, relationship practice, or something else? How do
queer people negotiate and manage poly relationships? Are there sexual or gender-identity specific issues or patterns related to queer polyamory? Is coming out as poly similar to coming out as queer? Is there a queer poly community similar to the ‘het/bi’ poly community? Do trans people experience marginalization in poly communities, and if so, how do they address those tensions? Do queer people perceive polyamory as a radical political act?

I argue that studying queer polyamory has several implications. First, this research addresses a considerable gap in literature simply by focusing on a population that has been neglected in existing research. Second, this study will inform our knowledge of how polyamory takes varying forms among queer people and how polyamory meets the specific needs of marginalized groups, such as asexual or trans* people. Third, this research should uncover how heteronormativity limits or constrains the construction of contemporary relationship practices among queer people. Thus, there is theoretical interest concerning the ways this relationship style works among queer people. Finally, studying queer polyamory speaks to the ways that some queer people actively challenge the dominant ‘gay normalization’ movement and weaken traditional definitions of sexual citizenship. In studying queer polyamory through a lens of heteronormativity, I sought to address the gaps in research and contribute to a wider conversation of contemporary sexual politics. The following chapter details the methodology of this research and introduces the participants.
Chapter 4

INTERVIEWING QUEER POLYAMORISTS:
Research Methodology and Introduction of Participants

To examine queer polyamorous relationships, families, and communities, I conducted interviews with 55 queer adults of diverse backgrounds and identities who had experience with polyamory. I utilized a qualitative research methodology, as qualitative methodologies offer deeper and more coherent understandings of the topic under investigation than quantitative surveys (Weiss 1994). Specifically, in-depth interviews provide rich data on how subjects experience and understand various aspects of their lives, and on meanings attached to those experiences. Employing this method is “a powerful way of helping people to make explicit things that have hitherto been implicit – to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings” (Arksey & Knight 1999:32). The current study is exploratory and thus utilized grounded theory, a methodological approach in which “theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data” (Glaser & Strauss 1967:5).

In this chapter, I outline the study design and introduce the participants. In the latter section, I provide a synopsis of how they define and understand ‘polyamory’ and briefly describe the poly relationship structures they have experience with. This discussion is included in this chapter because it is more descriptive than analytical and pairs nicely with a general introduction to the participants to offer the reader a more in-depth understanding of the queer polyamorists involved in the study.

Designing the Study

This section provides an overview of the qualitative design of this study. I first outline my sampling, recruitment, and data collection methodology. I then discuss feminist interviewing
as a central component of the data collection process. Next, I review ethical considerations related to this study, the data analysis process, and limitations and implications of the study design.

**Sampling**

Defining ‘polyamory’ is a challenging task. Researchers have employed various descriptions (as discussed in Chapter 2) and practitioners have disagreed on whether polyamory is a sexual identity or simply a relationship practice (Barker 2005). For the current study, I define *polyamory* as a relationship practice in which people openly and honestly negotiate multiple meaningful romantic, emotional, and/or sexual relationships. Here, the focus on negotiated relationships that involve openness and honesty is what sets polyamory apart from other forms of nonmonogamy, such as “don’t ask don’t tell” relationships. Likewise, the emphasis on meaningful multiple relationships distinguishes polyamory from other nonmonogamous practices such as swinging or open relationships in which sex “on the side” or uncommitted relationships are permissible.

In this research, I am interested in experiences of queer people who currently practice polyamory and those who have practiced polyamory in the past. Previous studies have failed to include perspectives of those who found that polyamory is not suitable for them. This perspective, however, is imperative to understanding how larger cultural forces such as cissexism or homonormativity may impact queer relationships, particularly for those who no longer practice polyamory due to societal pressures. Thus, where other research has utilized an identity-based approach in sampling design, using only subjects who identify as polyamorous, I utilized a practice-based approach, including subjects who have been involved in polyamory either currently or in the past. This approach is also inclusive of individuals who avoid the label of
‘polyamorist’ or prefer ‘nonmonogamy’ or another description for their relationship styles (Frank & DeLamater 2010; Klesse 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001).

Finally, I used *queer* as an umbrella term for those who self-identify as gender or sexual minorities (GSMs), such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, genderqueer, transgender, and so on, and for those who reject static labels. Although polyamory itself and other practices such as BDSM could be considered ‘queer’ by way of their non-normative status or potential to challenge dominant sexual practices, I focused specifically on individuals who are GSMs by way of gender of object choice or gender identity. *Gender of object choice* refers to the gender of whom we are attracted to sexually or romantically. Being attracted only to the ‘opposite’ gender (i.e., heterosexuality) awards individuals with social privileges and power not afforded to others. In contrast, anyone who is not attracted solely to the ‘opposite’ gender (including those attracted to the same gender or to trans individuals) or anyone not attracted to any genders (i.e., asexuals) are marginalized and thus considered sexual minorities. Likewise, anyone who identifies with a gender other than that which they were assigned at birth or rejects gender altogether (i.e., transgender, trans*, genderqueer, polygender, etc) is considered a gender minority for purposes of this study and thus falls under the ‘queer’ umbrella.

In summary, the criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants 1) are ‘queer’ as described above and 2) had one or more polyamorous relationships. The first condition addresses a substantial gap in literature on polyamory by focusing on a group neglected in previous research. Studies to date typically involve polyamorists from non-queer communities, namely those comprised primarily of heterosexual cismen and bisexual ciswomen. In contrast, the current study examined polyamory in a queer context, focusing on people who have same-gender or trans partnerships. This research does not necessarily exclude bisexual-identified individuals,
but rather emphasizes their involvement in queer communities or queer poly relationships as opposed to the ‘het/bi’ community or heterosexual relationships. The second condition addresses a gap in the literature by including people who no longer practice polyamory as well as those who do not identify as polyamorous.

**Recruitment**

This research utilized both purposive and snowball sampling methodologies. Employing a non-random, convenience sampling technique results in the inability to generalize to the general population, a limitation discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter. However, this method is appropriate here, as this exploratory study does not aim to offer generalizable data on all queer persons who practice polyamory and the technique will allow me to maximize the number of participants who meet criteria for inclusion in the study.

To recruit participants, I posted electronic and printed flyers (see Appendix B) at several target locations. There were two versions of the flyer: one for spaces in which people are known to use the term ‘queer’ and the other for spaces in which people may not use the label ‘queer’ but rather ‘LGBTQ+.’ Online locations included groups or pages catered towards queer and/or poly adults, such as those on Facebook or Meetup. Online recruitment typically included a call for participants (see Appendix C) to accompany the appropriate flyer; however, one site (HuffPost Queer Voices on Twitter) shared only the flyer. Physical locations included spaces frequented by queer people, such as the local pride center and a counseling center that specialized in LGBTQ+ issues. In addition, I employed snowball sampling, requesting that prospective participants offer my contact information or share the flyer with those they know who may have interest in the study. Some of the participants were in fact recruited through the snowball technique, indicating
that there are direct connections between participants in this study; however, most participants learned of the study through the flyer.

I had imagined the need to post printed flyers at numerous physical sites, such as local ‘gay bars’ or strongly queer-populated neighborhoods; however, the first phase of recruitment went so smoothly that I did not utilize these locations. After conducting interviews with 55 queer adults, all but one of whom were under 50 years of age, I limited recruitment to those aged 50 and older. In this second phase of recruitment, I targeted online and physical locations catered towards older queer and/or poly individuals and updated the flyer to reflect language used by older LGBTQ nonmonogamous individuals (see Appendix B). I received a good deal of interest from this group; yet, I was unable to complete interviews with any of the potential participants who contacted me. I can only speculate why older queer polys were more difficult to schedule than younger participants. Perhaps older queer polys are more hesitant to be involved in or skeptical about research relating to sexual practices or identities than younger queer polys, as the former group is likely have experienced social environments that are far more unwelcoming to queer people than is typical today. Or, perhaps the online groups I targeted – such as Meetup groups for older queer people – were more tolerant of members ‘flaking out’ on their events than other online groups, leading to those individuals to flake on our scheduled interviews. After scheduling several interviews with older queer polys that failed to materialize, I decided to close the study. Thus, the final sample consisted of 55 queer adults who had at least one polyamorous relationship.

Data Collection

I first asked screening questions to those who contacted me about the study to ensure participants were both queer and had practiced polyamory (see Appendix D), then scheduled
interviews with those who were eligible. This research took place across the U.S.: the Northeast (New York, Massachusetts, & Pennsylvania), the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, & Oklahoma), the West Coast (California), and the Southeast (Florida). Over two-thirds of the interviews took place in-person at the participant’s preferred setting, such as in their home or nearby a restaurant or coffee shop. I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews with people in the West Coast when I traveled there by plane and in the Midwest when I ventured on a two-week roundtrip ‘driving tour’ from New York to Oklahoma during which I stopped in several cities along the route to conduct interviews. Interviews that could not be scheduled in-person due to timing of my travel to the area, scheduling conflicts, or participant location were conducted on Skype or FaceTime. I anticipated in-person interviews to be more personal and comfortable than online interviews; however, I felt that I easily built rapport and had comfortable conversations even on Skype and FaceTime. All interviews were audio recorded with permission and each participant was compensated with a $20 Visa gift card inside a hand-written ‘thank you’ card.

There were several people in the sample who had dating connections with other participants such as current or former partners; however, I interviewed each participant individually and these connections did not pose any discernable concerns during the interviews or data analyses. There was one exception – a pair of cohabiting partners who requested a joint interview. In this session, I asked the two participants each interview question independently; however, they did at times interject into each other’s responses. Nevertheless, I did not feel that having a joint interview skewed their responses in any meaningful way.

I constructed the interview guide with a grounded theoretical approach in mind (see Appendix E). Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended in nature, which allowed for me to adjust questions in accordance with participants’ responses in ways that maintained a smooth
flow during our interview sessions. The guide noted areas where I should probe in order to obtain necessary clarification or elaboration (Arksey & Knight 1999; Weiss 1994). As a grounded theoretical approach involves “constantly redesigning and reintegrating [the] theoretical notions” during the process of collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967:101), I revised the interview guide as I saw fit based on existing interview data. This process required reflecting upon and reanalyzing data in order to enrich the study in ways not possible should the interview guide be uniform throughout the data collection process (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Weiss 1994).

The interview guide was divided into four sections: general questions about polyamory, relationships, community, and social issues. After my introduction, the first section opened the interview with a personal question designed to encourage the participant to offer a narrative response, setting the stage for the remainder of the interview session. This section focused on how the participant first became involved with polyamory and how they understand polyamory in terms of meanings, definitions, and identity. The second section asked the participant to describe their polyamorous relationships in terms of structure, closeness to partners, and nature of relationships. This section also inquired into relationship rules, namely how the participant negotiates and manages boundaries with their partners. Finally, this section asked questions to capture potential connections between gender and sexual identity or practices and polyamorous relationships. The third section was concerned with involvement in polyamorous, queer, and other communities, including how they overlap or may be in conflict. The fourth section placed polyamory in a larger social context, asking questions about being ‘out’ as a poly practitioner, interest in politics, and social challenges. Within the main body of the interview, the final
question allowed for the participant to express any other experiences, concerns, or issues regarding queer polyamory that were not covered previously.

I asked demographic questions at the end of the session if that information was not revealed during the interview. Placing these questions at the beginning of the interview may have encouraged participants to answer core questions with brief responses that demographic questions often elicit rather than more elaborate narrative responses (Weiss 1994), and conversely, participants should feel less discomfort answering sensitive questions about issues such as education or race as they become more relaxed with me over the course of the interview. After each interview, I wrote extensive field notes, noting details on various aspects of the interview such as location environment, respondent’s non-verbal cues, or challenges I experienced.

**Feminist Interviewing**

Semi-structured in-depth interviewing is the most appropriate methodological procedure to yield rich narrative data, particularly in an exploratory study. This technique allows for participants to express their everyday lived experiences along with meanings attached to those experiences. In-depth interviewers must follow several steps to ensure both the well-being of the respondent and the quality of the interview, such as respecting the participant’s integrity, identifying ‘markers’ that indicate a significant experience, minimizing intrusions, being aware of non-verbal communications, recognizing emotional cues, offering sensitivity in the face of emotional responses, and more (Weiss 1994). I believe that the flexibility and open-ended nature of this method as well as my monitoring of participant well-being and interview quality allowed my participants to openly describe their experiences with and understandings of polyamory comfortably in their own language.
Feminist interviewing adds another layer to these methodologies. Historically, feminist approaches to research aimed to address women’s subordination to men by giving women voices, to improve their social positioning, and advance relevant theoretical perspectives (Arksey & Knight 1999; Stanley & Wise 1990). Feminist researchers’ primary concern is with women’s oppression in a male-dominated society; however, gender inequalities that relate to the ways trans people experience social life in a cisgender-dominated society is often overlooked. Although my primary interest in feminist research is concerned with interviewing techniques, I argue that feminist approaches that center on gender oppression should be inclusive of and sensitive to trans identities.

Some researchers have applied feminist approaches to specific interviewing methodologies. For example, Ann Oakley sought to challenge what she perceived as a cold, mechanical, and hierarchical style of the textbook ‘masculine paradigm’ of interviewing. She argued, “the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and participant is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship” (1981:41). For Oakley, self-disclosure and equity are the crucial elements to the success and morality of interviewing. However, Oakley strictly aligns feminist interviewing with women interviewers, as did many feminist researchers of that time (Stanley & Wise 1990), suggesting that only women could achieve a successful interview on these terms. More importantly, she dismisses the ways that several ‘feminist’ techniques align strongly with traditional interviewing objectives. Thus, feminist interviewing techniques are better described as “distinctive ways of extending the methods of this qualitative tradition” (DeVault 1990:96) than in competition with traditional interviewing methodologies. (See Stanley & Wise 1990 for a thorough discussion of this debate.)
In addition to self-disclosure, feminist interviewing objectives emphasize listening (DeVault 1990), reflexivity (Hesse-Biber 2006), and reciprocity to maintain non-exploitive, non-hierarchical relationships and interactions with participants (Arksey & Knight 1999; Oakley 1981). I offered special attention to these objectives throughout the data collection and analyses processes to help minimize potential influences of my privilege as a white middle-class cisgender researcher. Another technique to address these potential interviewer effects follows the notion that researchers should establish an ‘interviewing partnership’ (Weiss 1994), in which the interview is understood as a collaborative process between the researcher and participant (Laslett & Rapoport 1975). In studying polyamory, Klesse refers to his research subjects as ‘interview partners’ for the purpose of acknowledging that “the production of knowledge in the context of qualitative interviewing is a joint enterprise and an active collaboration between researcher and research participants” (2006:579). Framing the research process as a collaborative partnership serves to help establish a non-hierarchical interviewing relationship. Although I refer to the queer polys I spoke with as ‘participants’ or ‘participants’ in subsequent chapters in order to minimize confusion in a discussion on intimate partnerships, I did consider them ‘interview partners’ and put effort into maintaining a non-hierarchical, collaborative relationship during all of our interactions.

I anticipated that some of the queer polys I spoke with would explicitly request information regarding my experience with polyamory, and a few did. In situating myself as the researcher, I had to be cautious not to shift attention away from my interview partner to myself (Weiss 1994) nor to sway their responses by disclosing my personal experiences. However, I suspect that revealing my experiences may have helped achieve a higher degree of trust. Building on Oakley’s (1981) notion of feminist interviewing, Hesse-Biber explains that sharing
identities should “increase reciprocity and rapport in the interview process, thus breaking down the notions of power and authority invested in the role of the researcher” (2006:128). To balance the feminist interviewing goal of disclosure with concerns of researcher influence, I briefly revealed upon request that I was a queer poly-fluid person in a currently-monogamous relationship, and then offered to elaborate on my experiences after the interview was complete.

I was in a unique position when conducting this research by having insider-outsider status. I had been in poly-structured relationships in the past and was open to future poly relationships but did not actively seek poly relationships and was in a monogamous partnership at the time of data collection. This positioning may have influenced the level of rapport and trust I gained with my interview partners. On one hand, poly-identified or current poly practitioners might have been less likely to open up to me than if I were strictly polyamorous, as I do not prioritize polyamory over other forms of relationships. On the other hand, some interview partners might have felt compelled to offer more detailed narratives if they perceive themselves to have more experience with polyamory than I do, and those who no longer practice polyamory may have been more comfortable expressing their experiences due to disclosure of my identity and experiences. Nevertheless, I believe my openness and support of polyamory in addition to my queer identity encouraged participants to feel comfortable discussing their experiences with me while allowing me to have a more objective interpretation of the data than if I were fully immersed in the practice.

My overall position on the interview process in this study is of satisfaction and enthusiasm. Feminist research philosophies contributed to building strong rapport and trust with my interview partners, provided greater confidence in navigating sensitive topics with people of
marginalized identities, and helped coach me through finding a successful balance between listening and reciprocity as well as between disclosure and influence.

**Ethical Considerations**

All participants were informed of their rights as human subjects and asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview (see Appendix F). The consent form provided a brief summary of the project, explained how data will be stored with confidentiality and presented in the dissertation and any related publications, and requested permission to record and transcribe the interview. All data, including digital audio recordings and interview transcripts, were stored on a password-protected computer and back-up machine that are not accessible to anyone other than myself. Consent forms, field notes, and any other hard documents with identifiable information were locked in a private cabinet during the process of data analysis.

One specific concern in this project is the ability for readers to identify participants in publications. I used a random-name generator to assign pseudonyms for each participant and any partners they named in the interview. However, polyamorous relationships are often structured in ways that participants may be identifiable solely by way of relationship structure and some of the queer polys I spoke with had exceptionally unique gender and sexual identities that might make them identifiable in publications. To address these issues, I limited some background characteristics, descriptors, and identities to broad categories rather than specific details. In addition, I avoided naming specific cities, workplaces, and other identifiable information, instead providing more vague descriptors such as region and city size.

All research on human subjects carries the potential to place those subjects at risk. I did not expect this study to result in emotional harm and do not believe any occurred; however, there
is a possibility that participants experienced some discomfort or adverse emotions when discussing intimate relationships or other sensitive topics. I reminded participants prior to the start of the interview, or during the interview if necessary, that they were free to stop the interview at any time or skip any questions that are too emotionally difficult to answer. My hope was that they would become “somewhat more comfortable with matters the respondent had previously felt troubled by” (Weiss 1994:123), as the very act of discussing personal issues is often healing in nature. Nevertheless, as a researcher, I was careful not to allow the session to transform into a ‘therapeutic interview’ (Weiss 1994). None of my interview partners ended the session early, and to my knowledge, none reported adverse experiences from their involvement in the study. Rather, many participants verbally expressed gratitude, enthusiasm, and relief that someone was finally conducting research on queer polyamorists, which confirms the need for academic attention to this marginalized group.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed from digital audio recordings. Following the grounded theoretical approach, I examined patterns in the transcriptions, noting emerging themes and applying nodes to organize and categorize the data. I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to assist in this process of “interpretation, summary, and integration” since qualitative narratives are difficult to categorize due to their depth (Weiss 1994:3). I identified and coded several major themes as “parent nodes” and divided each into multiple levels of “child nodes” that I saw fruitful for analysis. I then coded each interview independently, reorganizing child nodes as the coding progressed. Finally, I used text search and word query functions to locate and code the use of specific language and terminologies as well as the matrix coding function to compare narratives across participants’ backgrounds, identities, understandings, and experiences.
**Limitations and Implications of the Study Design**

The research methodologies employed in this study are not without limitations. The use of a convenience sampling design that involves non-random selection of participants results in the inability to generalize research findings to the general population (Weiss 1994). I am unable to claim that the experiences of queer people who practice polyamory in my study are representative of all queer people who practice polyamory; however, this study does not necessarily seek to do so. In qualitative feminist interviewing, the objective is to investigate “a ‘process’ or the ‘meanings’ individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations” (Hesse-Biber 2006:119). This study aims to understand how some queer people understand and experience polyamory in a hetero- and mono-centric social world rather than make generalizations about queer polyamorists as a social group. Likewise, the researcher’s job in utilizing grounded theory is not to provide a perfect account of an entire group, but to construct theoretical guides pertinent to the topic under investigation (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

One advantage of this project is the inclusion of queer people who have practiced polyamory rather than only those who identify as polyamorous or are currently active in a poly community. The great majority of previous studies failed to capture experiences of people who were in polyamorous relationship structures but decided the practice was not suitable for them or their relationship. Thus, an entire population of people who may have unique experiences and viewpoints has been entirely neglected in previous research on polyamory. In addition, by recruiting participants from various cities and communities, I was able to obtain a diverse and inclusive sample, particularly in relation to previous research that focused on only one polyamorous community.
Finally, there are benefits of utilizing both feminist interviewing and grounded theoretical approaches. The use of semi-structured interviews that encourage participants to express experiences and understandings of queer polyamory resulted in rich narrative responses (Hesse-Biber 2006; Weiss 1994), allowing for theoretical notions that are grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Permitting flexibility in interview structures and reformulating the interview guide as the process of data collection progressed helped produce ‘new insights’ that drove elaboration and modification, resulting in theoretical advancement (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Likewise, adopting feminist interviewing techniques contributed to the success of the interviews, particularly in minimizing concerns regarding power and authority (Hesse-Biber 2006; Oakley 1981) or exploitation (Arksey & Knight 1999) of marginalized subjects.

The narrative data that resulted from my interviews with queer adults who have experience with polyamory will inform our knowledge about the ways that queer people approach, manage, and understand polyamory on relational, community, and social levels. This research is unique by focusing on groups that have been neglected in literature on polyamory, namely those who identify along queer- and trans-spectrums, and by including those who no longer practice polyamory and/or do not identify as polyamorous. Further, this study will contribute to sociological knowledge on the implications queer polyamory has for contemporary sexual politics, intimacies, and families.

**Introducing the Participants**

The queer polys I spoke with came from diverse backgrounds and cited a wide range of gender and sexual self-identities that were often quite creative. They had varying conceptions of ‘polyamory,’ although there were a few universal criteria, as well as a range of experiences with polyamorous relationship structures. This section introduces the participants by providing
descriptive information about their identities and backgrounds. Additionally, I discuss their understandings of what ‘polyamory’ is and what forms of poly relationships they had experience with in order to provide a deeper representation of the queer polyamorists in this study. First, however, we should briefly revisit the intended meaning of the term ‘queer polyamorist.’ As described above, ‘queer’ in this study is an umbrella term for people who identify anywhere along queer/trans spectrums and ‘polyamorist’ refers to those who have had at least one poly relationship whether or not they currently practice polyamory or identify as polyamorous. Thus, I use ‘queer polys’ as a term of convenience to refer to the full group of participants in this study.

**Identities and Backgrounds**

Prior research on polyamory has sidelined the experiences of sexual and gender minorities by focusing primarily on the ‘het/bi’ poly community described in previous chapters. Consequently, sociological knowledge on polyamory is constrained by the intersecting forces of heterosexism and cissexism. Queer voices have been severely marginalized in this literature, reinforcing oppressive gender and sexual hierarchies in academia as well as neglecting many important sociological questions about queer polyamory. The current study addresses this gap in literature by focusing only on queer people who have experience with polyamory. Moreover, the existing body of research on polyamory has largely centered on people with overwhelmingly privileged social locations (white, middle-class, and cisgender), virtually silencing the voices of marginalized queer polyamorists such as queer people of color (QPOC), those who are gender-non-conforming (GNC), and those from disadvantaged social classes. For instance, people of color have comprised between 1-10 percent of participants in prior studies on polyamory and those with other marginalized identities have received very little attention, if any. Thus, one objective of the current study was to construct an inclusive group of queer polyamorists that is
diverse by way of race, class, and gender: A quarter of my participants are QPOC (26%), one third have working-class or poor/impoverished backgrounds (33%), and nearly half identify with a trans* or GNC identity (46%). These participants’ interest in this study suggests that marginalized queer polyamorists are eager to have their stories voiced.

Appendix G presents each participant’s sexual and gender identities and other select identities or characteristics including age, race, class, education, and the city size and region of which they resided at the time of our interview. These were opened-ended screening and interview questions so that participants could provide responses in their own words. For example, the screening questions included, “What is your sexual identity? [List all identities you commonly use]” and the demographic interview questions asked, “What social class do you consider yourself? Is this the same class you were growing up?” (See Appendices D & E). Table 2 below presents the participants’ identities and demographic characteristics as a full group. Several characteristics in this table are not mutually exclusive as participants self-identified in multiple categories, such as those who listed several sexual or gender identities, identify with multiple ethnicities, or experienced social class mobility during childhood.

Queer was the most widely cited sexual identity, although half of the participants cited multiple sexual identities such as ‘pansexual & queer’ or ‘asexual & lesbian.’ The ‘other’ category refers to less common sexual identities participants cited: Polysexual, dyke, straightish, heteroflexible, polyamorous, kinky, and trans. For anonymity, I classify these identities as ‘other’ in the text and Appendix G if only one participant cited a particular identity or reclassify them as another identity. For instance, ‘ace’ (asexual) includes both demi- and gray-sexual and ‘pan’ includes polysexual. I also include only the first two identities (where applicable) in participants’ descriptions for anonymity and readability purposes.
Table 2. Participant Demographic Characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexuality†</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Childhood Social Class†</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>Poverty/Poor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian/gay</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>Middle-class</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>70.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>Upper-class</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual/Demi/Gray</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>Current Social Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>Poverty/Poor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender‡</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans woman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Middle-class</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans man/Trans guy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>Upper-class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciswoman/Female/Femme</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>‘Middle-class Poor’</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisman/Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary/Genderqueer</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>Tech / Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>(College or Grad Student)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial ‡‡</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Jewish</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity‡</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-American/mixed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican or Cuban</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-American</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Categories are not mutually exclusive
‡‡Includes black/white, Native-American/white, and Asian/Native-American/white
Similarly, the gender categories in the table fail to capture the enormous variation of my participants’ gender identities. The ‘other’ category alone includes 17 gender identities or descriptors that differ from those in the table: Genderflexible, agender, butch, genderfluid, transgenderqueer, polygender, genderless, androgynous, dyke, lesbian, boi, two-spirit, masculine-of-center, femme, queer, complicated, and questioning. Over half of the participants identified as ciswomen, female, or femme; however, this figure is somewhat misleading as only 17 of those 29 participants identified solely as a woman. The remaining 12 of those 29 cited multiple identities such as ‘woman & genderqueer.’ Nearly 40 percent of the full group cited multiple gender identities. Like with sexual identities, I classify unique gender identities as ‘other’ or ‘trans-other’ in the text and Appendix G. I again include only the first two gender identities (where applicable) in participants’ descriptions and use ‘woman/other’ for participants who cited ‘woman’ as their first gender identity followed by other unique identities or a long list of other identities. In addition, I combine ‘non-binary’ and ‘genderqueer’ and abbreviate this category as ‘NB/GQ.’ Finally, the gender pronouns I use in subsequent text are the pronouns that the participant stated at the end of our interview when I collected demographic information. For instance, I will use ‘he/him/his’ for a genderqueer-identified person if that participant stated those pronouns in our interview, instead of ‘they/them/theirs’ pronouns that often accompanies non-binary/genderqueer identities. I also use different pronouns in different areas of the subsequent text for participants whose pronouns toggle between ‘he/him/his,’ ‘she/her/hers,’ and/or ‘they/them/theirs.’

Three-fourths of the sample were white, including one who racially identified as Jewish. A few POC (people of color) expressed discomfort with a public POC identity because they were white-passing and understood the privileges that accompany being perceived as a white person in
America. For instance, one biracial participant identified publically as white due to his light skin tone despite personally identifying as Native American two-spirit. Due to the small number of participants in each non-white category, I do not distinguish between them but rather classify them as ‘POC’ in the text and Appendix G (including biracial and triracial participants). Half of the participants did not identify with any specific ethnicities such as those who reported being a ‘mutt’ or ‘just Caucasian.’ The other half stated an array of ethnic identities such as Jewish, Native American, Blasian, Chinese, Filipina, and so on, with a few citing non-traditional ethnicities such as pagan, lesbian, and anglophile. One fifth of the sample cited European or European-American ethnic identities, such as German-American, Italian, and Welsh. These identities are excluded from the text and Appendix G for anonymity purposes.

Childhood social class refers to what class participants considered their families to be when the participant was growing up. It is possible that the middle-class category in the table is somewhat inflated, as it includes several people who identified their family’s social class as middle- or lower-middle-class but described it in ways that better align with the working-class (such as ‘My parents were factory workers’ or ‘My parents sometimes struggled to put food on the table’). Thus, I suspect that fewer than 39 participants were middle-class during childhood but coded them as middle-class since that is how they responded in their interviews. Current social class refers to the class participants considered themselves to be at the time of our interview. An interesting pattern emerged regarding movement between social classes – many participants were low-income or considered themselves poor or working-class at the time of our interview but recognized that they had access to middle-class privilege by way of their upbringing. Some explicitly identified their current status as ‘privileged poor’ or ‘middle-class poor’ (including participants who were in their 30s, had college degrees, or were not in graduate
school – i.e., this group was not limited to younger participants and students). Others indicated this status by explaining that they have class access despite currently being low-income.

Education further complicates social class. The queer polys in this study were well educated, with all participants having some college experience at minimum and 40 percent holding Bachelor’s degrees. Thus, many of them have class access despite their working-class/poor upbringing or had recently experienced upward mobility. Some of these participants were resistant to take on a middle-class identity despite being highly educated with a career or future in fields such as Engineering and Academia. For instance, one participant who was raised working-class continued to have strong ties to working-class culture despite being a doctoral candidate who will inevitably experience upward mobility. These sentiments were common among most participants who came from poor/impoverished or working-class backgrounds – they expressed discomfort with the new class privileges that their education provided, with some participants describing their current social class as ‘complicated.’

The queer polys I spoke with were relatively young with a mean age of 30 years and median of 27. Over half of the participants were in their 20s, although there were more in the older half of that group (25-29) than the younger half. As discussed above, my attempts to be inclusive of older queer polys failed as I was unable to conduct interviews with anyone who contacted me when the study was open only to those aged 50 and older, although I did interview one participant in this age group prior to that phase. To protect this participant’s identity, I include them in the ‘40+’ category (40 years of age or older) in Appendix G and subsequent chapters. Similarly, to protect identities of the two participants who were 19 years old at the time of our interview, I include them in the ‘early-20s’ group in the text and Appendix G.
Definitions and Understandings

The queer polys in this study had varying understandings of what polyamory entails and how it differs from other nonmonogamies. As several participants mentioned, defining polyamory is a challenging task and many polyamorists as well as polyamory researchers disagree about what polyamory is (Klesse 2006, 2007; Sheff 2011). Nevertheless, the great majority of the queer polys I spoke with viewed polyamory as a unique relationship practice—one that differs from ‘open relationships.’ Several participants explicitly stated that open relationships are less committed or emotional (regarding secondary relationships) and involve less communication or disclosure (regarding the primary relationship) than poly partnerships. Even more participants viewed open relationships as a practice that centers on casual sex outside of a primary partnership, in contrast to polyamory that centers on loving relationships. In contrast, however, a few queer polys did not differentiate between polyamory and open relationships or viewed ‘open’ as a descriptor for non-fidelitous poly partnerships. In addition, some participants viewed ‘polyamory’ as an umbrella term for all consensually nonmonogamous relationships or for any nonmonogamies that involve full disclosure and ongoing communication. For instance, one participant described polyamory as a “catchall for relationships that don’t fit the traditional definition of monogamy.”

Among those whose conception of polyamory differed from other consensual nonmonogamies, love was the most frequently cited distinguishing criteria. A few participants gave very brief definitions centering on love, such that it is the “understanding that love knows no numerical limits” or that ‘true’ polyamory is “extending love to more than one person.” Over half of the queer polys I spoke with referenced multiple loving, emotional, and/or romantic relationships in their descriptions of what polyamory means to them, such as in this description:
“For me it’s – sort of the short way of defining it would be the capacity to – the capacity to have multiple relationships that have a romantic component. Some people would shorten that to the ability to fall in love with multiple people and pursue that. So, something to that effect. For me the big defining characteristic of poly versus other stuff is the sense of romantic or deep emotional attachment.”

Some participants clarified that it is the *ability to act* on loving or romantic feelings that develop for someone new that matters rather than simply experiencing feelings for multiple people, which can occur within monogamy.

Other frequently cited criteria for relationships to be considered polyamorous were ongoing communication or disclosure, consent or agreement of relationship boundaries, and awareness or knowledge of all other partners (metamours). Many participants’ definitions of polyamory included ‘multiple partners’ or ‘multiple relationships;’ however, most clarified that these relationships involve “the knowledge and consent of everyone in it” or where “all parties understand and know that this is going on.” Several queer polys used words such as ‘ethical’ or phrases such as ‘on board’ or ‘above board’ to differentiate polyamory from other nonmonogamies and emphasize consensual agreement among all partners. For instance, one participant said, “To me, polyamory is having – or being open to having multiple … multiple romantic relationships, in an ethical and consensual way. To be concise.”

Several queer polys perceived commitment as a distinguishing factor for polyamory. These participants viewed people in ‘open relationships’ as typically being emotionally monogamous, having one committed, emotionally close, dyadic partnership and other less meaningful, sexual secondary relationships, whereas they viewed polyamory as involving multiple committed, emotionally intense partnerships. For instance, participants explained, “it's more of a longer-term thing, it's more of a committed thing, it's more all-encompassing,” and “poly is most often not about the sex and way more commitment and way more emotions
involved,” in contrast to open relationships that might be fleeting, casual, and merely sexual. Likewise, some queer polys viewed life integration as an important distinguisher, such that poly partners are more deeply involved in each other’s lives than secondary partners of people in ‘open relationships.’ For instance, they explained that poly partnerships involve more “day-to-day life stuff” than other nonmonogamies or that with poly partners, “you love them, you have sex with them, you do a whole bunch of relationship stuff with them.”

Several queer pols referenced concepts in their descriptions of polyamory such as ‘openness,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘autonomy.’ These participants stressed the fluidity of relationship boundaries in poly partnerships and the benefit of being able to make choices about their intimate lives, in contrast to monogamy and other nonmonogamies in which strict boundaries do not allow for flexibility nor autonomy. For instance, one participant who viewed polyamory as an umbrella term for various consensual nonmonogamies defined it as, “having the freedom to fall in love with, have sex with – any level of romantic or sexual experience with more than one person.” A few queer polys extended the centrality of individual autonomy and freedom to all partners, explaining that polyamory involves “having a mutual understanding of everyone’s autonomy and equity” or that it must “acknowledge the autonomy of all the people in it.”

Finally, some queer polys described polyamory more pragmatically, focusing on its capacity to fulfill different needs or sustain unique connections with different partners. For instance, one participant described how they explain polyamory to others:

“I just try to explain that we don’t have one friend or we don’t necessarily have exclusivity in other types of relationships and other types of things. So a lot of times people feel like monogamy is this social standard but not necessarily, [because it’s] only for romantic relationships. So that’s kind of how I describe it, is having people that meet other needs of yours in a romantic way just as friends can meet other needs of yours.”
Four participants made the argument that we all have multiple friends or kids whom we love and have unique connections with, which is no different from having multiple partners whom we love and have unique connections with. One participant was particularly excited to recite this analogy:

“Like, ‘Oh, you have more than one kid, and you love all the kids that you have. If you have one kid or six kids, you don’t love each child progressively less.’ Or, ‘Actually, I can’t love both twins because I really just expected to have one baby.’ You know? That’s ridiculous! It’s just like kids: If I can love all four of my children, I can love four people, you know, if I have that. So.”

Descriptions such as these again highlight the significance of multiple loving or romantic relationships as a defining aspect of polyamory.

Prior studies have revealed variation in polyamorists’ understandings of polyamory as a practice, identity, or belief system (Barker 2005, Klesse 2007, Sheff 2014). For instance, Barker (2005) found that some people view polyamory something that they do and others view it as something they are (Barker 2005). I asked the queer polys in this study whether they viewed polyamory more as a practice (something they do) or more as an identity (something they are). Of the 55 participants, 23 viewed polyamory more as an identity, 18 as a practice, 12 responded with ‘both,’ and 2 were unclear on the matter.

Among those who viewed poly as an identity, some explained that they “feel polyamorous” or are “very poly-minded, not just poly acting.” They were likely to view poly as a “core identity,” just as they would ‘queer’ or ‘pan,’ such as on participant who explained, “For me, it’s a lot like being queer. It’s a really major component of who I am as a person.” A few participants who viewed polyamory as a sexual identity held essentialist views of polyamory, stating that people are ‘born with’ a polyamorous or monogamous orientation. One participant drew a direct parallel between being poly and being gay: “I think it’s something you’re either
born with or you’re not. Some people are wired for monogamy. Some people aren’t wired for monogamy. Just like some people are wired to be gay and some people aren’t wired to be gay.”

As Klesse (2014) argues, this conception of polyamory as a sexual orientation perpetuates essentialist notions of sexuality, reinforces a normative identity politics, narrows access to legal rights and protections for some nonmonogamists, and can be obstructive to transformative sexual politics.

Those who viewed poly as a practice were less likely to identify as polyamorous for a variety of reasons such as that they do not ‘feel’ poly, do not ‘need’ to have poly relationships, or are simply no longer involved with polyamory. One participant, Shari, did not identify as poly because they did not “feel the need to” and framed poly as a way to “conduct relationships” rather than as a core aspect of their being:

Emily:  Do you identify as poly?
Shari:  I don’t.
Emily:  Is there any reason why?
Shari:  I guess I just don’t really feel the need to.
Emily:  Okay.
Shari:  I also don’t really like … I haven’t … I don’t really see it as an identity marker, pretty much just the way that I conduct relationships. Does that make sense?
Emily:  So, you see it more as a practice than something that you feel about yourself?
Shari:  Yeah, it’s a thing that I do and not who I am. I do think that if I … met someone and I was like really in love with them and they wanted to be monogamous, I think I would be able to do it.

Some participants in this group referenced terms such as ‘choice,’ aligning more with constructionist notions of polyamory than essentialist notions: “I generally see it more as like a choice than something I was always destined to be someone who practices polyamory.” Other queer polys in this group did identify as polyamorous but did so because they viewed polyamory
as a practice they engaged in rather than a core identity. Yet others fell into the poly-as-practice camp simply because they viewed polyamory as a ‘descriptor’ or ‘label’ for the type of relationships they have rather than for who they are.

About a fifth of the queer polys in this study viewed polyamory as both an identity and practice. A few indicated that their conception of polyamory as an identity arose from their experience practicing polyamory, such as one participant who explained, “I think from within the [asexual] community, it was always very theoretical and then as soon as – I think the more I started practicing [poly], the more integral it became a part of my life.” Likewise, some viewed feeling poly and doing poly as intrinsically intertwined, explaining that “they go hand in hand.” Others in this group seemed less certain about the matter, stating that they “go back and forth” with the issue or “hadn’t really thought of that before.” For instance, one participant appeared to be considering the issue for the first time while responding to whether he viewed poly as more of an identity or practice:

“Ohh. Um, uhh, I don't know, kind of both? [laughs] I mean, it's definitely something that I do because I was just doing it and before that I had never tried it so it wasn't something I was doing. But, I would say it's definitely part of my identity because I know I'm capable of liking more than one person at a time.”

In addition to viewing polyamory as a practice and/or identity, several participants explained (either in their response to the practice versus identity question or elsewhere in their interviews) that polyamory is a personal ideology that informs their views on intimacy and provides a model for intimate relating. They used an array of terms and phrases to describe this conception of polyamory, including: framework, philosophy, paradigm, belief system, relationship ideals, approach to relationships, and way of conceptualizing relationships. Some of these queer polys directly related this perspective to the practice versus identity question, typically explaining that they view poly as an ideology that informs their practice. For instance,
they specified that poly is “something that I do because it lines up with my values that it’s right for me” and “a conceptual framework that makes sense to me, and therefore it is what I do.” One participant who had the unique experience of being ‘trained’ to value these tenets during childhood explained that this ideology centers on open communication and love:

“With poly, it’s interesting to me because I do feel very like – I feel that inside of me as like this is my natural framework for being. And whether that’s actually inborn or whether that’s, you know, nature versus nurture, is another question. Because I definitely grew up in a household that was all about communication and that was about love as an active behavior, not like a state of mind. So for me, poly is an action like but it’s also just how I’m trained to think. Well, I mean, not the dating multiple people part but the open communication and the like loving people for who they are, not who I want them to be.”

Other participants also referenced communication and love in describing poly as an ideology, as well as tenets such as honesty, openness, non-possessiveness, and respect. In fact, communication was by far the most important value among the queer polys I spoke with.

I asked my participants if there was a value they held above all others in terms of practicing polyamory or having successful poly partnerships or if there was one they considered a ‘deal-breaker.’ Over three-quarters included communication in their response, including 30 participants who emphasized communication first. Supporting prior studies (e.g., Deri 2015; Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010), a clear trifecta emerged from this question: communication, honesty, and trust were by far the most important values to the queer polys I spoke with. Several participants viewed these three values as tightly interwoven, with some unable to disentangle all or two of these values. For instance, one participant responded:

“I would say honesty. That’s a really good question. I don’t think I’ve had to think about it in that framework before, which is why I’m looking off into the distance with a tense look on my face. Honesty. I mean, part of that is so intricately tied to good communication that I don’t even know how to untangle them. So, if I had to pick an umbrella term, it would be the good communication

113
piece, because I think good communication incorporates honesty, but is also much more than just honesty.”

Similarly, other participants felt that two or all of these values “go hand in hand” or are “tied in” to each other, and some explained that honesty and trust are products of good communication.

Related to honesty, several queer polys explicitly referenced transparency and others alluded to its importance, such as this participant who values people being ‘upfront’ even if that requires being ‘blunt’:

“I see communication and trust and honesty all kind of on the same level because somebody could communicate with you but it doesn't mean that they're gonna be honest about it. And I mean, I really value honesty in people and just upfrontness. Even if it's blunt like it's really important to communicate and be honest and trustworthy with another person.”

This participant’s response also highlights how there is often considerable overlap in how these values inform queer poly people’s intimate relationships and their social interactions in general. In addition, a few participants cited two other values closely related to honesty: openness and vulnerability. Outside of the ‘trifecta,’ respect/consideration was the most widely referenced value, followed by emotional investment/connection or love.

Respect/consideration appeared to be particularly significant for those who practiced hierarchy-free polyamory. The queer polys in this study were far more likely to have an anti-hierarchy than pro-hierarchy mentality, although several who were uncomfortable with the hierarchical language of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ used those labels occasionally for convenience. Many of the anti-hierarchy participants emphasized respect, equity, and empowerment of all partners in their narratives, and others focused more on the ways hierarchical relationships produce adverse feelings or experiences. For instance, one participant viewed partnerships that involve a secondary partner as “unethical” and “not empowering to
everyone in the situation” and another participant explained that ongoing, honest communication “comes in to make sure that everyone is comfortable and that they feel powerful or empowered.”

Some queer polys’ anti-hierarchy stance resulted from past experiences of having a secondary partner, such as this participant who explained:

“I would say that polyamory is the sharing of love, compassion, support with more than one person. […] And I think that also polyamory is about sustaining equity in those multiple relationships. And I know that some people disagree. So, I don’t use the hierarchy kind of primary-and-secondary structure anymore because I felt that it wasn’t exactly equitable to everyone involved.”

Others’ preferences for anti-hierarchy polyamory was rooted in their experience of being a secondary partner. They recalled that these relationships were “frustrating” and resulted in them “feeling crappy.” Yet others focused more on how they felt about hierarchical relationships in general rather on any particular experience, such as one queer poly who stated, “I don't like the situations where, you know, the 3rd [partner] is some sort of 2nd class citizen, some sort of house boy,” or another participant who explained:

“I like to look at each of my relationships as unique, so it feels weird to designate one of them like, ‘You are the important one’ when they are all important in different ways. […] I also don’t want the other people that I care deeply about to feel like they are secondary, you know, or tertiary or whatever. That just doesn’t feel right to me.”

In contrast, some of the queer polys I spoke with were ambivalent about, open to, or preferred hierarchical polyamory. For instance, this response to a question about hierarchies and relationship roles or expectations reveals the tension between the utility of hierarchical language and primary partners’ potential abuses of power:

“It really depends on the relationship for me. There are some relationships that just sort of work so beautifully with primary-secondary and then some tertiary partners that were kind of more just for sex, not really for emotional sort of things. The hierarchy, for me, works really well. It’s very defined roles in a lot of ways. I work well with having very open communication and very defined roles.
It just keeps everyone from getting hurt, essentially. [...] I had a boyfriend who wasn’t okay with me sleeping with other men. He was okay with me sleeping with women. He’s like, ‘Well, I want to be the only guy in your life, but I don’t really care about women.’ That was not really something I liked. [...] That didn’t work out really well for me. That’s eventually when I started realizing that I wanted to kind of move more away from those types of relationships, with men at least, where they’re primary and then like forbidding other people. But, I think honestly, I like the language because it gives definitions.”

Very few queer polys were ‘pro-hierarchy’ in the sense that they want or need hierarchical poly relationships. These few participants operated most successfully with a ‘primary-secondary’ relationship model in which clear boundaries and roles are negotiated for the primary partner. In contrast, others fell into the ‘pro-hierarchy’ group simply because they use ‘primary-secondary’ language for convenience. For instance, one participant used ‘primary’ to refer to a partner, but later explained, “That’s definitely … it’s not really how we – we don’t really exist with those terms in mind, but to describe our situation is that he is my, as far as relationships go, he is my primary concern.”

*Relationship Structures*

The queer polys in this study had experience with an array of polyamorous relationship structures, ranging from ‘solo-poly’ dating to larger poly networks. They were far more likely to have practiced *open polyamory* than only closed or ‘polyfidelitous’ polyamory. This finding comes as no surprise given the emphasis on naturally evolving and fluid relationships that frequently surfaced in their narratives. Participants used a range of terms to describe their open poly relationships, such as ‘free,’ ‘squooshy,’ or simply ‘open.’ Others did not employ a language of freedom but implied that their partnerships were open and had the capacity to change by using phrases such as ‘currently’ or ‘right now.’
Yet, others used hierarchical language in describing their open poly structures, differentiating between primary partners and others whom they were ‘dating,’ ‘talking to,’ or ‘seeing’: “They were my primary partner, and there were two other people that I was dating and sleeping with that my primary partner knew about, and there were a couple people that my partner was talking to and one that they were just kinda like snuggle buddies.” Some participants practiced open polyamory exclusively because they felt that other relationship structures were too difficult to manage or inconsistent with polyamorous values. For instance, one participant awkwardly stated that a ‘V’ or ‘triad’ relationship “seems hard to coordinate” and others more concretely expressed an active resistance to these relationship structures, such as they have potential to be “far messier” than independent relationships or that closed triads are simply “monogamy squared.”

The majority of participants had been involved in some form of triangle structure, such as a ‘triad’ or ‘V,’ and some had unique labels for their positions within those relationships. For instance, one participant explained, “We’re in a ‘V’ and I’m the fulcrum. My other partner that’s not my husband dates other people and so do I more casually, and always kind of with the open mind that if things become more than casual we’ll work it out and see what’s comfortable for everyone.” Many participants had practiced open polyamory while being part of an established relationship structure. Other participants avoided the language of ‘triads’ or ‘Vs’ for various reasons such as that labels feel ‘forced’ or are ‘weird. Other participants retrospectively understood past relationships to be a ‘Vs’ or ‘triads’, but did not identify them as such while they were in those partnerships, such as one participant who noted that ‘triad’ simply was not central to her lexicon: “I didn’t ever use ‘V’ because everybody was sleeping with everybody, so we were a ‘triangle.’ […] I may have used ‘triad’ a few times but I don’t remember that it was a
fundamental part of my vocabulary.” Still others did not label triangle relationships as ‘triads’ or ‘Vs’ due to their unique understandings of these terms, such as that ‘triad’ “implies equality between all three; they were the primary and I was the secondary” or “I guess it’s like a pyramid, where we're equal partners.” These linguistic nuances reveal how conceptions of polyamorous relationship labels vary widely among queer polyamorists.

Curiously, gay males were far more likely to have engaged in *polyfidelitous triads* than other participants. All except one of the gay-identified men in the study preferred closed triads to other poly structures and several had experience only with this form of polyamory. The interesting distinction between these men and others in the study appears to be purely one of sexual identity – queer-, pansexual-, and bisexual-identified men did not express an inclination towards closed triadic partnerships nor had much experience with this relationship structure. This finding raises the question of whether gay-identified men are more closely aligned with or constrained by dominant cultural expectations of monogamy (i.e., fidelity) than other queer polyamorists who value fluidity and natural relationship progression. This difference may be a result of the long history and institutionalization of gay male culture that is virtually non-existent for other sexual minority cismen, or perhaps due to the pressures of the gay community to present their relationships as deserving of social respect to help achieve sexual citizenship. A closed, committed, ‘normal’ trouple (3-person couple) might be more respectable in the public eye than open poly relationships, which can be perceived as promiscuous or unstable. In fact, one gay male noted on multiple occasions during our interview that the gay community was disapproving of polyamory: “There are two groups, there are people who are completely open to it or people who, you know, don't really have an opinion on it, and then there's people that feel like our behavior's detrimental to the cause of marriage equality.”
Less than a third of the queer polys in this study had been involved in larger group relationships such as ‘quads’ or ‘intimate networks;’ however, those who had spoke of these experiences quite fondly. For example, one participant recalled a relationship involving four partners in a ‘closed square’: “It worked out really well because they were all in relationships with each other as well […] That was fun!” Some participants had experience with groups larger than a quad. Queer polys who had experience with networks often used labels such as ‘family’ or ‘polycule’ to describe these structures. For instance, one queer poly explained, “There was one time I was with a very large group of poly people who were all kind of in relationships with each other, but we found this term called ‘polycule,’ essentially which is a large group. It was great. We would always joke about that.”

In addition, several participants had practiced solo-polyamory, in which they intentionally did not maintain long-term, committed relationships but rather preferred a greater degree of autonomy than other polyamorists. They typically described their relationships as ‘dating’ or ‘seeing people’ rather than with language that might imply commitment such as ‘partnership,’ and they referenced various reasons for practicing solo-poly such as frequent travel and mental health. For instance, a few participants expressed a ‘my primary is me’ mentality, indicating that self-care was currently more essential than intimate partnerships. One discussed mental health at various times during our interview, noting that self-care was particularly important due to a recent divorce:

“I've actually started to kind of embrace the term ‘solo-polyamory.’ Um, and that I never really felt comfortable with just ‘polyamory.’ But I like ‘solo-polyamory’ for myself, cause I like the idea of thinking of myself as my own primary. Um, and but seeking out deep connections with other people without any kind of desire for cohabitation or any of that. Because I'm just not interested in that. Maybe that'll change in the future but a year-and-a-half after my divorce, I'm like, ‘Nope.
I really like living alone!’ [giggles] But I have been dating, and some of those people are partners and some of them are not.’

This last sentence suggests that queer polys have varying conceptions of what ‘solo-poly’ entails. For instance, she referred to some of the people she has been ‘dating’ as her ‘partners,’ yet other solo-polys avoided that language due to its denotation of commitment.

Finally, a few queer polys spoke of having experience with relationship anarchy, a practice that actively rejects normative understandings of intimacy and intimate relationships. For instance, one participant described a long-term partnership as “one of the most weirdly squooshy, non-defined relationships that is kind of ridiculous.” He expressed that this relationship style is “something I really suck at” and had to adjust to, indicating that this relationship was undefined due to the partner’s preference for relationship anarchy rather than his own. He described her as being simultaneously committed and “free-flowing” about the relationship, highlighting the ways that polyamorous practices can differ enormously from mainstream relationship practices that would view these concepts as entirely incompatible.

Other participants practiced relationship anarchy within their intimate networks, eschewing labels and instead allowing their connections to exist with one another as they are. These participants referred to the people they had intimate connections with by name rather than relationship descriptors. The case of Dee, Dominic, and Rochelle illustrates this anti-label mentality – as well as the tensions that can arise between relationship anarchists and label-oriented polys. Dee was a queer woman of color in her late-20s who dated a male partner, Dominic, as well as a female partner of her close friend, Rochelle, who was also involved in this study. Dee explained,

‘Yeah, so I kind of have this relationship anarchy style thing. There was the married couple that I dated for a while. For a while, I was dating Rochelle’s girlfriend. So that got to be a little weird overlap situation of Rochelle sometimes
hooks up with Dominic, and then I was dating her girlfriend and Dominic. So it became a – we would all four hang out a lot but we weren’t a quad […] It was very fluid thing that, you know, we would all hang out and wouldn’t necessarily like all have sex but sometimes like happen to be having sex in the same bed with the people that we were with.”

Rochelle, a lesbian/ace woman of color in her 40s, also described Dominic’s avoidance of labels such as ‘girlfriend’ or ‘partner.’ She clarified, however, that “Dominic is totally my boyfriend [giggles], you know, like. Well, he's my husband. But like [laughs], he totally is! He totally is. You just can't say it to him.” She described her relationship with him as ‘best friends’ and used ‘boyfriend’ and ‘husband’ to signify their ongoing, deep, meaningful connection, but Rochelle held the ‘working title’ of “not Dominic’s wife,” highlighting the discrepancy between her inclination for relationship labels and his preference for relationship anarchy. Thus, she employed her preferred language to denote his significance in her life, while playfully respecting his non-label stance by agreeing to add the precursor ‘not’ to her role as ‘wife.’ This (non)partnership highlights how some queer polys must carefully navigate relationship labels to respect the preferences of the relationship anarchists whom they are involved with.

Relationship anarchy troubles the very idea of polyamorous ‘relationship structures,’ as defining a ‘structure’ is entirely contrary to the principal tenet of relationship anarchy. Likewise, solo-polyamory does not necessarily involve a relationship ‘structure’ since most solo-polys prefer to not have a defined or committed relationship. Thus, referring to solo-poly and relationship anarchy as forms of polyamorous relationship ‘structures’ is somewhat misleading. Rather, it might be more suitable to refer to them as ‘practices.’ Further, it is important to note that relationship ‘structures’ might misrepresent of any form of polyamorous practice, as many participants preferred a form of polyamory that is not structured, but rather fluid and evolving. Nevertheless, relationship ‘structures’ might be the most suitable descriptor here, as
polyamorous ‘practices’ entails a myriad of processes such as negotiating relationship boundaries, forming poly households, or co-parenting children with multiple partners.

**Interviewing Queer Polyamorists**

The participants in this qualitative study provided a new perspective on polyamory that will enrich sociological knowledge of polyamorous relationships, families, and communities. In-depth interviews produced fascinating narratives on their experiences with, approaches to, and feelings about queer polyamory. These participants came from diverse backgrounds and had a wide range of gender, sexual, and other identities. They were more likely to understand polyamory as a unique practice that is distinct from other nonmonogamies; however, some viewed polyamory as the umbrella term for all consensual nonmonogamies. They referenced love, communication, consent, and awareness in their explanations of what polyamory means to them. Communication was clearly the most important relationship value to these queer polys, although honesty and trust followed closely behind and these three values were often perceived as tightly interwoven if not impossible to disentangle. They also valued equitable forms of polyamory, typically preferring non-hierarchical relationships to those that employ the primary/secondary hierarchy.

My participants were split on whether they view polyamory as an identity, practice, or both, and some viewed it as an ideology to conduct their own intimate relationships or all social relationships. They had experience with an array of poly relationship structures such as polyfidelitous triads, open poly partnerships, primary/secondary partnerships, and groups or networks, and some practiced solo-polyamory or relationship anarchy. They typically preferred open and fluid forms of polyamory, although a few participants were more rules-oriented than
the others. I will return to many of these themes in the remaining chapters where I discuss queer polyamorous relationship practices, family performativity, and the queering of intimacy.
Chapter Five

PRACTICING QUEER POLYAMORY:
Initiating, Negotiating, and Navigating Relationships

*I definitely think that my journey into polyamory has been a journey into making my relationship healthier.*

–Hannah (queer/gay, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s)

As queer polyamorists’ relationship structures are prolific, as Chapter Four outlines, their relationship practices are tremendously varied and inventive. These practices involve processes of how they first participated in poly relationships, how they negotiate and manage boundaries or agreements, and how they experience and address challenges that arise in both dating and relationships. This chapter centers on my participants’ experiences practicing polyamory that are related to three broad areas: initiating, negotiating, and navigating relationships.

I include their initiation stories because these were often rich, narrative responses that point to the ways queer poly people value relationship fluidity, find community, and understand how polyamory relates to their selfhood. I then discuss the relationship agreements my participants had negotiated, focusing on elements of fluidity and flexibility and the emotion work necessary to negotiate and sustain queer poly partnerships. Finally, I examine relationship and dating challenges that arise largely from ‘differential positioning,’ in which partners have different backgrounds or identities. I adapt the concept of ‘relationship defining power’ (Peplau, Veniegas, & Miller-Campbell 1996) that other scholars have applied to work on non-heterosexual intimacies (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001) and gay male and bisexual nonmonogamies (Klesse 2007) to better fit my participants’ narratives on how social forces of inequality can impact queer poly relationships. I also discuss the innovate ways my participants addressed these challenges.
Initiating Poly Relationships

The whole point of me being poly was to explore, like, my queerness.

–Christina (bi/pan, woman, white, mid-20s)

My participants presented a variety of stories relating to when and how they first encountered polyamory. Four broad themes emerged from the interview question, “Would you tell me the story about how you first got involved with polyamory?” In the first three themes, participants framed their entry into polyamory as a product of chance discovery, identity exploration, and/or relationship fluidity. In the fourth theme, participants described being perpetually poly, rather than having a discernable entry into polyamory. In this section, I illustrate each of these themes with select narratives on how my participants first became involved with polyamory.

Chance Discoverers

Over two-thirds of the queer polys I spoke with framed their introduction to polyamory in terms of their initial discovery of the term ‘polyamory’ or a chance encounter with polyamorous people. Several participants in this group described learning of the practice through media, including television shows such as MTV’s True Life docuseries or podcasts such as Dan Savage’s Lovecast. Some acknowledged that the media often failed to accurately represent polyamory but nevertheless had made them aware of the practice. For instance, Nikko was a pan/queer trans-other participant of color in their mid-30s who recalled, “I hate to bring up MTV, but you know like MTV, like they definitely had not necessarily positive examples but just examples of what are alternate relationships. And so, the media I would say directly influenced my education, my initial education of what polyamory was.”
Some of these participants expressed an immediate fascination with the practice upon discovering it and were not hesitant to take on a polyamorous identity or begin seeking out poly relationships. Evie, a queer woman of color in her mid-20s, instantly “loved” polyamory upon learning of it:

“The first time I heard the word ‘polyamory’ was … gosh, that was in 2011, and I was watching a 60/60 episode and they were doing a segment on polyamory or a family, two married couples, who were involved with one another. I just, I loved it! I’d never heard of anything like that and it just sort of dawned on me that that’s for me, or that I at least wanted to try it. It wasn’t for another year until I actually got into a polyamorous relationship with a couple, they were engaged.”

Stumbling upon the term ‘polyamory’ in media parallels experiences some queer people have upon first discovering terminology that best suits their sexual desires, behaviors, or identities. For example, some asexual people report instantly identifying with ‘asexuality’ upon discovering the term on websites such as AVEN: The Asexual Visibility and Education Network or through other media such as Angela Tucker’s documentary (A)Sexual (AVEN, 2018; Robbins, Graff Low, & Query 2016). Although this observation is of a different group of individuals than my participants, the experience perfectly corresponds: Having an ‘Oh, that’s what I am!’ reaction upon learning of an identity such as ‘pansexual,’ ‘genderfluid,’ ‘asexual,’ or ‘polyamorous.’

Other queer polys were more hesitant at first learning of the practice, but nevertheless expressed interest. Garry, a gay man of color in his mid-20s, had to sort out some questions and misconceptions about polyamory and talk through the possibility of incorporating it into his current relationship after discovering the practice while watching television with his partner:

“I first got involved with it – I was actually dating Neal for about two years. We were two years into our relationship and we were watching a TV show. It might have been – I want to say True Life? It would just – it was just one of the things that fascinated me about this relationship that they were having, about polyamory. I asked Neal what it was because at the time I had no idea and I knew he was more – his vocabulary is a lot bigger than mine so I was like, ‘Well, he might
know.’ Asking him about it, I found out that he’s actually done it. I became curious about it, so the first couple of days after watching this episode, it was just a lot of questions. It was a lot of, ‘What happens if this happens?’ Or, ‘What would this be for this couple?’ ‘Does it just pertain to us?’ ‘Is it like Mormons?’ Like, ‘Is it like Sister Wives?’ Like, ‘No.’ Then after that I was – I just asked him, ‘Is this something you want to try again? Because if you want to…’ – I was all for it and two years later we’re still doing it.”

Like Garry, many queer polys I spoke with sought out further education on polyamory after first learning of the practice. Several participants subsequently read books such as *The Ethical Slut* and *More Than Two* and/or consulted friends or partners who had knowledge of or experience with poly relationships. Likewise, a few participants became educated about polyamory through university or organizational programs, such as being a sociology or women’s studies major or attending nonmonogamy discussion panels.

More often, participants first heard of the practice via a friend or having met poly people, such as Lonnie, a gay man of color in his mid-20s, whose learning of a friend’s two partners “immediately piqued my interest.” Over half of those who framed their entry into polyamory in terms of discovery first encountered polyamory by dating a polyamorous individual or couple. A few expressed shock at learning that their date was poly and were initially resistant to the notion, but typically warmed to the practice after self-education via literature on poly relationships and values. Nash, a white queer trans-other participant in their mid-30s, described an experience of transitioning from resistance to revelation:

“I met this woman and we just started like hanging out and one day like it was clear that we were – that there was chemistry and it was going in the direction – like we were gonna like date or be physical or something was going to happen. And then she was like, ‘Yea, I was talking about you to my husband (something something),’ and I was like, ‘Wait, what?! What just happened?’ But I didn't like, I didn't – she was so casual about it that I didn't say anything. I was like, ‘Okay...’ Um, and then she ended up like inviting me over to talk with them and it was so clear that like everyone like understood or he was on board or he understood that she was seeking to have more than a friendship with me. Um, but I didn't even – I
hadn't even considered that as a possibility in life, really in any sort of – especially in any positive way. It was more of a like, ‘Oh, uh, that's cheating. What are you talking about?’ And then I realized that, ‘Oh…’ and she used the word polyamory and then I of course like started looking it up and went ‘Oh, that makes so much sense! Oh!’”

This experience highlights the ways cultural misconceptions about nonmonogamy can elicit an initial resistance to the possibility of polyamory, as well as how self-reflection and education can help deconstruct those misconceptions.

Identity Explorers

Nearly a quarter of my participants framed their first experiences with polyamory as a product of developing sexual or gender identities. Many of their narratives centered on sexual exploration as a result of burgeoning sexual interests. A few began practicing polyamory after disclosing same-sex desires to their current partner. Christina’s narrative represents the interconnectedness of sexuality and relationship fluidity and highlights how compulsory monogamy can permeate heterosexual partnerships when one partner has ‘come out.’ Christina was a white bi/pan woman in her mid-20s whose monogamous partnership transitioned into polyamory so that she could explore her sexual desires. She identified her sexuality as the reason for being polyamorous: “The whole point of me being poly was to explore, like, my queerness.” Although she was soon-to-be engaged to her male partner at the time her story commences, she had held the assumption that they must end their five-year relationship so that she may explore her same-sex attractions. Her male partner, however, was able to challenge the veil of compulsory monogamy that guided her rationale by proposing that they search for alternate solutions:

“I was engaged to a cisguy that I’ve been dating for five years and we were living a lot – like we were in a long-distance relationship at the time. I was living [abroad] to finish an assistantship that I did after graduating. And I had really just
kind of come to terms with the fact that I was queer. And I pretty much – I’d been with him since I was 19 and I tried to break up with him. We weren’t engaged yet. We were talking about it. And I knew I loved him but I also knew that I hadn’t had a lot of experiences that I would like to have. And so, I kind of told him, you know, ‘I really, really, really like women and I feel like I have to explore that and break up with you.’ And he kind of brought it up and was like, ‘But do you love me?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, of course. I really love you but this isn’t going to work.’ And he said, ‘Well, instead of breaking up, why don’t we just look for other options?’ So I kind of started researching [polyamory]. And, you know, I guess I’d heard about it. I’d heard about people having open relationships. And my boyfriend at the time, soon to be fiancé, wasn’t interested in dating other people, wasn’t interested in being – you know, it wasn’t the kind of thing where I just wanted to have a threesome and get that out of my system. He wasn’t interested in that and I was interested in more than just an affair. So, we kind of just researched it and came up with rules and things that we both felt comfortable with and I started dating women as soon as I returned – well, women and other like non-binary folk whenever I got back to the United States. That’s kind of how it all happened.”

His proposition was a success: they negotiated a polyamorous arrangement that allowed them to remain together while Christina explored her same-sex interests. He officially proposed for marriage sometime after their mutual decision to be polyamorous. At the time of our interview, they had been married for a year and Christina was in another relationship that had a promising future.

A couple of my participants related their entry into polyamory to a different type of coming out experience, namely, beginning a gender transition after coming out as trans. These participants were led to polyamory while they explored new ways of expressing their gender identities. Brooke’s experience reflected Sanger’s findings on how polyamory can be a suitable solution when one partner comes out as transgender and the other feels that their sexual or romantic needs are no longer being met (Sanger 2010). Brooke was a white queer/lesbian woman in her 40s who was married to a ciswoman before her transition. Brooke attributed her entry into
polyamory to her gender transition, noting that the sexual connection within her marriage had waned during this process:

“We essentially – our own relationship has lost the sexuality element to it with like my transitioning to um – as a trans person. Um, and so that's kind of [sigh] … part of what prompted the discussion of what led into this. And, she knew before we married actually that I was trans. I let her know that stuff beforehand. But it was um, we just didn't know how it would affect our relationship and so we were just willing to let it go wherever it was going to go. And um, but so yea.”

At the time of our interview, Brooke’s marriage was undergoing its own transition. She maintained a close, affectionate relationship with her “complicated spouse,” but was uncomfortable denoting the partnership as ‘primary’ due to the way their relationship had recently evolved. Her spouse was in a “kind of monogamous” relationship that would otherwise resemble a heteronormative (heterosexual, cisgender, monogamous) partnership if not for the polyamorous agreement with Brooke and the emotional ties that persisted within their marriage. Brooke spoke of these matters with uncertainty and grief.

In contrast, Jordan’s transition offered relationship clarity and relief. Jordan was a white pansexual trans-other participant in his mid-20s. Beginning testosterone corrected a hormonal imbalance that had formerly triggered his psychosis and adversely impacted his relationship ideologies and experiences. He recalled a moment of revelation: “I was just like, ‘I don’t have to be in a codependent monogamous relationship. I don’t have to be with somebody who treats me like crap. Polyamory sounds okay. I’m going to go do this thing that sounds so much healthier for me.’” He later clarified that the ability to end the psychosis medication after starting testosterone was directly responsible for his new ability to consider polyamory: “I was saner. And then I suddenly was like, this sounds like a great idea.” Although Jordan’s experience is likely quite uncommon, it provides some insight into how the intersections of disability, identity, and polyamory can materialize for queer polyamorists.
A few participants noted that their process of coming into polyamory coincided with exploring sexuality during their teens or early twenties. Theo, a queer trans man of color in his early-20s, attended an exceptionally liberal high school where “it was okay to be poly.” He had friends who were polyamorous and knew of a gay male teacher at the school who was open about his cohabiting triad. Theo recalled experimenting with polyamory around the age of 16 or 17 and had since been involved in a wide variety of polyamorous relationship structures until his current monogamous partnership. This is somewhat of a reverse entry-into-polyamory story, in that he started practicing polyamory at a very young age, eventually exploring monogamy with a partner who also had previous poly relationships but was “completely monogamous” at the time I spoke with Theo.

Similarly, Phil recalled how he and a new partner (who would later become his wife) began exploring nonmonogamy together after disclosing same-sex attractions to each other. Phil was a white bi/pan man in his 40s who had experience with various forms of nonmonogamy including swinging and polyamory. He expressed gratification with the opportunity to explore a nonmonogamous “journey” alongside his partner:

“Umm, so my introduction to it, into – Now of course I didn’t realize that there was a word for it yet but I had just met my … who would later be my wife, who is now my ex-wife. But when we first met, within I would say the first year, maybe the first couple of months, just through us learning about each other, both of us came out as having an interest with the same sex. That started a whole conversation about, ‘Wow, well we’re in the beginning of this relationship. There’s this thing already. We should probably explore that.’ Like, ‘That seems like a thing that’s kind of important, you know. We should.’ So, what’s funny is that we both sat down and we were like, ‘Okay, so, if we should do this then let’s be smart about it,’ and so we sort of gave permission right off the bat. We were like, ‘Alright, so you’re out and you have a chance. Have at it. Go for it.’ Said, you know, ‘Permission granted. You don’t have to phone in. You don’t have wait until next time.’ It just so happened that the first time for both of us was when we were out with friends, one of my mutual friends, one of my really good friends
and his best friend. We were all out and we used to go dancing down at the gay bar down here, which I’d been going to for eons. It had the best music, the best vibe, the best crowd. It’s like a basement place that was just kind of dingy, but I don’t know, it was alright, you know. It was the place that you could go. We were trying to get into there to go but she was actually under 18 at the time, so they like kicked her out. We would always sneak in but this time she got caught. We got bounced and we all ended up back at the house and it ended up being the four of us all messed around. That was my first time with a guy and it was her first time with a girl and it just so happened to be the same night. After that, after they went home, we were laying in bed and… and I’m like, ‘So, how’d it go?’ You know? And she’s like, ‘Yes!’ And I’m like, ‘Do it again?’ And she’s like, ‘Yes!’ And I’m like, ‘Alright!’ She’s like, ‘So, how did it go?’ You know? And we both gave the thumbs up to it and, ‘Alright, then this is a thing, so we should probably figure out moving forward what to do with this.’ That like set up my first poly dynamic because I would say maybe […] about three to four years after that, I had my first boyfriend, so that was full on. She had a girlfriend at the time. That was … That was the structure. Then the three of us: me, her, and my boyfriend all moved in together. […] That’s kind of how I got started into poly, was just because it became the ideal arrangement for, you know, for just the right way for where I was at. And it really… It really fostered a … like a support. Like, we were both supporting each other and going through this journey and it was nice. But yeah. So that’s how. That’s how I got started.”

Phil eventually married this partner and the two continued to explore various poly relationship structures together until they later separated. He identified as polyamorous and was in an open relationship at the time of our interview.

In addition to those who began practicing polyamory as a result of coming out and exploring new identities, a few participants learned of polyamory while exploring queer communities. Blake, a white queer/sexual trans-other participant in their early-30s, recalled, “I think the first place I ever heard about polyamory was within the asexual community just because the way asexual relationships are formed, poly makes a whole lot of sense.” Their understanding of intimacy as well their description about relationship norms in the asexual community supports existing literature on the linkages between asexuality and polyamory. Blake continued:
“I guess it helps to explain more about me, in that I’ve never understood relationships. I’ve never understood the point of dating. I’ve never understood like – it wasn’t until my sophomore year of college that two friends had asked me if I would consider myself fairly straight. And they had just – they were both co-persons of the gay straight alliance at my college. So it’s – I think if they hadn’t asked that, it probably wouldn’t have come up for a very long time. So yeah, that’s sort of my background in that it might sound odd but polyamory to me is a very logical – like it just – and it might also just be that there has been a fair amount written about it, but it’s something that just makes sense to me.”

Prior research has found that many asexual people value polyamorous relationships and report that the practice does in fact ‘make sense’ to them (Sanger 2010; Scherrer 2008, 2010). The narratives my participants presented about coming out and having unique needs due to particular gender and sexual identities reveal the ways that polyamory serves to meet the specific needs of many queer people.

Similarly, several participants first encountered polyamory via exploration of or participation in swinger and kink communities. Carole, a white queer/gay woman in her late-20s, recalled, “I met this woman who I became friends with through the kink scene and she was telling me about her two partners. And … and I don't know, as I got to know her and talked about it, it was like, ‘This sounds interesting.’” Carole then contemplated polyamory for her own life and eventually engaged in the practice when she began dating a married woman who she was still involved with at the time of our interview. Likewise, a few participants came into polyamory from the swinger community, including experiences where swinger relationships evolved into or were retrospectively understood as poly relationships. For instance, three participants had explored swinging with a partner and eventually maintained a closed sexual/emotional relationship with another swinger couple that could be described as polyamorous quad. The queer polys I spoke with who had experience with swinging were far more oriented toward polyamorous relationships, but most were unaware of polyamory when they entered the swinger
community. Similar to those whose swinging relationships transformed into polyamorous partnerships, many participants had initiation stories in which their current partnership evolved or transformed.

**Relationship Redesigners**

Over a quarter of participants framed their entry into polyamory in terms of intentional or unintentional relationship fluidity, including friendships that developed into intimate partnerships and monogamous partnerships that became polyamorous. The most common first experience my participants had with polyamory involved redesigning the parameters of their own existing relationship or marriage. Several of these relationship transitions were intentional and often a product of long-distance dating, in which it seemed most practical to open the relationship or to ensure that one’s own needs are being met. For example, Shari, a queer/bi woman of color in her mid-20s, described her reaction upon learning that her partner planned to spend several months abroad: “Okay, well, I’m not going to wait around for you to come back. You know? I can’t be celibate for three months, basically.” Likewise, some participants presented polyamory as a sensible solution when needs vary between long-distance partners. Frances, a white queer woman/other aged 40+, prioritized love over sex at the time she began practicing polyamory, whereas her cismale partner desired more of the sexual aspect:

“When I was 21, I met this guy through my parents and our parents are really good friends. We totally connected and we started dating, and he lived on the East Coast. We ended up being involved for four years, but two of those years we were on opposite coasts, so it started then because we both just felt like … you know, we wouldn’t see each other for really long periods of time, so for us it felt like this very practical thing but then it turned into – for him, I think it was a way to … like sow his oats, you know. For me, it wasn’t. I had a girlfriend in college and I dated her. She was the only person I dated otherwise. I didn’t sleep with anyone else. Like, I loved her really, really deeply. And that went on for years. It was kind of like, I had these two relationships in my life and my relationship with him was like the primary relationship. […] But, she was like almost equally important
to me in terms of like the status of the relationship. When we were still at school, people knew that we were involved and that’s how they sort of treated it, like a monogamous relationship. So um, yeah. That was how it started.”

Frances continued both relationships after her then primary partner had moved back home, but ultimately ended the other relationship because that partner could no longer “share” her. This situation raises the question of whether some people are comfortable with poly relationships only if their metamour (their partner’s partner) is not local. Having a long-distance metamour, as Frances points out, can make a partnership look and feel “like a monogamous relationship.”

Other queer polys experienced somewhat of an unexpected transformation within existing relationships as a result of one partner developing feelings for another person. For instance, the relationship between Karl and Carrie, white lesbian partners in their mid-20s, shifted when Karl developed feelings for a friend who was also an ex-partner. They explained in a joint interview:

Emily: So, would you tell me the story about how you first got involved with polyamory?

Karl: Okay, from my perspective back in 2012, we’ve been dating for over five years and were monogamous when we first began our relationship in 2010. In 2012, I became interested in a person – a dude named Brian, and we [Carrie and I] had been talking before I went to meet Brian, who had been an ex of mine and who I went to meet up down in South Carolina to just hang out, as friends. I used to identify as pansexual, and I was interested in him and we [Carrie and I] agreed that if any sexual stuff came up that it would be okay for me to do sexual stuff with Brian. When I went down there, we did end up doing sexual stuff and then realized that we actually had romantic feelings for each other and kind of got confused about what the – how that would work in a relationship since I was already in a relationship. So, when I came back home from my vacation with Brian, I talked to Carrie and I said, ‘You know, we already have an open relationship sexually, are we also open to the idea of opening our relationship up to love other people or be with other people?’ Carrie thought about it for about a week and then decided that she would be okay with that. So that was kind of the kick-starter.

Emily: Okay, so you two came in it together then.

Karl: Yep.
Emily: Okay. So Carrie, I guess from your perspective it might be the same story but–

Carrie: I think I’ll give a little background information that might not be important but, you know, it’s something that was a factor. When I was younger, I read a lot of science fiction by …

Emily: Heinlein?

Carrie: [Nods] And he featured a lot of polyamorous relationships. Growing up in a very conservative Christian background, I read the bible a lot and it’s like, ‘Oh, they had multiple spouses sometimes,’ and I think I had things like that, that made me actually think about it beforehand. Like, I wasn’t thinking about it at the time when it came up and I was like surprised, but it was something I thought about before that point and just hadn’t really expected it to be something that would be considered by any of my partners probably, that I was fascinated or interested in it because of that. But yea, she [Karl] described the circumstances that it did come up. I did have to think about it a little bit just because it was something– you know, actually applying that to our relationship would be new and just new ground, but yeah, I guess I was just interested in at least trying it and if it didn’t work then we’d figure something out.

Carrie and Karl each experienced unanticipated events: Karl’s developing romantic feelings for Brian and Carrie’s having a partner express interest in polyamory. Their entry into polyamory then occurred as their dyadic relationship transformed into a triangle structure with the addition of Karl’s friend and ex, Brian. Although he was no longer involved at the time of our interview, Karl and Carrie continued both their partnership and shared interest in polyamory.

Several others’ first poly experiences transpired when a close friendship evolved into a partnership. For instance, Maggie was a white queer/gay woman in her mid-20s who formerly identified as bisexual. Her entry into polyamory occurred when a close friendship underwent a twofold transformation, first shifting into a sexual friendship, then into a partnership:

“My best friend had a boyfriend, and we like sort of discussed a threesome – she and I sort of discussed a threesome but mostly in sort of a joking manner or um it was something like, ‘Oh we’ll talk about this more later, like maybe that’d be interesting.’ I think at the time I was like identifying as bisexual. Um, I was still sort of new to the world of sex in general but like open to trying things out. And
so, what happened was that she invited me over for a “movie” [air quotes] at like eight-o'clock at night and I was like, ‘Oh okay, yea sure, let's watch a movie together.’ And them um, then it became like, ‘Well now we've had some drinks, do you just want to stay over, do you want to stay on the couch or in the bed with us?’ And ... from there I chose the bed. And then, that just continued to happen and then eventually we were like, ‘Oh, we're not just three people having threesomes a lot, it's a little more than that.’”

Maggie later noted that blurring the lines between friends and partners can cause confusion: “She was my best friend, she was and is my best friend. So, there was sort of a dual relationship there where we had to sometimes work out like, ‘Is this a girlfriend or best friend thing that's happening right now?’” Nevertheless, Maggie indicated that they were successful at navigating those circumstances and renegotiating boundaries as their relationship evolved, although they had transitioned back to friendship by the time of our interview.

Finally, some participants experienced a transformation in their own practices or ideologies that did not occur within an existing relationship, but after adverse experiences with monogamy. Miriam, a white queer/bi genderqueer woman in her mid-30s, decided after having a monogamous partnership:

“It was not for me. When I first was – when I was first exploring things it was more just nonmonogamy and having a lot of sex with different partners, although I had some more serious partners. Over time it has morphed into I don't really have casual sex anymore, in the past seven years I haven't really had casual sex, I have committed partners.”

She experienced shifts in both thought and behavior as she realized monogamy was unsuitable for her, began engaging in sexual nonmonogamy, and finally transitioned into polyamory. Like Miriam, Spencer’s first relationship was monogamous and ultimately resulted in his rejection of monogamy. He was a white bisexual man in his late-20s who explained, “After my one early monogamous relationship ended, I basically just said, ‘I am not doing that again.’”
For others, the transition into polyamory outside an existing relationship did not coincide with a rejection of monogamy, but with multiple budding relationships. For example, J.R. was a white bi/queer genderqueer participant in his mid-20s who experienced a “paradigm shift” after learning of polyamory when he had fallen in love with two women during a study away program located across the country from the university he was attending. He recalled developing an attachment to Shaunna, who lived near the area a temporary program of study he attended was located, while simultaneously receiving continual emotional support from Emery, whom he had been involved with back home. The “growing bond” he felt with each of these women as well as pressure from one of them to define their relationship initially caused internal conflict but ultimately led to critical reflection. He continued with his story:

“It was about that time when I was like trying to process everything. I didn’t even know how like – how the word polyamory was introduced to me but I heard it somewhere and I started, you know, doing some internet digging and I was like, ‘Holy shit,’ like, ‘I don’t have to lay one person aside and just ignore them. Like, it’s not a bad thing to be in love with more than one person.’ And sort of that paradigm shift moment occurred where I was like, ‘Oh, this idea of commitment doesn’t have to be relegated to monogamy, and you can have a loving relationship with more than one person.’ And that was my first exposure.”

J.R.’s first encounter with the possibility of polyamory did not materialize into poly relationships with both of these women, although he did subsequently practice polyamory and reconnected with Shaunna while he was cohabiting with another partner. Rather, this experience introduced him to polyamory, dramatically transforming his relationship values and expectations. In other words, he experienced an ideological self-transformation into polyamory as a result of simultaneous attachments to two individuals, rather than having the experience of the relationships themselves transforming into a polyamorous structure. Interestingly, those whose entry into polyamory occurred within an existing relationship placed far more focus on the partnership itself than their own ideological transformations, despite that the experience of
transitioning into polyamory from monogamy would surely be accompanied by an ideological shift as partners learn polyamorous relationship values and expectations.

**Perpetual Polyamorists**

One fifth of the queer polys I spoke with framed their entry into polyamory as non-linear, complicated, or indiscernible. Logan was a white heteroflexible man in his early-30s. His narrative illustrates the complexity of some poly initiation stories. Logan’s initial response to my inquiry about how he first became involved with polyamory was, “Wow, okay, so that’s a … [mumble].” He was suddenly distracted by an unrelated thought during those seconds of mumbling so I was unable to capture his full reaction, which I suspect would have been something along the lines of that’s a ‘big question’ or ‘complicated story,’ as a few other participants noted. Once we got back on track with the interview, he offered a verbose response, attributing his entry into polyamory to several factors such as media, self-reflection, having friends who are poly, and festival culture. He could not identify a “crystalizing moment or some real clear thing” that occurred; however, he recalled a period in which he was questioning his then long-term monogamous relationship:

“...I do think that already at that time I was very much thinking about the idea of being open, opening up that relationship or seeing other people within the context of that relationship, or, I don’t know. I don’t think I had a necessarily concrete thing in mind but I was open to some range of possibilities. [...] Somewhere around that time at least those possibilities became real to me, somewhere around the end of that relationship. I was sort of like, you know, ‘I think this is a thing I might want and even if I don’t continue doing this relationship, I still think I might want that. If I enter another relationship in the future, which I assume I will do, I might want to start there rather than coming to that after five years or four years.’”

That partnership ultimately ended and Logan relocated to a large city with an openness to and interest in open relationships, but also without a “real concrete sense” of what that means. He
recalled having an interest in festival culture during this time and was able to integrate into the local ‘burner’ community after making the decision to go to Burning Man – a large annual festival in the Nevada desert that celebrates community, art, creativity, and inclusivity. He described how the overlap of poly and burner communities facilitated his entry into polyamory:

“Very quickly, I met tons of people who identify as polyamorous and some other people outside of that community too, on OKCupid and other things. It wasn’t like … I don’t think it was very … I don’t know. I don’t feel like there was this linear clear path. It just sort of came in a couple-year period. All of a sudden, I felt like lots and lots of my friends identified that way based on some of the communities I became a part of when I uprooted my life. Because I was like starting to date through those communities and maybe because I had it in my head a little bit that I wanted to date in that way, you know I just ended up in a number of relationships that were something other than strictly monogamous. I feel like it was a very soft kind of entry into it. It’s hard for me to be exactly clear.”

Here, Logan reiterated that his entry into polyamory was somewhat indiscernible as a non-linear process. He continued his initiation story by describing how he was introduced to the idea of nonmonogamy during childhood:

“I seriously very clearly remember, like, being in maybe elementary school or early middle school and watching an episode of Oprah of all things on swingers, you know, talking about a swinger party. […] I remember even then, that young, having this conflicting feeling of, ‘That really makes some sense to me, this idea that marriage doesn’t have to be so fully closed off. We could question monogamy.’ But then, of course, at the same time my Catholic guilt crept in and like, ‘Well, on the other hand, hell.’ You know? […] It also seemed scary. But I feel like that was always in the back of my head.”

The conclusion of Logan’s initiation story suggests that he attributes his entry into polyamory primarily to the time in which he began “running into” polyamorous people within the burner community.

Logan’s narrative reveals how tricky identifying a point of entry into polyamory can be. He identified a few entry points within his response: thinking of nonmonogamy during a
relationship in college and graduate school, learning of nonmonogamy via media during childhood, and meeting polyamorous people during his integration into the burner community. The latter story is one I heard from a few participants – that polyamory is normative and celebrated among burners. It seems that the burner community provides a space for poly people to be open about their identities and relationship practices, which can be valuable to those who may not have another welcoming community. For instance, a few polyamorists I spoke with did not identify with or felt they fit into the ‘queer’ community, such as those who are ‘heteroflexible’ or ‘bisexual,’ largely because they were uncomfortable “invading” an oppressed community due to the privileges they held as people who are often read as cisgender heterosexuals.

Logan’s narrative also hints at the final poly-initiation theme: Over half of my participants conveyed a perpetual poly mentality, in which they expressed a long-standing orientation towards or interest in non-monogamous or polyamorous relationships, despite the timing or experiences of their entry into polyamory. In Logan’s case, learning of nonmonogamy during childhood planted a seed of thought that would develop over the course of several years until he began actively pursuing nonmonogamous relationships. Other queer polys I spoke with did not identify the specific root of this mentality, but recalled that monogamy had never “made sense” to them. For example, Delilah, a white pansexual woman in her mid-30s, was perplexed when a person she had previously dated said their relationship had to end because he was moving away. She thought this solution – to break up – was entirely nonsensical, arguing that people should be able to have multiple partners in the same way they have multiple friends or children. She realized retrospectively that she “just didn’t get monogamy.”
In addition, several participants in this group expressed either knowingly or retrospectively having always practiced polyamory, including some who had poly relationships during high school. A few always understood their early relationships as polyamorous, even if they were not aware of that term at the time. Debbie, a white bi/ace woman in her late-20s, assertively proclaimed, “I’ve never really had a monogamous relationship, period.” She described her first “multi-partner relationship,” in which she and her boyfriend dated the same girl for a few months during high school: “We didn’t have a name for it. It was just, I liked girls, I had always liked girls. He liked a girl and she liked us and, yeah. […] It was a triad. Everybody was fully aware. We did dates together.” Others recognized their early relationships as polyamorous only in hindsight. Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s), who was caught by surprise when his date casually mentioned having a husband, retrospectively understood his first relationship as poly. Nash continued his narrative of how he became involved with polyamory by describing a high school relationship in which his girlfriend dated multiple people. Nash recalled feeling entirely comfortable with the relationship structure despite friends questioning his insecurity: “I'm like, ‘I feel completely fine about it, I don't feel insecure at all. In fact, I feel really good about our relationship, we've been together more than two years.’” Retrospectively, Nash realized, “‘Ohhh, I've sort of been doing this all along, I just didn't know it.’”

**Conclusion**

The four broad ways that my participants framed their entry into polyamory are not mutually-exclusive, as Logan’s narrative above clearly reveals. In fact, some queer polys touched upon several themes within the first few statements of their initiation stories. For example, Rosa, a queer woman of color in her mid-30s, explained:

“I first got involved in polyamory, probably the way a lot of people do, is I started dating someone that was polyamorous. I had heard of open relationships before,
and it was when I was younger, so my definition of sexual identity and relationships and everything was getting more and more fluid and less, you know, binary, if you will. And, we had a long talk about it and what it meant to him and what, you know, that would look like for us and what would and wouldn't be okay with me. And, I went into it with ‘Okay,’ you know, ‘I'm okay with this, I'm okay with our relationship being open as long as there's extensive conversations.’ [...] And I, being the big nerd I am, did a lot of research and read a lot of books.”

Rosa’s story is one of discovery, fluidity, and sexuality: She discovered polyamory by dating a polyamorous individual and her own subsequent investigation, experienced relationship fluidity during the process of redefining existing relationship boundaries, and recognizes her openness to polyamory to be a product of her developing notions of sexuality and relationships. Likewise, Brooke (queer/lesbian, trans woman, white, 40+), whose marriage was undergoing a transition, attributed her entry into polyamory to several factors:

Brooke: My first involvement was when I was in college actually, and I kind of started exploring my identity then, trying to figure out what exactly what – who I was basically. And so, like part of that process I um hooked up with this couple that practiced BDSM and was kinda like their third, um kinda submissive sort of person with that. So that would've been my first involvement.

Emily: Was that strictly a sexual arrangement or was it more of a triad relationship?

Brooke: It was – at that point strictly a sexual relationship but they asked me to make it more of a permanent live-with-them sort of thing. Um and I was considering it, and decided it wasn't really the way to go. Um, after that though, I did decide that like I did want most of my relationships to be at least open where nobody was like really possessive of each other. So, I had been raised Mormon so it was actually kind of way off from how I'd been raised.

Brooke’s path to polyamory occurred in three overlapping stages: she first began the process of identity exploration, subsequently becoming involved with people in the kink community who introduced the possibility of polyamory, which consequently sparked reflection on the possessiveness of monogamous relationships.
My participants’ initiation stories were multifaceted and diverse. The queer adults I spoke with framed their first involvement with polyamory in terms of discovering the practice via media, education, friends, dates, and/or partners, exploring sexual/gender identities or interacting with sexual communities, and redesigning current partnerships in ways that permitted relationship fluidity. I was surprised to find no pattern of queer polys attributing their first encounters with polyamory to being in queer spaces. Rather, they were more likely to reference other sexual communities such as kink and swinging. In addition, I found that many participants also expressed a perpetual orientation towards polyamory, with some having had poly relationships since their teen years and others having a long-standing interest in or mentality that aligns with polyamorous relationships.

A comprehensive examination of these stories reveals the centrality of fluidity in their initiation narratives. The concept of ‘sexual fluidity’ has multiple meanings. In its most basic form, fluidity is a sexual identity that is increasingly embraced by young people, such that someone might describe their sexuality as ‘fluid’ rather than with a static identity such as ‘lesbian,’ ‘heterosexual,’ or ‘bisexual.’ Second, it describes the capacity for sexual identities, attractions, and behaviors to change, posing a direct challenge to dominant essentialist notions of sexuality. Third, fluidity can refer to discrepancies between sexual identity, attraction, and behavior. For instance, research on both straight and queer women has identified discrepancies between their sexual identities and their sexual attractions and/or behaviors (Callis 2014; Diamond 2008; Lamarre 2016; Rupp et al. 2014).

The concept of sexual fluidity can be applied to a broader range of experiences, such as those my participants detailed in their narratives. First, whereas our intimate culture frames sexuality as inherently static and relies on vastly rigid relationship expectations, the queer
polyamorists I spoke with exuded dynamic and elastic notions of sexuality and relationships. As we have seen, they exhibited a strong capacity for and openness towards change – a fundamental tenet of fluidity. Second, some of their narratives revealed discrepancies between their desires or ideologies and their practices that align with the second description of fluidity cited above. Specifically, many participants conveyed an ever-present or long-standing poly mentality that did not correspond with their relationship practices. In other words, they experienced periods of discrepancy in which they were monogamous in practice while polyamorous in ideology. These findings highlight how queer polyamory both challenges and is constrained by compulsory monogamy and heteronormative relationship ideals.

**Negotiating Poly Relationships**

*Our rules are basically don’t be an asshole, be honest, have faith in the other person’s good intentions.*

—Spencer (bi, man, white, late-20s)

Similar to my participants’ initiation stories, fluidity was a predominant theme when they spoke of negotiating relationship boundaries and rules. Their narratives on this topic were far briefer than I had expected, as many reported having very few rules, boundaries, or agreements in their current and/or past poly partnerships, if any. Instead, the queer polys I spoke with had typically negotiated an open and flexible form of polyamory, often rejecting ‘rules’ altogether or abandoning them after becoming more comfortable with polyamorous relationships. Some participants were averse to the term ‘rules’ and others simply did not reference the term when we discussed relationship negotiations. Instead, most preferred ‘boundaries,’ although some disliked that term as well, and nearly a third referenced having ‘agreements.’ When they did describe relationship boundaries or agreements that were negotiated with partners, the queer polys I spoke
with often noted an element of flexibility or the potential for those boundaries to change or evolve over time. In this section, I first briefly outline the types of agreements my participants had established with their partners, then discuss how their negotiations and agreements reveal underlying themes of fluidity/flexibility and emotion work.

**Relationship Agreements**

Two broad categories of agreements emerged from my participants’ discussions of relationship negotiations: those based on values and those that addressed practical issues. The values-based category overwhelmingly centered on communication and respect. The participants who cited these agreements sometimes framed them as values or guidelines; however, communication and respect were actual established boundaries or rules for other participants. Agreements related to specific practical issues primarily fell into three subcategories of established boundaries: timing of disclosure, relationship and household parameters, and sex with other partners.

Around two-thirds of the queer polys I spoke with referenced honest communication in their descriptions of relationship negotiations. This agreement involves being truthful and upfront about feelings and intentions, talking through emotions, and checking in with each other. Many participants framed communication as more of a value or guideline than an established boundary, such as Debbie (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s) who described it as an ‘ideal’: “We have ideals that we try to keep to but really it’s just you have to communicate and you have to communicate honestly.” In this sense, the agreement to uphold honest communication is what distinguishes polyamory from other nonmonogamies.

In addition, several participants focused on mutual respect and consideration, again framing this category as either a general guideline and/or an established boundary. Mathis, a
white gay man in his mid-30s, explained, “We try and just basically operate out of the idea that we’re going to be respectful of everyone no matter what we do. Don’t do something that’s going to be disrespectful or hurtful of someone else.” Likewise, Ron, a white heteroflexible man in his 40s, cited respect/consideration and communication/honesty as two of only three agreements. He used the very term ‘guideline’: “The only rule we had was that there was no rules. We had more guidelines, I guess, being considerate, and being honest, and being yourself were the three guidelines that we try to employ.”

In contrast, a few cited honest communication or respect/consideration specifically as a “rule.” I was surprised at how many of the queer polys I spoke with had set these as their only agreements. For instance, Teri was a white bisexual genderqueer participant aged 40+ who practiced open and fluid forms of polyamory. She explained, “In my form of poly, I am free to do what I want with whom I want, just like I would with friends. Just because I have one friend doesn’t mean I can’t hang out with all my other friends whenever I feel like it. The same goes for my partners. My only rule is be considerate.”

The great majority of my participants had negotiated and established practical boundaries and rules at some point in their poly relationships, despite that many ended up forgoing these agreements for a more open and flexible form of polyamory. These agreements centered on pre- or post-disclosure related to other partners, relationship or household parameters, and sexual behaviors or expectations. First, many participants had set disclosure agreements relating to how much information about other people (dates, partners, hookups, etc) they would share with each other and when. Most often, they had negotiated the expectation of pre-disclosure, such that a conversation should take place and agreements made before a partner goes on a date with or has
sex with a new person. Likewise, many participants negotiated agreements to immediately disclose interest in or feelings for a new person, even if the interest was simply a ‘crush.’

In addition, some participants set post-disclosure boundaries around the sharing of information, in that they or their partner(s) preferred not to hear all the details about dates or sexual encounters. In contrast, several participants expressed excitement about hearing details of their partners’ dates and sexual experiences. These contrasting expectations suggest that some partnerships may involve different agreements for each partner, as some partners experience compersion and others experience jealousy. For example, William, a white gay man in his mid-30s, described this aspect of his marriage as “very interesting” because he enjoyed complete disclosure while his husband was far less inclined to want details:

“...one of the things that's also very interesting is, when he's dating someone, I like to know lots of details. ‘Where'd you guys go hang out? What did you do? Did you have sex? Oh, how did that go? What did you do?’ You know, fairly explicit. I like to know. It's enjoyable to me to hear that he had a good time and so on. But with me, he does not wanna know. It is very – it's very ‘don't ask don't tell.’ And um, I've had to test that a few times with him. You know, cause I'm like, ‘Does he really mean that?’ No, he'll get bent out of shape.”

William’s inclination towards compersion likely contributed to his suspicion that his spouse might actually prefer to hear details of William’s dating life. William became convinced that his spouse genuinely wanted the non-disclosure-agreement only after William ‘tested’ it and subsequently learned that his spouse is in fact uncomfortable with post-disclosure.

Second, participants had negotiated practical agreements related to parameters around partnerships, households, and time. Partnership parameters involved setting boundaries around relationship structures or number of partners. Most often, these parameters related to expectations of polyfidelity in a group relationship; however, these boundaries may not have been actively negotiated the way other practical agreements are. Meredith, a white pansexual
woman in her late-30s, revealed: “I want to say that we knew that it was a triad and that there
was no outside contact. Somehow, I have it in my head that once we started dating, that it was a
closed relationship within the three of us. But for the life of me I don’t know how we decided
that. Did we have a conversation about it? Did we not? I have no idea.” Household parameters
included establishing rules about whether another partner or date is invited into or can sleep over
at the shared home, what types of sexual activities are acceptable inside the home and/or
bedroom, and giving a ‘heads up’ about or scheduling when other partners or dates will come
over. Several participants referenced time availability and scheduling time with partners as a
central boundary. A few of these queer pols had negotiated weekly time slots for their partners,
but most had more flexible agreements, such as ensuring that they ‘make time’ for each other.

Third, many participants had ongoing conversations with their partners about sexual
expectations and behaviors. The great majority of these discussions centered on safe sex with
others, including the use of protection and schedules for STI testing. Some also established
boundaries around sex in terms of specific sexual acts or partners, such as reserving a ‘dom/sub’
(dominant & submissive) kink dynamic or ‘fluid bonding’ (barrier-free sex) for primary partners.
These boundaries were most often explicitly negotiated; however, they could be an individual
choice, such as for William (gay, man, white, mid-30s) who set a boundary around ‘bottoming’
(being penetrated): “I only bottom for my husband. And that's not a rule, like he imposed
ownership or something like that. That's something that I chose early on that was important to
me.” This “self-imposed boundary” was not established via relationship negotiations like the
great majority of relationship agreements, but rather was a product of William’s desire to reserve
something special for his spouse.
The queer polys I spoke with described agreements that could be classified as either abstract values or specific practical concerns; however, these categorizations are heavily intertwined and often impossible to disentangle. For example, disclosure of feelings for another person centers on the guideline of honest communication and expectations around safe sex were often framed as respect or consideration for their partners rather than as established rules. Participants who had experience negotiating relationship boundaries often framed them as malleable, in the sense that established boundaries were continually open for renegotiation, ultimately became less rigid or important to the relationship, or were abandoned altogether.

**Fluidity and Flexibility**

My participants’ narratives on relationship negotiations revealed the centrality of fluid or flexible agreements, even if they had negotiated and established specific boundaries. This theme became evident through direct remarks regarding the lack or rejection of rules and boundaries as well as the use of specific terminologies in describing their relationship negotiations. Lance’s discussion of relationship negotiations was characteristic of many participants’ narratives: that very few rules or boundaries were negotiated, with the exception of safe sex. Lance was a white queer trans man in his mid-20s who had experienced a break-up with one of his partners, Julia, in the days preceding our interview. Lance’s response about negotiating boundaries centered on the overarching guideline of honest communication, noting that a few disclosure agreements were “pretty much it”:

“Um rules and boundaries. Um … talking as much as you can before if something's about to happen and talking as much as you can after it. Um, so for example, when I visited Kyrsten, we talked a lot about what we expected the weekend to look like for each other, so that we didn't have any false expectations as it was happening. Um, and therefore we were both able to go through the weekend and feel supported while still like having our weekend. Um, and then the point was also to like reconvene and talk after and make sure everything is still
okay. (Course it wasn’t, but that wasn’t the point of that talk.) Um, and so like same thing when I met [Julia’s] husband for the first time: we talked extensively about what it might look like when I meet him and how I didn't know what my reaction was gonna be at all until that happens, and then how I would like to talk a lot afterwards to make sure everything's okay. Um, that's pretty much it. Oh! Rules in terms of sex. Having safe sex talks before and then also like reporting back to each other that we had had those talks and that everything was okay, so. But, or like then mentioning if there was someone I wanted to sleep with or make out with or go on a date with, um just like letting – bringing that to her attention.”

Many participants’ discussions of relationship agreements were framed in a similar manner: an example or two of negotiating a practical issue that often centered on the values of communication and/or respect, a declaration that sexual safety is an established boundary or expectation, and a brief statement expressing that there are no other agreements.

Other participants described their agreements as fundamentally open and flexible, often with phrasing such as “I tried to make it as open as possible.” Yet again, as Nash’s (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) discussion reveals, many queer polys rooted the potential for flexibility and openness in honest communication:

“So in terms of my wife, like any – she has a pretty good cart blanche to do whatever she wants in terms of developing, you know, a lot of room there for um going on dates, developing friendships, developing people that turn out to be more than friends, um having literally like one-time sexual experiences or ongoing sexual experiences, or people she dates that she wants to invite back to hang out with all three of us or whatever. Um, but the common denominator in that literally is communication. And I know that that's like probably cliché but if she doesn't communicate to me her interests, her plans, um that's the sticking point for me.”

Similarly, Spencer, (bi, man, white, late-20s), had partnerships with no established boundaries but centered on the guidelines of mutual respect and honest communication: “We don’t do rules. I think … yeah, we don’t do rules in general. Our rules are basically don’t be an asshole, be honest, have faith in the other person’s good intentions.” Here, Spencer borrowed the term ‘rules’ to describe (a lack of) boundaries related to the household but later described his
relationship agreements as ‘expectations,’ explaining that “we don’t have rules that we impose on other people.” Several participants expressed similar discomforts with the rigid and demanding term ‘rules,’ and applied various terminologies related to relationship negotiations that were more flexible such as ‘roles,’ ‘values,’ and ‘courtesies.’

In addition, some participants directly expressed or hinted at an aversion to established rules or boundaries. This was either a product of a natural inclination towards open and fluid forms of polyamory or due to past experiences with ‘rules-poly.’ For Delilah (pan, woman, white, mid-30s), the aversion appeared to be a product of both. She explained that her brain does not process rules the way it might for other people and that she does not like the “rules-poly” form of polyamory but is more inclined towards relationship anarchy. In addition, she had a former partner who “needed more of a rule-type system” and established rules under the impression that they would serve to keep himself and the relationship safe without realizing that he “set rules so that he could break them.” Her narrative around this experience clearly exhibited that negotiations within this partnership were challenging and emotionally exhausting, which likely contributed to her distaste for rules-based polyamory. Her discomfort with ‘rules’ reemerged later in our conversation when she described boundaries within her current relationships:

“Well, I don’t think I do [have rules]. I mean, I do have a rule. I, I guess – there is one rule that’s been like with … and, but with Ava and Linnia, I don’t do rules. I don’t do rules with Ava or with Linnia. […] And so, I have like told Josh that I will talk to him before pursuing any additional or new relationships or if a relationship is going to change. I will talk to him and let him know about that and I will appreciate that if he did the same and he said, ‘Oh, absolutely.’ And so, I mean, I guess that fits a rule that – I mean, I had someone that I’ve had been, we’ll call it ‘talking to’ for a couple of years, had proposed that we meet up to maybe have sex, like a date, and potential sex thing and he’s cismale. And I mentioned it to Josh beforehand. We didn’t end up doing that but I wanted to let him know that I would be doing this. It’s not like I could or couldn’t, that – not
for permission, but more like, ‘This is what we were talking about. This is what our potential plans are. How does that make you feel and what would that change in our relatively new relationship if we get together for this?’ And he was like, ‘Oh, thanks for telling me that.’ He was like, ‘I can’t anticipate how to feel, so I guess I’m hesitant but I don’t want to disallow it. So, let’s see and then we’ll continue to reevaluate.’ So that actually is really important. That’s really important to me, and so rather than maybe calling it a ‘rule’ I’d say that’s a ‘must.’ That’s what I need to feel safe and secure. Like I – if Ava were gonna … um… pick up and be involved with someone new in a significant way, we haven't dis – I haven’t said that that’s necessary but I think she would and I hope that she would discuss it with me so that I know as well. Not that I would prohibit her from doing that or have her request permission or anything, but that so I know and so that we can continue to reevaluate who we are and how we are to each other.”

Delilah was hesitant to call her pre-disclosure agreement with Josh a ‘rule,’ despite that it was an established relationship boundary. Ultimately, she decided that ‘must’ is a more suitable descriptor, such that she has no ‘rules’ with her partners but that they maintain an understanding that they must communicate their plans and intentions. In saying that it this is what she needs “to feel safe and secure,” Delilah’s narrative on relationship negotiations highlights the significance of the honest communication values-based agreement even among participants who practice open and flexible forms of polyamory.

Finally, many participants highlighted the importance of allowing relationship boundaries and agreements to evolve or shift over time. Several participants recalled establishing many rules for a new relationship or when they first began practicing polyamory, with one participant attributing this phenomenon to paranoia: “We were all new and everybody was paranoid.” These rules eventually “eased up,” became “less important,” or were abandoned as the relationship progressed: “We would just chuck them out as we go, you know?” Similar to shifts that invited more openness and fluidity within existing partnerships, a few participants discussed how their personal mentality or skillset towards relationship negotiations developed over time. Pauline, a white pansexual woman in her early-20s, had set very few boundaries in her “pretty open”
partnerships but recalled that she gradually “figured out how to articulate what I actually meant” when negotiating disclosure agreements. Likewise, Frances (queer, woman/other, white, 40+) explained how her personal boundaries evolved over time, from trying to enforce veto power to having “flexibility”:

“I definitely went through a stage where I was trying to micromanage who Nash hooked up with. I was like, ‘That person’s annoying. That person’s manipulative. That person’s mean. That person’s blah.’ You know? And now I just really don’t care. But, I don’t know, I guess it’s something that I had to go through. And I think a lot of why we, like, came out the other side with way more flexibility and supportiveness is because we just talked and talked. You know? And we check in all the time. It’s like um … you know, ‘Hey, so I met this person.’ ‘Great.’ Then like three weeks later, ‘Hey, so I met this person, remember, their name is blah-blah-blah and I’m still talking to them and is it okay if I date them?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘So, remember that person I went on a date with? Let me tell you all about it.’”

Frances’s description of this experience as something she “had to go through” was not common among the queer polys I spoke with; however, the final result of situations such as these were nearly always framed in terms of learning experiences that led to personal growth.

Likewise, some participants spoke of renegotiation processes, where partners would revisit existing agreements to ensure everyone involved remained satisfied, to address new concerns, or to set new boundaries. Some of these new agreements were established after partners encountered a situation that had not been previously negotiated or where boundaries were exposed as unclear. For example, Nikko (pan/queer, trans-other, POC, mid-30s) experienced a form of “trial and error” negotiation early on that eventually transitioned into a process of renegotiation:

Emily:  With your current partner, have you had any negative experiences negotiating boundaries or anything or any negative experiences around the values that you’ve talked about?

Nikko:  I think because we – it was trial and error at first and I think because it was the errors or the trials before the negotiation. I think it’s been – no, I think
originally like the first time we like were practicing polyamory, we didn’t really have the talk first. We kind of just was like, ‘Yeah, we are. All right.’ And then that’s – after that an intimate, not really intimate, but after that we kind of were like, ‘All right, we realize now that we both didn’t emotionally feel good about what happened last night, so like now let’s talk about boundaries and what we want to go over.’ And since then we’ve modified those values but at least we came to the conversation ready to both modify, versus like I was saying before is me trying to negotiate and the other person not respond. And, you know, I think the only thing that has really changed is some of the things that we negotiated has been brought back up for renegotiation. That’s what we’re going through now, is like the renegotiating process. So, yea.

Emily: So, what types of things are you renegotiating?

Nikko: So before it was just, you know, open honesty. Who cares if it’s like a one-night-stand kind of thing, not really worrying about it. Whereas now, we’re renegotiating like, you know, ‘How do we talk about this before it happens?’ So now we’ve negotiated that there shouldn’t – like we don’t want to practice like one-night-stands necessarily. If you want to like get involved in a sexual relationship, we’d like talk it over first. And I think that’s one of the renegotiations that happened. And it wasn’t because anything horrible happened and a person was upset. It was more just like, ‘All right, I’m changing the terms of our – or I want to change the terms of our relationship. This is what I want.’ And then I was like, ‘I don’t know if I agree with that,’ and so now like we decided to revisit it, you know, because I think it’s not always about sitting down and talking and like making demands. But sometimes it’s like, ‘All right, we’ll revisit this and talk about it.’ So that’s like one of those things we renegotiated.

Nikko’s discussion of relationship negotiations reveal how ‘trial and error’ negotiation processes necessitate emotion work and how the commitment to revisit and follow agreements are ongoing processes. Abiding by relationship agreements was often described as a form of ‘respect,’ as Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) stated: “I guess it is communication combined with like respecting boundaries. So, you have to communicate the boundaries and then you have to respect the boundaries.” My participants described an array of situations where partners failed to
respect their agreements, which further highlights the extent to which emotion work is involved in negotiation and renegotiation processes.

**Emotion Work**

Despite that the queer polys I spoke with typically characterized their relationship boundaries and agreements as fluid and flexible, their narratives underscored the pervasiveness of emotion work in negotiation processes. Although many of the limited studies on polyamory touch upon the emotional energy required for polyamory, only one of which I am aware specifically examined emotion work in queer poly relationships. Deri’s (2015) research on jealousy and compersion in queer women’s poly relationships suggests that many queer poly women experience and celebrate compersion, yet can still encounter mononormative constraints and must work through jealous emotions. Employing the term *polyagony* to refer to the ‘excruciating’ process of managing jealousy, Deri found that some queer poly women “would reflect upon their desires, negotiate with the best intentions, and still encounter polyagonous results” (2015:137). Nevertheless, many of these women constructed creative techniques to manage, resist, and reimagine unfavorable emotions. Similarly, my participants described an array of experiences related to emotional labor, including how they manage feelings such as jealousy and insecurity individually and with their partners. Their narratives reveal that queer polys often reconfigure these experiences as constructive rather than adverse, citing personal and relational benefits of emotion management processes.

Internal processing of feelings was one of the most common themes related to emotion work that arose in my participant’s narratives on relationship negotiations. This process typically involved taking time to analyze and question one’s own adverse feelings about a particular situation that occurred or a hypothetical situation that might occur in the future. Nash (queer,
trans-other, white, mid-30s) detailed their process of recognizing when an issue arises, stepping aside to analyze the underlying cause of the adverse emotion, and communicating with their spouse to renegotiate a boundary or come to a new agreement:

“"I'm more interested in over, over-sharing, over-communication, and then if something bothers me, I feel it instantly. I don't think it, I feel like … like literally I feel a gut twinge. I'm like, ‘Oh, hey that's there…’ And then I kinda say, ‘Okay, stop.’ Like if she's telling me about an experience that she's had, I don't make her feel bad for sharing it because I want to know and I've made it clear that I much prefer to know, but I'll say, ‘I need you to hold that for a second’ and I'll say, ‘I need like five minutes or ten minutes to kinda think about – something's bothering me about this, I don't know what it is, I need a minute.’ Um and I'll say, ‘Okay, I figured it out. It’s not that you're doing this with that person, but that I didn't know that was an option on the table, so I didn't feel like we communicated about that enough.’ So I really try to not make her feel bad, like put any guilt trip or like, ‘You should've known’ or anything like that. Just, ‘I'm noticing that I feel something about that. I feel some sort of jealousy.’ I don't feel jealousy often but when I do I'm like, ‘Oh that's jealousy. Hey, I remember you.’ And I'll say, ‘Oh, it's not that you went out to dinner, it's that you went to this restaurant, which I've only ever been to with you and I kind of thought was our special place and I didn't realize that it didn't mean that to you.’ So then like, ‘Does it mean that to you or does it not mean that to you, can we clarify that? So now we can bring people here, or should we reserve it for our special spot, or can we make a new special spot?’ or ‘How can we resolve this?’ Instead of like, ‘You fucked it up!’ and, ‘It's all over!’ Um, so for me it's really, I literally get a twinge and I know something feels off. I don't know why, I kind of just stop, and she's become very accustomed to stopping and being like, ‘Okay, I'm stopping, I'll let you figure it out.’ She knows I'll come back to it. She knows 99% of the time she did absolutely nothing wrong. Um, it's just something came up that I had not anticipated. Um it works really well for us. So that's kinda how we navigate that.”
woman, POC, late-20s) encountered a situation in which a partner’s partner proposed a “temporary fluid bonding holiday” that allowed barrier-free sex among the four individuals involved in the agreement. Rather than processing her emotions individually, Dee talked through her feelings of anxiety with her partner:

Dee: So, she proposed this and, like, we had a whole lot of conversations because it was bringing up a bunch of anxiety for me and curiosity but mostly anxiety about what it means.

Emily: The conversations were between the two of you, or with everyone?

Dee: Just me and Dominic. She brought it to Dominic, Dominic brought it to me. I expressed anxiety. He was like, ‘Well, why don’t you and I talk and figure out what we want, and then I’ll go back to her.’ So we kind of, we had, gosh like three two-hour conversations where I was like figuring out all the things I was anxious about, including things like, ‘Am I keeping you from having sex by having the fluid –’ You know? I was like, ‘I don’t want to keep you from having sex. If this is keeping you from having a lot of sex, I don’t want that.’ You know?

As this scenario reveals, sometimes the process of navigating emotions involved one partner or metamour acting as an intermediary. In Dee’s case, Dominic’s role involved having alternating conversations with one partner then the other in order to negotiate a new agreement in a way where everyone was comfortable and satisfied. Similarly, Karl (lesbian, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s) and Carrie (lesbian, trans woman, white, mid-20s) recalled in their joint interview the difficulties they encountered with a former partner:

Emily: Have you had any negative experiences negotiating or talking about what levels of disclosure you need? Or, anytime there was tension or that you couldn't necessarily come to an agreement?

Karl: I definitely had that with Brian.

Emily: Okay –

Karl: Yeah. In our relationship I never have, but with Brian it was a back and forth argument all the time about how Brian was feeling jealous, how I was feeling jealous, how who could see who and I never like wanted – I never limited Brian. But it was always about how much I was trying to fight against Brian limiting me essentially. Then also I have a bad habit of like
being vengeful so when he was like, ‘You can’t see anybody,’ I was like, ‘Who can’t see anybody?’ Like back and forth about that sort of thing. With Brian definitely.

Emily: I’m curious, how does Carrie tie into that? So, did you ever get involved in those negotiations or arguments? What impacted that?

Carrie: Those – I remember I got on the phone with Brian and talked with him, you know, just going on a walk in the rain for probably over an hour –

Karl: That’s when you had your waterproof phone.

Carrie: Yeah, there were times that I – especially if they were like – had hurt each other in some way and needed time, not like interacting over it. Sometimes I would talk to one or the other and try and help them work it out how I could. But yeah, I mean I generally try to see everything as positive light as possible but Brian was a self-centered possessed person, and it made things very difficult.

This situation exposes how emotion work can produce emotion work. Karl and Brian’s struggles to process their emotions and successfully negotiate relationship boundaries resulted in Carrie wielding emotional energy in her position as a mediator.

Another primary theme centered on the emotion work that accompanies being new to polyamory, particularly in learning how to navigate and voice emotions and needs. Brooke’s (queer/lesbian, trans woman, white, 40+) comment aligns with the concept of compulsory monogamy (discussed in Chapter 3): “I think that kind of happens especially when somebody's just entering into this sort of thing coming from what our society teaches us, relationships should be where everybody should just be tied to one person or whatever, so they end up feeling – having all these emotions and guilts.” Likewise, Mathis (gay, man, white, mid-30s) touched upon a subcultural issue within the gay male community that had caused adverse experiences within his relationships:

“I think most gay people just assume poly and open are the same thing. So that’s very frustrating. So yes. We’ve tried dating people, especially when it was separate, it’s difficult trying to explain to them what our conception of the relationship would be. That things would be open to an extent but we’re trying to
also respect each other’s wishes, desires, and nothing is cloak and dagger, nothing is secretive. There was a lot of that. A lot of hurt feelings. A lot of miscommunication going on in the early months of this. There was a lot of upset, hurt people.”

Nonmonogamy developed within the gay male community in a way that subscribes to compulsory emotional-monogamy, in which open relationships are normative – those involving ‘sex on the side’ or ‘don’t ask don’t tell policies’ – but polyamorous relationships remain marginalized. This phenomenon created a recurring situation for Mathis and his partner that deepened the emotion work typically involved with new partnerships. Nevertheless, many of the participants who described the emotion work that goes into new polyamorous partnerships also noted that these were learning experiences and that they had developed emotion management and negotiation skills either individually or with their partners.

Several of the queer polys I spoke with described unique experiences relating to emotion work. For example, a few participants acknowledged situations in which they devoted too much energy towards ‘checking in’ or giving ‘reassurance.’ In addition, several participants expressed difficulties that accompany being a secondary partner, such as Maggie (queer/gay, woman, white, mid-20s) who explained of her triad: “Sometimes that was hard for me, to sort of always be in second place. […] There were definitely conversations where I was really upset because I didn't feel wanted, because they were putting their relationship first and I was like, ‘Well, what about me?’ you know, ‘This isn't fair.’” The way my participants spoke of experiences like these – feeling “disposable,” “unimportant,” “ganged up on,” and “treated as an object” – suggests that coming into an existing partnership as the third partner is particularly emotionally exhausting, or as one participant framed it: “really friggin’ sucksy.”

Moreover, several participants’ narratives highlighted the ways mental health issues interact with emotion work in poly relationships. In some cases, participants discussed backing
away from negotiations due to their own mental health concerns such as anxiety disorders. Ava, a white bisexual genderqueer woman in her mid-30s, describes in the following conversation:

Emily: Have you ever had any negative experiences negotiating boundaries or rules?
Ava: Yes. Probably too many rules.
Emily: Was it more like arguments or tension or you couldn’t come to an agreement?
Ava: It was all of the above. Panic attacks, stepping away. It was all based on either miscommunication or no communication, basically. The one instance, I was having a panic attack and I basically said, ‘Do whatever you want,’ which obviously didn’t mean ‘do whatever you want’ but he took it literally and did the thing that he shouldn’t have done, and that turned into a whole thing. At the time, I probably did exactly what I thought I had to do, which was just leave the situation and go have a panic attack and get over it. Because yeah, he wasn’t going to hear me anyway. So. […] I don’t have any medication anymore so I don’t have like a backup plan. Escape and calm and go through all the words. Yeah. Like, ‘This may be just perception, this may not be reality.’ You know, ask all the questions. Make sure, you know, have the talk through really hard. Yeah.

The emotion work that went into Ava’s negotiations with the partner she referenced above was exacerbated by that partner’s own mental health issues. A few other participants had experiences negotiating with partners who had serious mental health concerns, which was a source of friction and at times led to relationship dissolution. For example, Evie (queer, woman, POC, mid-20s) acknowledged that she was “just not equipped to be an entire support team” for a former partner with mental health issues who Evie suspected had been falsely identifying at polyamorous in order to manipulate the relationship. In addition, a few participants mentioned having to ‘pick your battles’ due to a partner’s emotional instability, suggesting that these participants must make decisions about whether to engage in particular negotiations with partners who have mental health concerns, which is itself a form of emotion work.
Finally, many participants cited benefits or positive outcomes of investing in emotional labor around poly relationship negotiations. As mentioned above, many queer polys framed difficult negotiating experiences as learning experiences that heightened their emotional maturity. In addition, some referenced situations in which difficult negotiations enhanced the partnership. Lynette, a white queer woman in her mid-20s, concluded a response about difficult negotiation experiences with, “The ultimate result was we talked about it and came out feeling better if not completely 100%.” Further, a few participants’ narratives suggested a beneficial interaction between polyamory and mental health, describing polyamory as a facilitator of deep introspection. For example, Phil (bi/pan, man, white, 40+) distinctly stated that polyamory “forced” him to address his mental health issues:

“I've had my own personal hardships that don't involve other people, but just my own. Just, in dealing with poly. You know? In the process of poly, it's forced me to deal with some really hard ... hard things. Uh, mental health issues that um, that – that I guess I had convinced [myself] were healthy in some ways. Or, that were easy enough to ignore until you couldn't ignore them. You know? Like, some situations just really bring that out and kind of force you ta, to do better. And so, I've definitely had some real hardships with that, in being forced to, you know, to look at myself and just be like, ‘This is unhealthy.’ You know, where I couldn't before. And so, yea. I definitely feel that I'm a much, much healthier person now than I was fifteen years ago. And I could definitely point to a lot of periods in my poly relationships that have forced me to ... to put them in a forefront, make these issues higher. You know? And so, there's been some hard times with that, but.”

They also cited benefits for their partnerships. Hannah, a white queer/gay NB/GQ woman in her mid-20s, claimed, “I definitely think that my journey into polyamory has been a journey into making my relationship healthier.” Thus, despite that this introspective process requires a great deal of emotional labor, the ultimate result can be tremendously beneficial for queer poly people and their partners.
Conclusion

My participants emphasized an overwhelming preference for flexible and fluid forms of polyamory, although most had experience negotiating boundaries and agreements at some point in their poly relationships. These agreements primarily centered on two overarching values: honest communication and respect. Some of the queer polys I spoke with had established agreements such as rules around sex, specific expectations around disclosure, and boundaries around relationship structure and scheduling. Others were averse to ‘rules-poly,’ describing agreements that involved only overarching values rather than established boundaries or rules. In fact, some participants viewed the lack of rules or boundaries in their partnerships as a benefit of polyamory. For example, the following excerpt is part of Dee’s (queer, woman, POC, late-20s) response to the question, “What have you enjoyed so far about being in poly partnerships?”:

“There’s no expectation. We don’t have a rule. It’s just kind of what has been comfortable and worked out. That’s been really great. For me, that’s what I’ve really enjoyed. [...] I just feel like it’s a very different approach. I feel like that’s been a really nice thing that I enjoy about being poly and about being in relationships where, yeah, we don’t have a rule. We basically just say, you know, ‘If you end up hooking up with someone, let me know.’ But it’s not like you have to get permission in advance. We don’t have any set rules like that. Everything … I mean, I don’t even like ‘rules.’ I feel like we have agreements. Agreements are – they can change if we decide that they’re not working for us anymore. But we don’t have rules that, like, you break it and then the relationship’s over. You know, whatever.”

My participants also discussed benefits that result from the emotional labor required by poly relationship negotiations. The underlying theme of emotion work was present in the great majority of conversations I had with them about relationship negotiations. One participant recited a phrase he learned from a former partner that succinctly and comically summarizes the extent to which emotion work is involved in polyamorous relationships: “It’s 90% talking, 5% crying, and 5% fucking.” Although rudimentary and surely inaccurate, this phrase underscores
how polyamory mandates a great deal of emotional labor for relationship negotiations and emotion management. These processes are compounded by systems of power such as *monocentrism* and *heterosexism* and further complicated for those with other marginalized identities who must navigate relationships as queer polys of color, from working-class/poor backgrounds, or who are gender minorities. The next section will describe the unique challenges that marginalized queer polys face in their relationships.

**Navigating Poly Relationships**

*Yeah, being like a queer woman, the predatory nature of some of the cis hetero couples out there…*  
–Dee (queer, woman, POC, late-20s)

Queer polyamorists must negotiate their relationships expectations and agreements within a larger context of multiple systems of power. At the least, participants in this study face *heterosexism* or *cissexism* for being queer and *monocentrism* for practicing polyamory. Moreover, these systems intersect with others for marginalized queer polyamorists such as *racism* for QPOC and *classism* for those of working-class/poor backgrounds. An intersectional perspective considers the intersecting systems of power and oppression that serve to marginalize social groups on the basis of race, class, gender, and other areas of social location (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectional theorists argue that systems of power are interlocking and impossible to disentangle (Erel et al. 2011). Thus, examining how interconnected systems of power produce unique experiences and meanings for queer polyamorists is vital to form a deeper sociological understanding of queer poly relationships. This section describes various dating and relationship challenges from an intersectional perspective, paying special attention to the ways systems of power can impact queer poly relationship negotiations.
**Relationship Negotiating Influence**

As discussed in Chapter Three, power dynamics are important to consider in research on relationships as “Complex power relations structure *all* intimate and/or sexual relationships” (Klesse 2007:115). It is particularly vital to understand how systems of power materialize within polyamorous relationships due to the degree of negotiation involved in these partnerships. The queer polys I spoke with discussed the ways that social class, race, gender, and other areas of social location created tensions within their relationships or placed one partner at an advantage in negotiations. They were more likely, however, to frame their partners’ (or their own) societal privileges as producing the ability to influence negotiations rather than the power to define relationship parameters. Thus, I distinguish between relationship ‘defining power’ and ‘negotiating influence.’

Peplau, Veniegas, and Miller-Campbell’s (1996) notion of ‘relationship defining power’ is useful for examining the ways that cultural-level inequalities permeate intimate relationships. For instance, more formal education or higher income translates into having the ‘power’ to settle an argument in one’s favor. Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan used this concept in their work on same-gender intimacies. They found that while their participants strongly valued relationship egalitarianism, nearly all had “identified factors that had the potential to cause inequality” in their partnerships (2001:114). Klesse applied this concept to gay male and bisexual nonmonogamous relationship negotiations, finding that ‘differential positioning’ among partners by way of class, gender, age, and other characteristics “ultimately impacts [one’s] ability to successfully negotiate non-monogamy in a relationship” (2007:125).

As Klesse found, however, some polyamorists view ‘power’ as an inappropriate term to describe relationship negotiating dynamics. My participants in fact did not frame this issue in
terms of ‘power’ dynamics, with few exceptions. Moreover, they did not describe any partners as having the power to ‘define’ relationship parameters. Thus, I argue that ‘negotiating influence’ is better suited to describe my participants’ experiences and interactions than ‘defining power.’ I adapted the concept of ‘relationship defining power’ to relationship negotiating influence to describe the socially-ascribed ability to sway relationship negotiation and management as a result of having privileged social locations. The queer polys I spoke with understood that differential positioning can provide one (or more) partner(s) with the ability to influence negotiation outcomes but typically did not employ a language of ‘power’ to describe this dynamic. In addition, with its emphasis on the process of negotiation, relationship negotiating influence implies more of an interactional element or interpersonal process than the former concept.

Some participants felt that social class discrepancies produced unfair disadvantages in communication and ability to negotiate relationship boundaries. These thoughts align with Lareau’s (2003) findings on how the middle-class parenting approach of ‘concerted cultivation’ teaches children stronger negotiation skills than the working-class/poor parenting approach ‘accomplishment of natural growth.’ Sara was a white pansexual trans woman in her late-20s who was cohabiting with a partner, Jules. Sara had ex-partners and current partners who were raised middle-class, in contrast to her and another partner who were ‘lower class.’ Sara felt that her partners’ class backgrounds directly impacted their ability to influence the relationship. She framed class issues in terms of financial resources, housing, and negotiating abilities:

Emily: Do you notice differences when you’re negotiating things with middle-class partners?
Sara: Yes! There’s a big difference. There’s definitely a big difference because they have kind of this expectation of having more resources. Kind of like … there’s more insecurity on my part because I … Like, I feel like a lot of things are going to kind of tear away from me and I’m going to lose stability or I feel like everything is temporary and I find that people of a higher class
kind of stand their ground or have a lot more knowledge about what the relationship is about, or at least they know what it is for them.

Emily: When you say, ‘stand their ground,’ you mean like … negotiating until they get more of what they want?

Sara: They know – they establish the terms of the relationship a lot more. You know … Now, in the relationship I’m in now, I feel like I have a bit more power because Jules is living with me. For sure, I feel like I have a lot more power because Jules is living with me, even though I want to think that Jules’s other partner is the same level. But realistically, it’s not. Idealistically, I want it to be. You follow?

Emily: Yeah.

Sara: It’s kind of … [Heavy sigh] I know what you’re looking for. I studied sociology when I was an undergrad. It’s real. It’s there.

Like Sara, a few other queer polys directly attributed relationship negotiating influence to their partners’ social class statuses. Theo (queer, trans man, POC, early-20s) had a partner who came from an affluent family, was a successful businessman at the time they were together, and “was a crazy, crazy negotiator” in terms of relationship agreements. Participants of working-class/poor backgrounds identified how middle-class partners have stronger negotiation skills but typically did not understand this difference in terms of ‘power’ dynamics nor as an avenue for partners to intentionally influence the relationship.

Other queer polys felt that social class positioning did not necessarily impact their relationship negotiations but did have other implications such as providing the financial means to go out on dates. Spencer (bi, man, white, late-20s) felt that his ex-partner’s privileged class background resulted in a “difference in opportunities” that had “caused some friction” but were “not necessarily negotiating differences.” These participants were more likely to describe this issue in terms of a source of ‘stress,’ ‘frustration,’ or ‘discomfort’ than as a ‘power imbalance.’ However, one participant employed this exact language to describe a situation in which she experienced stress due to housing- and economic-related issues, despite that her partner did not
intentionally use her economic advantage to gain *relationship negotiating influence*. Hayden was a white lesbian/ace-spectrum non-binary woman in her mid-20s who was living at her partner Shae’s place at the time of our interview. At first, Hayden felt that there was not a ‘significant’ power dynamic between them but that the housing situation did cause a ‘little bit of power imbalance’ that was a ‘large source of stress.’ Over the course of this part of our conversation, however, she came to realize that the economic differential was a ‘pretty huge power imbalance,’ at least in some ways:

Hayden: I don’t feel like there’s really a significant power imbalance. In my relationship with Shae right now there’s a little bit of power imbalance because I’m sort of staying at her place on her kindness.

Emily: And you see that as her having a little bit more…

Hayden: Yeah, and that’s been a large source of my stress, but that hasn’t been something that she’s used. But that is an imbalance of power. Like, I don’t have housing. […] She’s more financially secure than I am right now. I don’t have a job. I don’t have a place that I’m leasing or anything. […] So like, that's a power imbalance. That’s a pretty huge power imbalance in a lot of ways. […]

Emily: So, when you’re having conversations, there’s never been any tension? It’s just, you know, that that’s the situation.

Hayden: It’s only been something that’s like a weight on me because I’m neurotic rather than because she’s said anything.

This dialogue is representative of how queer polys often understood their own or their partners’ privileged social locations as inherently linked to a *capacity* to influence relationships rather than to the intentional use of privileged social positioning as a tool of control, even when they employed a language of ‘power.’

Nevertheless, it is likely that some of my participants’ partners did intentionally use their social positioning to control the relationship. Karl and Carrie’s narratives about their ex, Brian, alluded to a strong possibility that he used social class to either manipulate or control their partnership. In the following exchange, these participants (the mid-20s white lesbian non-
binary/trans couple) discussed how Brian traded his financial resources for an expectation that the two “accommodate him” and Karl recognized that Carrie’s ability to push back in these situations was a product of her middle-class background:

Emily: Okay, can you think of like a specific time that he did something like that? … If you can’t, that’s fine.
Karl: He had just bought me computer charger for my computer and first thing, he said when we broke up and after all that I did for you. He’s like I just bought you that computer charger and like you’re going to send me a check for that. I’m like …
Emily: Wow, yea.
Karl: I mean that was like the very end. There were many other times where things – he bought a plane ticket for me to see Augusta, I definitely owed him for that when I got there, through various acts. I felt indebted – and like the thing is some people can recognize that but I – because of my upbringing, I do feel indebted to people. Because nothing is free, because money cost things, and things cost things. And I don't know, what were you going to say?
Carrie: I was going to say something that I know was pretty common is if he would make the trip here rather than us make the trip to him, the gas, taking the time going through the effort of coming here, he would expect us to accommodate him more because he did that.
Karl: Even if we didn’t want him too.
Carrie: Yeah, even if we’re like, ‘Hey, if you need to wait this long to see us, that’s fine, you know, whatever!’ Even if he was the one who was like, ‘No I really need to come down.’ But then there was still the expectation…
Karl: We still owed him.
Carrie: Yeah, exactly.
Emily: Okay.
Carrie: And you mentioned like tickets and stuff too.
Karl: But you were like, ‘No, I don't owe you’ and I'm like, ‘But he spent money and time and those things cost money and resources and they’re not free and they’re not cheap.’ So, it would be used against me a lot and I'm more susceptible to it.
Carrie: And that’s something I wouldn't put up with.
Karl: You’re also middle-class, it’s important to know.
Karl also attributed relationship tensions with Brian to his being a cisman. They felt that the cultural gender hierarchy is impossible to escape in interpersonal relations and that this power dynamic is inherently present in nearly all woman-man relationships: “I think under patriarchy in a relationship that a woman-identifying person has a male-identifying person or man is going to have a power dynamic where the man is going to be on top. It’s not impossible, but it’s difficult for that kind of relationship to be equal.”

Many women-identified participants expressed frustration with cismale partners due to the overwhelming privilege these men have and their consequent attitudes of entitlement. Some of the frustrations queer poly women cited were directly related to cismen performing hegemonic masculinity. When Maggie (queer/gay, woman, white, mid-20s) dated a male/female couple, the male partner was “very feminist” in private but played up hegemonic masculinity in public. She framed this public/private dichotomy as “funny” despite admitting that she and their female partner “absolutely hated” his public performances:

Maggie: [Giggle] It's really funny because he's um, he's sort of two different people in, in like if you know him as a person you can see that he's very feminist, but he has this desire to be very masculine. Um, and he's not a very masculine person. And so, sometimes he would make those like shitty misogynist jokes and we'd groan and be like, ‘That's unacceptable.’ And it was clear that he was just trying to put on this masculine front that both of us absolutely hated. But, in his heart he doesn't actually feel that way, which I realize sounds like I'm making excuses, but um [pause] ...

Emily: So, do you think it was like – when he was with people, it was more of like a masculine presentation?

Maggie: Yea, for sure. When he was in public, he was very like, ‘I have these two girlfriends’ and like, you know, ‘Isn't that great that I'm dating two chicks?’ sort of thing. And like, but with the two of us, if we went out to dinner or hanging out watching movies or whatever, those aren't things that he would say or do.
This is an instance in which the male partner might not intentionally be using his privilege to gain influence over the female partners but still has far-reaching implications. Bragging about having multiple girlfriends and making ‘shitty misogynistic jokes’ sexualizes these women, degrades women in general, and reinforces a gendered power structure that prioritizes hegemonic masculinity. Other queer women also described male partners as ‘feminist’ but nevertheless as having ‘power’ or ‘advantage,’ such as one participant who said, “Well, he was kind of a good liberal feminist boy, and so he tried really hard, but there were definitely times where he absolutely had some sort of social power advantage over me.”

In contrast, several queer women described instances where men appeared to intentionally manipulate a situation or alter relationship boundaries. Carole (queer/gay, woman, white, late-20s), who was dating a married woman at the time of our interview, described an “uncomfortable” situation when her metamour approached her to suggest she should give the couple more space. He “caught” her off guard one day when his wife was not present and started “an extensive conversation” about how he and his wife needed “time together as a family unit.” I asked Carole if she thought he was acting on his own accord or if the couple had had a prior agreement that he would talk to her about this issue. She recalled that he mentioned, “I don't exactly want her to hear me saying all this to you,” indicating to Carole that his wife was entirely unaware that he intended to have this conversation.

Several queer women who had poly relationships involving cismen described how men’s relationship negotiating influence materializes when he sets the “one-penis policy,” referring to a relationship boundary that prohibits women from dating other men but allows either to date women. The logic behind this agreement is that “girls don’t count,” or as one participant’s husband stated, “Whatever, I don’t care, it’s just a girl.” Women participants commonly framed
male negotiating influence in surprisingly blunt terms such as “the penis gets the say.” Moreover, they complained of struggles negotiating because men have “cismale anxiety,” “a lot of aggression,” or “an ulterior motive” and are easily “threatened” by other men, are “more violent” than women, or “aren’t very good peoples” in general.

In addition, several participants reported adverse experiences dating cisgender male/female (‘straight’) couples. Queer women were particularly prone to be targeted as a potential ‘unicorn’ by couples on dating sites. For participants of color, racial stereotypes and fetishes can exacerbate these issues. Dee (queer, woman, POC, late-20s) explained:

“Yeah, being like a queer woman, the predatory nature of some of the cis hetero couples out there, how many times on OKCupid I’ve gotten people that were like, ‘Hey, hey!’ and they’re just looking – that it feels very vulnerable and particularly as a black woman, they are also people who say like, ‘I’ve never been with a black woman.’ Or like their first message to me is like, you know, ‘Are you okay with white men?’ Like, ‘That’s the first thing you say to me? No! I’m not okay with them then, okay?’ […] I think that there are racialized assumptions in that as well [laughs], about black women and sexuality that folks may or may not know that they are putting on to me.”

Charlie, a queer/bi woman in her early 30s, reported that her long-standing “big issue” in dating was being fetishized due to one of her racial identities. Despite experiencing racial fetishization, Charlie was uncomfortable calling herself a ‘person of color’ because she is white passing.

Several queer polys of color or mixed-racial backgrounds related their dating experiences to larger poly community issues on racial marginalization. Charlie was one of many participants who brought up the importance of either having conversations that center race in poly communities or having communities specifically for polys of color. She said, “You can definitely rant about – particularly race I think is definitely a factor in a lot of these sort of alternative lifestyle scenes. But then you have to find people who are willing to talk about it and there just aren’t that many of us out there, you know.”
Other relationship challenges centered on trans issues and the intersection of trans identities and social class status. A point of contention specific to trans queer polys is when one partner has the resources to begin transitioning while the other partners do not. This situation can create feelings of discomfort or jealousy and heightens the need for honest communication and negotiation. One participant described how having conversations about this issue helped him understand his partner’s position: “He can’t really afford to present how he wants to. He can only afford like the very masculine wear and stuff like that, so he’s expressed that to me. So, it makes more sense after talking to him about it and I feel a lot more at ease talking to him in that way knowing he has those feelings.” Trans identity and social class also intersected for Glen, a white bisexual man in his early-20s. He felt gender dysphoria when his partner paid for dates because it felt like they were playing into gender-stereotypical roles. He explained, “I feel a lot of frustrations being poor because I can't take him on dates or anything. I guess him paying for me feels a little dysphoric because you know, supposed to pay for the girl and I don't want to deal with that.”

Glen’s experiences extended beyond frustration about dating. He felt that at least one of his partners, if not both, viewed him somewhat voyeuristically: “I think that's one of the reasons they both find me interesting though is because I'm – at least with my secondary partner, I felt like he thought I was just like … He had never met someone like me, who’s this broke and queer and trans. So, I guess it was more like ... maybe commodity’s the wrong word but like a fascinating new kind of person.” I asked if his partners’ interest in him being poor bothered him. He replied, “I feel a little weird about it, not going to lie. I don't want to be pitied. So, I have a feeling of that from him.” This experience is not representative of other poor or low-income queer polys I spoke with; however, it does mirror encounters that women of color faced with
white couples or white men who played on racialized stereotypes. In expressing fascination with
the ‘other,’ people of privileged groups reinforce their dominance by reducing people of
marginalized identities or backgrounds to harmful stereotypes.

**Addressing Imbalances**

A few queer polys were who concerned with imbalanced dynamics relating to race, class,
and/or gender tried to develop solutions with their partners to equalize these dynamics. Some of
their attempts were unsuccessful while others resulted in an agreement that “makes sense.” Dee
(queer, woman, POC, late-20s) had both experiences. She had dated a man with much stronger
financial resources who “didn’t quite get it” when she expressed frustration about paying for
dates, but was able to come to an agreement with her female partner who earned a far lower
income than Dee. Her narrative touched upon several issues related to class, race, gender, and
their intersections. She first describes her interactions with the class-privileged male partner:

Dee: I think the person that I was dating earlier in the year came from a very
different class background. And communicating around dating was a little
difficult because I couldn’t afford to do things, and I prefer to split stuff but
I couldn’t afford to split the kind of things…

Emily: He was upper-middle-class?

Dee: Ugh.

Emily: More than that?

Dee: He like went to Paris for fun. Just because he could.

Emily: With his own money? Or with like parents’ money?

Dee: I assume parents’ money. Yeah. I assume there’s family money.

Emily: Did he go with his parents?

Dee: No, just on his own. Would use their frequent flyer miles. He was like, ‘It’s
a free trip!’ because he used their frequent flyer miles. I was like, ‘It’s not
free!!’ You know? It was just like a weird thing.

Emily: Yeah, okay. Using resources.

Dee: Yeah, so access to resources, that’s a very good way of phrasing it. So that
was just hard because, you know, he would want to do things sometimes or
go to restaurants. He was a foodie. I just … for me, it was hard. I was like, ‘I haven’t been to a restaurant this nice since I was on the job market when the university is paying for it.’ You know?

Emily: Right.

Dee: So, learning how to communicate like, ‘Yes, I have a job and I am financially stable but I’m not quite that financially stable.’ [Laughs] You know? Or, ‘I can do this for a celebratory thing once or twice a year. This can’t be our weekly date.’ You know?

Emily: Did he take that well? Or, what did he…

Dee: His response was, ‘Well, I’ll just pay for things.’ So, he didn’t quite get it. It became a just like, ‘Oh, you can’t afford this, but don’t worry,’ but I was like, ‘That doesn’t decrease my discomfort,’ because I still don’t like to feel like someone’s – and even though we’re in a totally real relationship, I don’t like to feel like there’s this gender dynamic where the masculine person is paying for everything. You know what I mean? Or ever. I don’t ever want to be in a relationship where one person is paying for everything. I prefer there to be some financial equity.

Dee’s desire to avoid gender-stereotypical roles was echoed in many participants’ interviews, particularly among queer women who date cismen. Dee then continues describe the financial agreement she had with her female partner who “grew up really poor.” Interestingly, she sneaks race into her conception of class-privileged queer women:

“[She] and I have an agreement where, like, she pays for one-fourth and I pay for three-fourths when we get a hotel together or something. […] That’s our agreement because that’s based on what our finances are right now. She’s making $16,000 as a grad student. I’m making three times that. You know? It makes sense for me to pay three times as much money. So, that’s what we had to come to as our arrangement. But, like, she insists on paying something and I think that that’s good because I also don’t want to ever – I don’t want to be in a situation where I’m paying for everything either because I have some money. I don’t ever want to give that feeling of, like, someone’s taking advantage of me, even though I know she isn’t. But, like, I wouldn’t want that feeling to even cross my mind. I think it’s really – financial equity is really important to me, and that doesn’t necessarily mean splitting it straight down the middle but it does mean figuring out financially what everyone can afford. And, you know, [Jess] and I aren’t going to Paris together. We don’t have ‘white lesbian money,’ as we always say. We have so many white lesbian friends who are like, ‘Oh, we went to Israel and
blah blah blah,’ and, ‘We did this and then we went to Japan.’ And we’re like, ‘We went to [the Midwest].’ [Laughs] ‘We’re going to Austin for conference together.’ That’s what we’ve got.”

It is unclear whether Dee’s use of ‘white lesbian money’ indicates that she perceives class and racial privilege as inherently intertwined or if this phrasing simply reflects the social locations of the friends she described.

Some queer polys evaded relationship challenges by avoiding a particular group of people. Several women I spoke with chose not to date ‘white straight men,’ ‘straight poly men’ or cismen in general, such as one participant who reported, “The fewer straight cisdudes I date, the happier I find myself to be.” A few of these women expressed a desire to date cismen but nevertheless refused to. Frances (queer, woman/other, white, 40+) explained, “I made this very conscious decision that I would never have a relationship again with a cisman.” She admitted, “I super miss having sex with cismale bodies” but refuses to date cismen because “I just don’t miss, like, all the shit that goes with it.” Some of these women even flipped the script on sex, such as one participant who said, “Boys are cute and all, but they’re better as like play partners and, you know, people that I see occasionally.” This participant enjoys cismen for sexual relationships but is not interested in having emotional or romantic relationships with them – a reversal of hegemonic masculinity in which men are expected to claim that women are only good for sex.

Some queer poly women also refused to date other women who had cismale partners. Cecilia, a white lesbian aged 40+, reported, “I’ve had my heart broken by more than one woman who, you know, had a male partner/boyfriend and were sort of open and after I got in up to my knees were like, ‘He’s not okay with this.’” Like Cecilia, Shari (queer/bi, woman, POC, mid-20s) “got burned too many times” and stopped dating women with cismale partners for her “own
sanity.” She suspected that partnerships involving cismen struggle with a lack of communication, which she perceived to be less of an issue in relationships with other women.

Queer poly women’s decisions to avoid (white straight) cismen fell into two broad overlapping categories: Lack of communication and power dynamics. Queer women’s perceptions of men lacking the skills or effort necessary to effectively communicate was a theme among those who dated cismen. I frequently heard comments such as, “learning to communicate with [him] was definitely hard” or, “If he just didn’t want me to do something, he would just decide that it was a rule that I couldn’t do that anymore.” In the latter category, queer women explicitly cited ‘power’ and/or ‘privilege’ as a reason for avoiding relationships with cismen. One participant explained, “There’s a lot of, like, inherent privilege and power dynamic stuff going on there that I am not sure if they’ve taken the time to unpack.” This statement suggests that she might be open to dating straight poly men if they recognized and put effort into understanding their privilege and power. Interestingly, several participants I spoke with, including white cismen, did in fact recognize their own privileging and discussed how they actively try to combat it. This is another way that queer polys try to equalize their relationships when differential positioning is present.

Many white participants (particularly white-passing mixed-race participants) acknowledged their racial privilege and expressed a genuine devotion to remaining continually aware of their social location. Some described experiences they had with their partners of color that helped them understand their own relationships within broader racial systems of privilege and oppression. Similarly, several queer polys acknowledged their intersectional societal advantages and how they might impact their partnerships. J.R.’s (bi/queer, NB/GQ, white, mid-
commentary clearly reveals a commitment to combating the ways social inequalities can impact his relationship negotiations:

“I feel that I’m probably a lot more open with these things than most, you know, passing cisgender, passing straight white men are, you know. Like if you’re – if you look like a straight white guy from a middle-class background, like chances are that you don’t understand what privilege is because like you’ve never really had to encounter it. And the fact that, you know, like I’m an ardent feminist and I’m anti-classism and anti-racism and stuff like that. I am invested in trying to break down those social hierarchies. On a personal level, when there are conflicts of like, ‘Oh, this makes me uncomfortable because of…,’ I am always willing to defer my own interests and go out of the way because I’m the one with the privilege and the power to do that. And I understand my position there.”

Other participants expressed a firm commitment towards prioritizing the needs or desires of partners who have marginalized identities or backgrounds. Some also offered concrete examples of how they materialize this commitment such as Logan and Linnia who actively redefined oppressive gender norms, as we will see in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Imbalanced relationship dynamics can occur in any partnership and are not a product of social forces of inequality alone. Some of my participants attributed a partner’s advantage in the relationship to their personalities, disabilities, and mental health issues rather than their having privileged social locations. Although these are important patterns, particularly the intersection of polyamory and disability, my interest in relationship dynamics lies in the ways societal privilege translates into the ability to sway negotiations and other relationship decisions. Relationship negotiating influence is a challenge unique to consensually nonmonogamous relationships, which must be negotiated and often continually renegotiated. This study cannot measure the extent to which differential positioning impacts queer poly relationships, but queer polyps’
narratives reveal some of the ways they feel that diverging backgrounds or identities can create advantage for privileged partners.

A few participants had not considered the potential for differential positioning to sway relationship negotiations, whereas it was clear that most of the queer polys I spoke with in fact had thought about or even had taken preventative measures to address potential imbalanced dynamics. Queer polys of color reported being marginalized in poly communities (where potential dates are often found) and fetishized in poly dating sites. Working-class/poor queer polys perceived their middle-class partners has having more resources and skills necessary to negotiate their desires relationship boundaries. Moreover, queer women expressed a high degree of frustration with cismen, which often led their decisions to avoid relationships with cismen entirely. Here we see how racism, classism, and sexism impact marginalized queer polyamorists, in both their relationships and communities.

I was interested in how these systems of power intersect to produce unique experiences among my participants but was surprised to find a lack of narrative that exposed how intersectionality impacts the queer polys I spoke with, at least in regards to intimate relationships. The exceptions, however, are interesting to contrast: Queer women expressed a colossal mistrust of white, straight, cismen and white, bi or heteroflexible, male-identified or AMAB (assigned male at birth) participants expressed an acute awareness of their social privileging. The latter group are often read as white, straight, cismen since gender and sexual identities are not always perceptible, but they appeared to reject their socially-ascribed privileges and instead took steps to combat those privileges in their intimate relationships. Nevertheless, acknowledging one’s privilege does not produce perfectly balanced relationship dynamics. It
would be interesting to see whether and how relationship negotiating influence impacts relationships in which partners recognize and try to combat their own privileges.

**Practicing Polyamory**

In this chapter, I selected elements of my participants’ relationship practices that have been overlooked in prior literature on polyamory such as their initiation stories, the emotion work they undergo in negotiations and relationship management, and how they navigate adverse experiences or relationship imbalances resulting from differential social positioning. For instance, whereas existing literature on polyamory has focused largely on poly values and established relationship boundaries or rules (e.g., Frank & DeLamater 2010; McLean 2004; Wosick-Correa 2010), my participants’ narratives revealed an underlying theme of fluidity and flexibility. I was surprised at the extent to which they eschewed rules or boundaries in favor of practices that allow relationships to naturally evolve and shift without resistance. Although I cannot make direct comparisons with my data, this particular finding suggests one manner in which queer poly practices might depart from ‘het/bi’ poly practices.

In addition, prior studies have suggested that poly women in the ‘het/bi’ community have more community respect, sexual subjectivity, and relationship power than monogamous women and that poly relationships center feminism and egalitarianism (e.g., Ritchie & Barker 2007; Sheff 2005, 2011, 2014). Yet, the women in my study who had encountered the mainstream poly community were largely uncomfortable with those interactions. Queer poly women’s avoidance of white straight poly cismen – who comprise a large portion of the ‘het/bi’ community – suggest that they likely have different feelings about women’s social and relational statuses in the mainstream poly community than do the women involved in prior studies.
Supporting existing literature, I found that my participants identified race, class, and gender differentials as having the potential to impact their relationships (Klesse 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001). However, my participants’ narratives suggest that the concept of ‘relationship defining power’ (Peplau, Veniegas, & Miller-Campbell 1996) that the above studies utilize might be more applicable to queer polyamorists when reconceptualized as relationship negotiating influence. In general, the queer polys I spoke with avoided language that centered on ‘power’ and were largely committed to preventing social positioning from translating into relationship negotiating influence.

The relationship practices I discuss in this chapter can be thought of as a form of poly performativity. Queer polyamorists ‘do’ relationships in diverse and inventive ways, just as they ‘do’ family in the same manner. The following chapter will introduce the idea of family performativity, or ‘doing’ family, and explore queer poly family practices, challenges, and hopes for the future.
Chapter Six

DOING (POLY)FAMILY:
Performing, Navigating, and Imagining Queer Polyamorous Families

We’re trying to cultivate this kind of non-traditional thing that we have going on, in the way that we all interact with each other.
–Linnia (queer/bi, woman, white, late-30s)

The literature on polyamorous families is severely limited, although there are two researchers (to my knowledge) who have devoted considerable energy to filling this gap: Sheff’s (2014) work on polyamorous families with children, presented in The Polyamorists Next Door, and Pallotta-Chiarolli’s (2010) study on poly families and schools, presented in Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools. Although their research centers largely on the ‘het/bi’ community, it does provide important sociological knowledge on how children and adults in poly families navigate issues such as disclosure, social stigma, and interactions with educational systems as well as the benefits these families can have for children, adults, and society at large.

I borrow Pallotta-Chiarolli’s term ‘polyfamilies’ to denote all forms of polyamorous family that my participants discussed. Thus, whereas the very limited existing research on polyfamilies has focused largely on families with children, I include families that do not have children as well as ‘families of choice.’ Many of the queer polys I spoke with had experience with some form of polyfamily such as a triadic relationship in which all partners were considered a nuclear family or a small network of close friends, roommates, and partners as chosen family. Whether or not they had experience with polyfamily, nearly all participants illustrated their ideal (poly)families, which commonly revealed unique perspectives on households, marriage, and childrearing.
In this chapter, I first discuss how the queer polys I spoke with understood and ‘did’ family, providing examples of the three broad themes that emerged in their narratives: familial roles, households, and networks. I then discuss challenges my participants faced relating to marriage, children, and separation, as well as how they managed those challenges. Their narratives suggest that queer polyamorists engage in unique and innovative ways of doing and navigating polyfamilies. Finally, I describe how participants described their hopes and plans for their future families in imaginative and enthusiastic ways.

Performing Polyfamily

There’s what we call ‘tribe’ [...] everybody is there to support everybody else.
–Debbie (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s)

Literature on contemporary families has reconceptualized ‘family’ in performative terms. Just as we ‘do’ gender (West & Zimmerman 1987) via gender ‘performativity’ (Butler 1990), we also ‘do’ family via performative acts. The most widely cited discussion of doing family is of David H. J. Morgan’s work. Morgan (1996) described ‘family’ in ways that transcended the classic sociological understanding of family as a social institution. Family is not merely a ‘thing’ to which most of us belong, but rather a ‘quality’ that is enacted through family practices. These practices are everyday, mundane activities such as preparing meals, playing games, or offering advice, that are linked to the cultural environment and have broader implications for sociological understandings of ‘family’: “Practices are often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of practitioners. Their significance derives from their location in wider systems of meaning” (Morgan 1996:190).

Work by Weston (1991) and Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan (2001) provided groundbreaking insights into how queer people ‘do family.’ Building from Morgan’s work,
Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan explain that the notion of doing family “displaces the idea of the family as a fixed and timeless entity,” instead emphasizing family as “a series of practical, everyday activities which we live: through tasks such as mutual care, the division of labour in the home, looking after dependents” and other “relational interactions” (2001:37). Similarly, Weston found that queer adults do family by engaging in processes in which “they quite consciously incorporated symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material or emotional assistance, and other signs of enduring solidarity” (1991:109). For instance, Weston illustrated the significance of sharing meals within queer chosen families with her own experiences: “The centrality of the meal – sharing food on a regular basis in a domestic setting – certainly contributed to our growing sense of relatedness” (1991:104).

Other qualitative work has demonstrated how people involved in queer families participate in and make meaning of processes of doing family (for example, see Perlesz & colleagues’ 2006 study on lesbian-parented families or Takács & Kuhar’s reader on gay/lesbian family practices); however, this body of literature neglects attention to how queer polyamorists engage in these processes. In this section, I discuss how the queer polys in my study do and understand family via their narratives on familial roles and values, households, and networks. Although I did not ask specifically about these processes, my participants’ narratives made clear that they understand and do polyfamilies in a variety of ways.

**Giving Time and Support**

This study involved queer polys who took on familial roles as parents, coparents, and social parents. Nearly forty percent of my participants had experiences with children, whether with their own or their partners’ kids. Only seven participants had their own children – meaning those with biogenetic or legal ties (such as foster or adoptive children). Unsurprisingly, they
were older than the total sample: all of these parents were either at or above the mean age and four were in the 40+ age category. A fifth of the queer polys in this study were partnered with someone who had kids at the time of our interviews. In addition, many participants took on spousal roles, whether they were either legally married, symbolically married, or engaged. The queer polys I spoke with had captivating narratives on marriage and engagement. Two-thirds of the participants in this study had some form of experience with marriage (including former marriages and relationships with married couples). Eleven participants were legally married at the time of our interview, two others were symbolically married, and eight had been formerly married. Most of the currently-married participants were spouses with individuals not involved in the study; however, two participants were spouses with each other and there were four engaged couples in this study. (Of the five married or engaged pairs of participants, four were interviewed independently and one pair was interviewed concurrently.) My participants were more likely to discuss parental roles than marital roles – their discussions on marriage typically centered on challenges rather than spousal roles – and were even more likely to focus on supportive familial roles.

Many participants understood ‘family’ as those who maintain close emotional bonds, provide psychological and material support, and devote time to each other. They spoke of experiences providing or receiving various forms of support, such as relationship advice, help during or after a crisis, and financial assistance. These types of support are typical of any family; however, the presence of metamours (a partner’s partner) distinguishes poly families from others. Several queer polys described how their own or their partners’ metamours offered direct and supplementary emotional and material support. For instance, Lance (queer, trans man, white, mid-20s) narrated a story about a time when his newer partner, Kyrsten, was involved in a car
accident and he was clear that his longer-term partner, Julia, was supportive about the sudden degree of attention and concern he was directing towards Kyrsten. Throughout our interview, Lance spoke of Julia in a way that expressed a sincere appreciation of her supportiveness.

Other participants’ partners were ‘polyaffective’ metamours and offered direct support to each other. Christina’s (bi/pan, woman, white, mid-20s) husband and her other partner were ‘really good friends’ and ‘close buddies.’ At the time of our interview, the three were in somewhat of a transitional phase in which they would likely soon become ‘family’ and were already discussing and engaging in different familial roles. They were considering the potential for Christina’s non-marital partner to move in with her and her husband. She explained:

“I think we are going to feel like a family but just more like they’ll feel more friends – like more of a friendship than a romance. But definitely, they’re very supportive of one another, too. And, you know, like we’ve talked about my other partner going back to school and how would my husband feel if, you know, we kind of took up a little more rent or something to help [my partner] out. And, you know, we function like that, like a family, thinking about what can we do to support each other.”

As with Christina, support was central in many queer polys’ narratives on family roles and values.

The significance of mutual support extended beyond partnerships and metamours. In our conversation on communities, Debbie (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s) differentiated between her ‘tribe’ and her other close poly network despite that the two groups engaged in similar family-style events. Her tribe did family by providing emotional support to each other and engaging in frequent family activities:

Debbie: There is [a local poly community], which does potlucks, which is a much smaller part of [another community] and very concentrated here. And we do some community events. All of us with kids are getting together Thursday night to do [a Halloween event]. Everybody’s getting together, taking their kids. We do bonfires. We did a haunted hayride and bonfire a couple weeks
ago where everybody got together and it was a family friendly event, and we do stuff like that. We’re definitely more close knit. There’s a lot of inter-dating, so lots of people are dating lots of other people from that group. And then there’s what we call ‘tribe,’ which is about twenty people at this point that are all very interconnected and very, very close knit. We rely on each other, talk to each other, plan events that are specifically for that set of people.

Emily: So is that less of an organized anyone-can-come – like a friend group or network or something?

Debbie: It’s very family-based. That’s where the ‘tribe kids’ come in. It’s the people – the kids that belong to those people. We’re all very, very family organized, very comfortable with each other. We do like movie and cuddle nights. Like, we do random movies and had like pillows and blankets and everybody just snuggled, which was really, really great. There’s a way – much more sense of community, which is why we ended up with the label of ‘tribe’ because that’s how it feels. If there’s an issue, everybody is there to support everybody else. And those people are fantastic.

As Debbie’s narrative reveals, spending time with each other in various activities such as dinners, movie nights, or other events were fundamental components of how queer polys do family.

Similarly, some participants understood ‘family’ to involve processes of spending holidays with partners’ families-of-origin or blending families-of-origin. For instance, J.R. (bi/queer, NB/GQ, white, mid-20s) explained, “When you start like being, ‘Okay well, we’ll do this Christmas at your family’s place and next Christmas we can do at mine,’ like, you guys are family.” Similarly, Nikko (pan/queer, trans-other, POC, mid-30s) stated:

“I guess part of me considering someone family is like when you respond to their family as family. So, as an extension of them, you’re friends with their family. And I think in this current relationship, this is definitely that situation where I consider him like my best family. You know, I consider his family my family.”

Finally, a few queer polys spoke of family roles with pronounced intention and awareness. I had separate interviews with Linnia, a white queer/bi woman in her late-30s, and her fiancé, Logan, whom we met in the previous chapter (heteroflexible, man, white, early-30s).
Their way of doing family involved intentional affection, investment, and non-traditional connections. Linnia explained:

“It’s – okay this is going to sound silly but we call our unit a ‘pack’ instead of like the word family. Although, we do refer to what we have as a ‘family,’ but like more affectionately, we refer to it as a ‘pack’ and we very much cultivated this notion of a pack with the kids. The way that is significant to us I think, is that we have a dog, two cats, two kids, we had another baby that we lost, that we very much talk about with the kids too, as part of this pack even though [the baby’s] not here. Logan and the kids, we’ve talked about the fact that we’ve all come together to support each other and to live in a household that’s not what we started out with. That all four of us are very much invested in this, in trying to cultivate this kind of non-traditional thing that we have going on, in the way that we all interact with each other.”

Linnia and Logan did family in many ‘non-traditional’ ways beyond simply being consensually nonmonogamous. They were committed to maintaining a feminist relationship, in which both partners engaged in behaviors to offset Logan’s privilege as a (seemingly straight) white cismale. For instance, Logan expressed, “I want to be aware of those power structures or those kind of unconscious habits” that accompany his social positioning. Logan was a homemaker and primary caregiver to Linnia’s two children from her prior marriage while Linnia worked multiple jobs and was “paying most of the bills.” They were both very clearly devoted their kids’ well-being and appeared to practice ‘feminine parenting,’ a parenting style that centers on elements such as warmth, closeness, and affection that is common in queer families and has positive implications for children’s outcomes (see Biblarz & Stacey 2010).

Nearly forty percent of my participants had experiences with children, whether with their own or their partners’ kids. Only seven participants had their own children – meaning those with biogenetic or legal ties (such as foster or adoptive children). Unsurprisingly, they were older than the total sample: all of these parents were either at or above the mean age and four were in the 40+ age category. In addition, a fifth of the queer polys in this study were currently partnered
with someone who had kids. A few of these participants identified themselves as stepparents or co-parents, or were otherwise deeply involved in the children’s lives even if they did not consider themselves co-parents. For instance, Dee (queer, woman, POC, late-20s) did not consider herself a parent to her partner’s children but had spent time with them: “I’m obviously in no way in a mother role, but they know who I am. I’ve hung out with them. Sometimes if I’m there and they happen to be there (because he has them every other week), I’ll have dinner with them and watch movies with them.” She also explained that she had spent time with the children of her metamour, who co-parents with Dee’s partner.

Other participants took on co-parenting roles via their networks and chosen families. In fact, several participants expressed a strong appreciation of the ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ mentality that often accompanies poly practices, whether or not they had their own children. Debbie (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s), whose chosen family was called a ‘tribe,’ was one such participant. She was a mother to her biological child and stepparent to her husband’s two kids but also unofficially co-parented the children in her tribe. In the following conversation, she vocalized a sincere belief in village parenting, framing it as a ‘wonderful’ benefit of polyamory:

Emily: How do you think that having the kids around has impacted your experience with polyamory?

Debbie: I think it’s one of the wonderful things about poly. My kid always has somebody to go to and will always have somebody to go to. When I seek out actual partners, that is one of the things that is kind of a requirement for my partners. You have to like kids. You have to be able to be around my kid and my kid needs to be comfortable with you. I don’t do an automatic introduction with my kid because I try to protect him from fluctuating relationships. But once I get to a certain point of being serious with a person, it’s, ‘Look, this is my family and you have to be able to accept my child.’ I had a really crappy childhood growing up and I think that the whole theory of it takes a village to raise a kid is very true. I have a skill set and it’s my skill set and I like it but it’s missing things. I can’t hunt or work on a car and my partner can and that’s fantastic. And so, he can teach my
kids those things. And he gives backup support and my husband’s girlfriend will babysit for us frequently when we need time to go out and do things and that is amazing. And nobody ever really has a problem and everybody – so the community as a whole has several children and they’re ‘tribe kids.’ They all like basically consider themselves brother and sister even though they come from all of these different families. And they all get together and play well and they take care of each other. Because there’s a pretty significant age range in the tribe kids. And it’s amazing.

Here we see how some participants’ discourses on ‘family’ obscures the boundaries between conventional notions of family and families of choice – Debbie described the ‘tribe kids’ as siblings who “come from all of these different families.”

**Managing Shared or Independent Spaces**

Others did family simply by living together. In fact, the great majority of the queer polys who had experience with cohabitation considered cohabiting partners as family, and several participants considered all people living in the household as family whether or not they were partnered together. For instance, Phil (bi/pan, man, white, 40+) recalled a time when he lived with a male partner, a female partner, and her little brother: “That became like the crew because it was mixed up of friends, and friends’ girlfriends, and partners, and boyfriends, and family-family. It was a family. We definitely had that house feel. Like, we were the house.” Interestingly, Phil simultaneously equated family with the household and referred to the connection between his partner and her brother as “family family” – as if real family is biological. This phrasing highlights how challenging it can be to describe chosen families in ways that do not privilege families of origin.

Other participants distinguished between the household as family and the household as cohabitation. For instance, Nikko (pan/queer, trans-other, POC, mid-30s) described a situation in which the household comprised a family unit until the partners came to realize that their poly
‘values’ did not align: “I think initially we considered ourselves family. I think initially it was like, ‘This is our safe space for us to grow as a home and we’re inviting people in.’ But I think towards the end it turned to being like, ‘We’re just cohabitating.’” Nikko made clear that there is a distinction between a family home and ‘just’ a cohabiting home. I later asked Nikko, “Would you consider yourself family with your current partner?” Nikko replied, “Yeah. Yeah, I do. […] I consider the home we built together like our safe space together where we both have equal say in everything.” Doing family for Nikko involved constructing a safe, egalitarian home environment.

Conversely, several queer polys considered non-cohabiting partners as family, indicating that living together was not a mandatory criterion to define who is regarded as ‘family.’ For instance, Neal, a white gay man in his early 30s, was in a triad with a cohabiting partner and their non-cohabiting partner. Neal considered them both family despite that one partner was not in the household. Delilah’s (pan, woman, white, mid-30s) “little queer family” was comprised of cohabiting and non-cohabiting partners and friends. She mentioned that she enjoys having communal space in the house that she owns and that she likes “that type of queer family.”

Other participants did not explicitly state that their cohabiting and non-cohabiting partners were family but described their experiences in ways that align with doing family. For example, I asked Theo (queer, trans man, POC, early-20s) what it was like when he lived with his girlfriend while they dated other people. He recalled,

“It was actually a lot of fun. It worked out really well for us, because every one of our partners – because we had been in the relationship for like a year-and-a-half to almost two years at that point. Basically, every partner had a key to the house and if anyone wanted to stay they could stay whether it was because they needed somewhere to crash or they wanted to sleep with me or my partner or they needed something emotional. Everyone had a key, which was really great for us.”

Like Delilah, Theo enjoyed being able to offer communal space to partners, friends, and metamours. I did not ask whether he had considered this group family since we naturally
transitioned to talking about their break-up. Nevertheless, Theo did family by giving them material and emotional support and appeared to strongly value that type of family support.

**Constructing Chosen Family**

Many queer polys did family by forming families of choice. They used descriptors for their networks such as ‘chosen family’ or unique labels such as ‘tribe’ or ‘phamily’ (“family with a ph”). Their families of choice were often comprised of people from multiple households and thus were typically larger than the polyfamilies discussed above. These participants described family roles and activities that were nearly identical to practices in other family forms, such as spending holidays together or providing emotional and material support. Charlie (queer/bi, woman, POC, early-30s) explained her network as family:

“I’m part of, we call it ‘The Family’ because it sounds like a sweet gay mafia sort of, but it’s sort of like this big group of poly folks who are all friends and occasionally play partner or lovers or whatever and we’re all like, we all hang out with each other’s significant others and stuff like that. It’s sort of like that’s the core of my friend group right there. All these crazy poly folks.”

I asked Charlie if she used ‘The Family’ to joke around or if she does consider these ‘crazy poly folks’ as family. She responded:

“A little bit of both. They’re definitely my family of choice. They’re the ones who took me in when I didn’t have any place to go. We have taken family pictures together at weddings when one of my play partners got married last year, we all had group family photos. Yeah. That kind of thing. We’re all really close but in sort of a give and take way. It’s not particularly fixed and there’s not labels on it but it’s just like a bunch of weirdos who love each other.”

Charlie and her family of choice did family by spending time together, providing material support, taking ‘family photos’ together, and maintaining emotional closeness. Her description of her chosen family as ‘not particularly fixed’ suggests that she has a conception of polyfamilies that aligns with my participants’ preference for openness and fluidity in poly intimate
relationships. In other words, queer polyfamilies can be open and fluid just as queer poly partnerships often are. In contrast, Rochelle (lesbian/ace, woman, POC, 40+) bluntly stated, “Network is family.” This phrasing suggests that queer polys can have concrete, fixed understandings of networks as chosen family despite that networks are commonly practiced in ways that align with relationship fluidity and deeply obscure the lines between partners, friends, lovers, and family members.

A few queer polys I spoke with referenced their partners’ networks as chosen family, such as Dee (queer, woman, POC, late-20s) who explained, “They do a poly family thanksgiving that’s kind of extended networks of people’s partners and kids and partners of partners. It just kind of expands and yeah, I definitely consider them chosen family and their people chosen family.” Like many other polyfamilies, Dee’s network did family by sharing meals and spending time together over holidays. Other participants did not explicitly state that they were part of a chosen family with other queer polys but appeared to do family in nearly identical ways. For instance, Garry (gay, man, POC, mid-20s), who considered his two partners as family, reported that he was involved with another polyfamily comprised of his closest friends. I asked, “Have you ever been involved with a poly family otherwise? Like, dated someone who was part of a poly household, or been adopted into somebody else’s poly family, or anything like that?” Garry responded, “Yeah, I think our closest friends. They've been a real big help with helping me figure out what I'm doing. Sometimes I still don't know.” Both of these polyfamilies were comprised of gay male triads, and the six of them engaged in various familial behaviors such as spending time together and providing emotional support. Like Garry, many of my participants understood ‘family’ and engaged in practices of ‘doing family’ in ways that obscured the boundaries between friends, partners, and conventional notions of ‘family.’
Conclusion

The queer polys I spoke with did family in a variety of manners that both align with and differ from conventional ways of doing family. Like many types of families, they provided emotional and material support, planned frequent family activities, spent family-oriented holidays together, and resided together or regularly visited each other. In addition, my participants engaged in creative and unique family practices such as sharing communal space and applying exclusive terminologies that distinguish their chosen family from other individuals with whom they were emotionally close. Moreover, polyfamilies are distinctive due to the presence of metamours. Many participants described ways in which their own or their partners’ metamours provided additional layers of support for those involved in their families. As we will see below, queer polyfamilies are also unique due to marital and parenting practices that challenge normative understandings of family.

Navigating Polyfamily

*I don't always know if I should have like a talk with him, but I think it’s pretty clear. He knows we're both queer, so.*

—Miriam (queer/bi, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-30s)

Family performativity extends beyond practices of support, sharing time, and residing or visiting each other. ‘Doing family’ also involves more challenging practices, namely, managing family issues. The queer polys in this study had encountered a variety of issues with their own and other polyfamilies. These participants often had to navigate challenges relating to marriage, children, separation, and stepfamilies. Some married participants expressed frustration with the process of dating while married, particularly in that their marriage dramatically reduces the size of their dating pool. Queer polys with children had similar experiences with the dating process
but also had unique challenges to navigate such as deciding when and how to disclose their poly relationships to the kids. These disclosure decisions were further complicated due to custody concerns for a few participants who were in the process of divorce or separation. This section discusses my participants’ experiences navigating these and other related issues.

**Being Married**

The queer polys who had experience with marriage spoke of a variety of related issues such as partnership (re)negotiations, imbalanced relationship dynamics, and public stigma or misconceptions. Christina’s narrative reveals a great deal about the challenges that queer poly people can face when they are married and dating, particularly in the ways she encountered stigma and misconceptions from both the queer community and her family of origin once she married. Christina (bi/pan, woman, white, mid-20s) had married her long-term cismale partner after she came out and began exploring her attractions to women and non-binary people. The person she was dating at the time she was engaged abruptly ended the relationship once Christina married her husband. She recalled:

“One of the more serious relationships I had – I mean, it wasn’t talking about moving in and all that but like we were, you know, fairly, fairly serious, and they stopped talking to me, completely ghosted me after marriage, as if they thought I was going to stop [dating them]. Like, because I had been dating them almost the entire time I had been engaged, like almost the entire year and a half […] And yeah, they completely – yeah, haven’t talked to me, other than like seeing them in group surroundings and saying, ‘Hi.’ Like, they didn’t want to date. They didn’t want to do anything afterwards. And it was very strange because I saw them right before my marriage at Pride, the weekend before I got married, and we went together and held hands and, you know, spent the night. And it wasn’t – I mean, I didn’t give any notion that I was going to like stand up and stop my own wedding. And they – I don’t know what they thought. But, yeah, they stopped talking to me right after. So it’s very, very different.”
Christina also explained that although people in the queer community were accepting of her being poly, they become uninterested in dating her when she discloses that she has a husband. She described their responses when she discloses her marital status: “They’re like, ‘Oh, but like an actual husband? Okay, no thanks.’” I asked Christina felt that it was the marriage itself which caused dating challenges for her, as she did not have these experiences when she was engaged to her husband.

In fact, several queer polys I spoke with believed that they encountered more difficulties dating because of their marriage – not just because they were partnered. These participants explained that people assume they are unavailable or being dishonest about their dating intentions. Several participants clarified that they are open and honest about have a spouse on dating profiles yet still encounter people who show interest and initiate conversation but then disappear once they are directly informed of the marriage. For instance, Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) reported:

“So of course I'm going to mention my wife, I'm gonna say that I'm married, I'm gonna say that I'm nonmonogamous, I'm gonna say that I'm poly, you know, whatever. But that limits the number of people who contact me or why they contact me. They may like, ‘Hey! I’m not looking for anything intimate but looking for new friends if you wanna hang out.’ Or they might say, you know, ‘Oh’ – like people have messaged me before and then on further communication have been like, ‘Oh I missed that on your profile, good luck with your search.’ You know, like, the end. I'm like, ‘Dammit!’”

Nash also felt that her marriage “very much stifled” other types of relationships and was particularly saddened that emotional intimacy with others had weakened after she married, which was “a huge problem” and “totally unanticipated.”

Other married queer polys chose not to disclose their marital status on dating sites for fear that potential dates would become uninterested in them. For instance, Tasha was a married
white queer/bi woman in her mid-20s. She clarified after I asked whether she thought her marriage ever impacted her experiences with polyamory:

Tasha: Yeah, definitely. My husband and I are both on OKCupid and we don’t actually come out and say immediately that we’re married, because both of us have had people who were very interested until they learned that we were married. Because apparently that’s weird for people.

Emily: They knew that you had a partner, but they just didn’t know that you were legally married?

Tasha: Right.

Emily: It was the marriage itself that scared people away?

Tasha: Mm-hmm. Actually, he was seeing somebody for a while that everything was fine, and then the week before our wedding, she broke it off because it would be weird to be sleeping with a married guy. [...] That’s the thing, it’s like to me, nothing has changed whatsoever, but to the rest of the world, it’s like, ‘Oh, big marriage thing, scary.’

One participant felt that this issue is gendered. Ava (bi, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-30s) was married, partnered, and dating at the time of our interview. I asked if she thought being married had made it harder to find people to date and she replied, “Men, no. Females, yes.” Ava explained that “Guys in general just don’t care” about her marriage but that women were hesitant to date her, likely because of her marriage. She was unsure about why and questioned whether it might be time availability concerns or that queer women prefer not to date a woman with a male spouse. No matter the reason, her dating pool was smaller because women were not interested in dating her because of her marriage.

In addition to dating-while-married challenges, some participants encountered misconceptions about being married and polyamorous. Christina’s (bi/pan, woman, white, mid-20s) narrative again best represents these experiences. She felt that people in her friendship network as well as her partner’s friends made false assumptions about her marriage. She explained:
“I met a lot of people through friends, through queer friends, and they knew my circumstances but I think they thought I was unhappy in my marriage or in my relationship. And my other partner has found that a lot, too. People saying things like – [my partner] came and visited me a few weeks ago, actually, at the beginning of this month, and people would ask them like, ‘Oh, how is it?’ Like, ‘How was seeing your metamour?’ (They didn’t use those terms) but like, ‘How is your girlfriend’s husband?’ And [my partner] would be like, ‘Oh it was great! He was great. We had so much fun. We made dinner and went to a movie.’ And they were like, ‘Oh, that sucks.’ And [my partner]’s like, ‘Why is it shitty that my metamour is so awesome?’ And, ‘Oh, because it makes it harder on you.’ And both of us couldn’t figure out what people were trying to say but we think that people are hoping that [my husband]’s a shitty person because they still have it stuck in their head that we’re screwing around behind his back. […] Like they hope – my other partner’s friends or people that they often tell that their girlfriend has a husband will say that like they think I’m in a bad marriage and I just want a way out or like that it sucks that my husband is so awesome because I’ll want to stay with him or it sucks that he’s so awesome because it makes what we’re doing to him is like adultery that we’re committing behind his back. Like, ‘Oh, it sucks that he’s not just like a shitty wife beater that you don’t care if you’re doing stuff behind his back.’ And [my partner]’s like, ‘No. Like, we hung out together. He knows. He knows about us.’ And they still are like, ‘Oh, that sucks that he’s a good person. He’s actually awesome and you want to hang out with him. You don’t want to just like smite him.’ I don’t know. It’s so strange. To me it’s so strange.”

Christina also faced stigma from her family of origin. She described her father’s reaction to her decision to continue practicing polyamory after she would marry:

“Honestly, like one of my parents, my dad, he tried – I came out as poly to him before I got married and he was just like, ‘Just don’t get married.’ You know, ‘You obviously don’t know what you want, like just don’t get married.’ I was like, ‘No, that’s not it. I want to get married.’ And he’s like, ‘But marriage is sacred and you’re fooling around.’ I was like, ‘No, I’m having other relationships.’ And we’ve talked about it more recently and he said like, ‘I feel like what you’re doing is a slap in the face to marriage.’ And so I said, ‘So it would be okay if I was just engaged and doing this?’ And he said, ‘Yes. The fact that you’re married makes all the difference.’ And I feel like a lot of people I date feel that way too.”
Like Christina’s father, it seems that people often perceive marriage and polyamory as incompatible, such that polyamory is only suitable for those not legally married. The argument that polyamory disrupts the “sacred” status of or is a “slap in the face” to marriage parallels conservative arguments against same-gender marriage. Some people are unable to reconcile this perceived incompatibility even when made aware that these partnerships are open and honest or that metamours spend time together, such as in Christina’s case. Rather, they assume the marriage is troubled or that one partnership will eventually fail.

A few of the queer polys I spoke with questioned whether they might have approached marriage differently had they known at the time that they wanted to practice polyamory. For instance, Ava (bi, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-30s) suspected that she would have avoided a traditional wedding:

“We did the whole marriage thing because that was what was happening. That’s what people do. They get their degree and they got engaged and then they got married and had kids or whatever. We did the whole business thing instead [of kids] but people ask, ‘Well, if you’re poly, why are you married?’ ‘Well, we did [the marriage] first. We didn’t know.’ We probably wouldn’t have gone the full religious ceremony thing if we would have known that this is what we would prefer. Because we don’t wear rings. About midway through that first year we stopped wearing rings. Actually, we switched hands. We wore them on the other hand and like waited to see who noticed. Nobody cared, so we just took them off.”

I was unclear about whether Ava felt that she would have avoided only the wedding or the marriage all together if she had begun practicing polyamory beforehand. Nevertheless, Ava and her husband challenged traditional notions of marriage by removing their wedding bands. This act is consistent with poly values of anti-possessiveness and personal autonomy, as the wedding band is a historical symbol of ownership and property.
In contrast to the queer polys who discussed challenges and misconceptions related to being married-while-poly, a few participants felt that their marriage was beneficial to their experiences with polyamory. In fact, William (gay, man, white, mid-30s) felt that being married made dating-while-poly easier rather than more difficult. He stated, “I have the advantage that if I have a shitty date, I'm like, ‘Well I get to go home,’ you know. But at the same time, it also makes my dating process much more slow, much more methodical, much more picky. I think that's the difference.” He viewed having a husband at home for emotional support after a bad date as a benefit of being married and clarified that he enjoyed the “luxury” of being able to slow down the dating process. Similarly, one participant viewed her experiences being married-while-poly as generally positive. Brooke (queer/lesbian, trans woman, white, 40+) and her wife lived separately part-time in different cities. I asked what it was like being married to someone who regularly stays with another partner. She replied that it had been a positive experience, but admitted that it can be “frustrating for both of us to align sort of household needs with social needs.” Despite this complication, Brooke felt that it was beneficial to have time alone to work from home and that the “freedom of scheduling is actually a nice thing.” Brooke’s marriage reinforced meaning and stability within her partnership while simultaneously allowing her space for personal time and scheduling autonomy.

**Having Children**

The queer polys I spoke with described a variety of challenges related to children, particularly about dating as a poly parent and disclosure practices. Phil’s experiences best illustrate these issues. Phil (bi/pan, man, white, 40+) was a divorced single parent living with his nine-year-old daughter, Adalynn, and had a non-cohabiting partner at the time of our interview.
He described the following story that took place about four years prior after I asked him what he had enjoyed about having polyamorous relationships:

“And, what’s really nice too, is you know there’s that village kind of support system that’s there as well. So like, if there’s a crisis, like one time – and this is really small, but it was a big deal to me at the time. It still is. […] So, it was Fourth of July picnic. We’re out at the park, throwing the frisbee around. And it was me, my daughter, my partner, my partner’s husband, this new person that I’m seeing, and my partner’s husband’s cousin. And so, we were all just hanging out, throwing frisbee, having a good time, and I went for the frisbee, fell, caught my shoulder on a root, and ended up tearing the ligament that comes across [there]. Playing frisbee, you know, of all things. So, but I couldn’t drive and I had to go to the hospital, but I have my daughter. I have to get my daughter home. It’s bath night, you know, she’s got preschool the next morning. I’m like, ‘I need some help.’ And very quickly, my one partner is like, ‘Alright, I’ll take your car, I’ll take Adalynn, I’ll give her a bath, put her to sleep, tell me your bedtime routine.’ […] The girl that I was seeing was like, ‘I’ll take you to the hospital.’ You know? And I’m like, ‘Awesome, thank all of you, you’re amazing.’ And so, we did it. We went. She waited with me at the hospital like the whole time, you know, and then took me home and we all hung out afterwards.”

Phil’s chosen family was able to coordinate care for both him and Adalynn during this crisis.

Like Phil, other queer polys specifically referenced appreciation for the ‘village’ parenting style, whether or not they were parents. I will return to ‘village’ ideology later in this chapter.

Phil wanted me to be clear that having a daughter was “the greatest decision” he has made, but he did acknowledge that it had complicated the dating process. He clarified:

“Because people immediately see it as some sort of added complication, particularly for people who do not have children. So, if I am talking to someone and, you know, we’re on first dates, and I usually mention a kid, that kind of reads out – As a matter of fact, my current partner right now originally had no interest in me because of my daughter, until they actually got to know me and then realized that it wasn’t like a baby-baby, but like a nine-year-old. Completely different. But right off the bat, that kind of knocked me off the list. It actually knocks me off the list almost automatically with the gay community as well. It automatically, like, takes out two-thirds of my dating pool. Right off the bat. So in that sense, it does make it harder to be poly and it impacts poly because it makes it hard for me to meet people, and to be intimate with them. Sometimes the only
people I can do that with are other parents. Which is fine, but I’m a single dad. That has its own set of issues altogether. But yeah, no, people hear ‘kid’ and they’re like, ‘Oh, I don’t want in that drama!’"

Monogamous single parents surely encounter this complication when dating; however, the difference lies in the initial size of the partner selection pool – queer polys have a severely limited dating pool by way of being queer and polyamorous that is further minimized by being parents (and/or being married, as we saw above). Phil mentioned that people in the ‘gay community’ have accused him of being a straight man who just ‘dabbles’ with same-gender relationships. He said, “That I had [heterosexual] sex to help create the kid automatically knocks me off. So, it’s unfortunate.”

Phil described his ‘philosophy’ on how to best navigate disclosure of poly partnerships to children. After describing how ‘out’ he is to friends, family, work clients, and so on, he continued:

“And I am kind of out to my daughter. I don't – My daughter's nine, and I don't really talk about it in any particular sense, but I have a philosophy when it comes to my daughter that if she's old enough to ask the question, she's old enough to get an age-appropriate answer. And so, she has at times asked me, you know, the questions about, ‘Hey, so when you were dating so-and-so, were they still married to so-and-so?’ And I'd be like, ‘Yea!’ Usually it's just because that little connection was never made until right then. And most of the time she doesn't even think of it further. You know, but we have had talks about it when she brings up those subjects. And uh, the last time she brought it up, she had a question and I answered it. I'm talking to her, and I'm like, ‘Well, you know, here: There's more to this conversation than just this. Because this is important, and you're asking very private questions.’ You know? But I was like, ‘But if you're old enough to ask it, you're old enough to get an answer.’ And um, I – and it was a really good conversation cause I was like, you know, ‘Some people, the majority of people, ...’ you know, and I’d explain to her about, you know, how, ‘Some people believe that it's like you get married, you have kids, there's a man and a woman …’ And I'm going through and I'm like, ‘I had this person, and these people, they were married’ and so I'm going through all the different things. And I'm like, ‘Some people may think that there's a right way. There's just the way that lots of people do it, and there's ways that not lots of people do it. It doesn't make one right or the
other.’ And things like that. But, and having that conversation and being like, ‘I told you something private. This is not yours to tell.’ Like, ‘I chose to tell you, you can't go and tell others.’ You know, ‘Not everyone's gonna understand. Some people are gonna have very negative opinions about that, and that should be my choice to tell them.’ And she got that, she understood that. I was like, you know, ‘If you had a birthmark someplace that was embarrassing, I shouldn't go around telling people about this embarrassing birth mark you have, cause that's not mine to tell. You know?’ And then she got it, and it was nice.”

Disclosure is a primary concern for polyfamilies with children. Poly parents must make cautious decisions about the method and timing of which they disclose their relationship style to children (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010; Sheff 2014). As Phil’s conversation with his daughter illustrates, poly parents must also train their children about how to respond when someone asks about their family structure or parents’ relationships. In a study on polyfamilies with children and interactions with schools, Pallotta-Chiarolli’s (2010) found that some families choose to ‘pass’ and present themselves heteronormatively, some ‘border’ by revealing their family structure to select people but not everyone, and some ‘pollute’ by being entirely open in order to actively challenge conventional notions of families and relationships. I did not specifically ask about navigating disclosure issues; however, it seemed that the queer poly parents I spoke with were most likely to ‘border,’ by way of training their kids to be selective with whom they disclose that their family is polyamorous.

The queer polys in this study had varying experiences with and feelings about these processes. Some parents, like Phil, valued transparency and were open to answering questions their kids asked with ‘age-appropriate’ responses. Other parents seemed to ‘border’ because they took an indirect approach such as letting their children see their poly partnerships but not specifically explaining what multiple partnerships mean. For instance, Miriam (queer/bi, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-30s) was unsure of what the best approach was. She had not had a formal
conversation about polyamory with her preteen son but suspected that he was aware of it because she chose not to hide her relationships from him and because he knew his parents were queer:

“I have never been super explicit, although I haven't hidden it either. Like, he’s seen me cuddling with other people. When I was in the with the other two people, we would have our chosen family Christmas and he would always come with us. You know, yeah. I don't always know if I should have like a talk with him, but I think it seems pretty – it’s pretty clear. He knows we're both queer, so.”

Similarly, Ron (heteroflexible, man, white, 40+) seemed ambivalent about the process of disclosing his poly relationships to his 18-year-old daughter who was living in Germany with her mother at the time I spoke with Ron. He suspected that his daughter asked him not to share details with her about his poly life because “she thinks it’s just all about sex and whatnot” and potentially due to the complicated relationship between Ron and her mother. He explained, “So, what I do think that she knows is that I’m a good person and at least understands why I do what I do. She doesn’t shun me for it. I don’t think she understands it enough.” I then asked if he would like to talk with her about his relationships or how polyamory works and he replied:

“I’ve always wanted to but I don’t think – Some people I’ve talked to have said, ‘She’s a kid, it’s not really appropriate. Do you really want to know about your mom’s relationships and stuff?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, I guess as a kid I really wouldn’t want to or I really wouldn’t care.’ As she gets older, I think she’ll want to know more because as I got older, I wanted to know more about what my mom had going on and how she navigated things. It’s pretty heavy, I think, for a kid to hear about all that stuff about their parents. I don’t know. I’m kind of whacky. I don’t think – I don’t know. If she asks me, I’ll tell, but I’m not going to force whatever it is on her, at this point. I think I tried a little bit and it didn’t work out so well.”

Ron’s uncertainty about whether it is appropriate to talk with his daughter about polyamory stood in stark contrast to other queer polys who were adamant about having these conversations with their children.

Some parents had or planned to have a formal conversation with their children as soon as they were older enough to discern that their family was different from others. For instance,
Mathis (gay, man, white, mid-30s) and his husband were beginning the adoption process with their two-year-old foster child. The couple’s other partner, John, was heavily involved as a co-parent who “helps raise her and make those important parent decisions that we all make as parent” and was likely to move in with Mathis and his husband soon after our interview. I asked if the presence of their daughter had impacted his experiences with polyamory and he responded with a focus on disclosure:

“Because she’s so young, right now we haven’t had to broach any of the issues with her. She hasn’t asked too many questions. She doesn’t think anything of Daddy and Papa holding hands with John or kissing John or anything like that. As she gets older, we would definitely need to have some kind of conversation with her. We’ve thought about that a lot. We’ve been reading about poly families and how they handle that. It’s not something that we want to deal with unless we adopted her for sure. She’s … As she gets older, she’s definitely going to become more aware of these things. We have this window of time right now where we can get away with it but that’s soon running out. We have to figure out what we’re going to say to her.”

Mathis was anxious because he felt that his family had little time remaining to decide how to disclose their triadic partnership to their young daughter as she approached an age where she would begin to understand more about families and relationships. Their status as foster parents further complicated this issue – they were navigating this disclosure decision while considering when John should join the household and while applying for adoption, which can be a trying process for gay men who may encounter discrimination in foster and adoption systems.

**Dealing with Separation**

Separation and divorce can complicate the issue of disclosure to children. For instance, one of Debbie’s (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s) stepchildren was only seven years old at the time of our interview. She and her husband had to “keep things quiet” about polyamory because her stepdaughter’s mother “is a very, very, very, very conservative Christian” who they had
encountered great difficulties with in arranging custody agreements after the mother kept the girl away from her father for several years. Debbie and her husband decided that they would not to disclose their other partnerships “until she is old enough to be able to deal with it and make her own decisions, because the last thing that we want is her mother throwing a giant custody battle our way because of the way that we choose to identify our lifestyle.” At the time we spoke, Debbie’s stepdaughter had met her and her husband’s other partners but they were introduced as ‘family friends.’

Debbie was not the only queer poly I spoke with who was in this situation. Linnia (queer/bi, woman, white, late-30s) and her partner, Logan (heteroflexible, man, white, early-30s), were an engaged couple who were not actively looking for another committed partner but had gone on dates together and were oriented toward nonmonogamies. They were raising Linnia’s two children who were ten and thirteen at the time of our interviews and were trying to have another baby together. Linnia was in the process of divorce with the father of her kids and there were other challenges they faced as a queer stepfamily (which I will not discuss here for the sake of anonymity) that further complicated the divorce process. Logan felt, “We’re under a microscope and any sort of non-normative behavior is seen as evidence that we’ve corrupted the older kid. […] It’s really complicated. We’re in the middle of a divorce. Everything you do gets – It’s acrimonious and everything you do gets used against you. You know.” Logan further explained that he and Linnia had to maintain a “thick barrier” so that the kids would not find out about their parents’ nonmonogamous practices:

“Where we are right now, where we have to be for custody reasons and stuff, just the fact that there is a divorce and a custody battle and that sort of thing, it’s tough. It’s really – How does that impact us? I mean, we hide stuff. I mean, stuff like you’ve got to keep a really thick barrier there. We’re not trying to let the kids in on any of this. If we’re going on dates and stuff, it’s when we don’t have custody. It’s not – I mean, they do know at least the one person Linnia was
involved with before because she’s a close friend and like comes over a lot, we’re close. But it’s friendly. They don’t – We never do anything. We really are careful around the kids.”

Linnia framed disclosure in the same way: “They’ve known a lot of my partners but they’ve never known them as ‘partners.’ They’ve just been like ‘friends’ that come in and out of the house.”

Logan stated later in his interview that they are also very cautious about who they disclose their nonmonogamy to but would like to be more open to discussing it if they were not experiencing divorce and custody issues. Linnia’s feelings were parallel. She imagined that it might soon “come up” with their children since they had been increasingly asking questions about sexuality and relationships, and she preferred transparency and to have an open and honest family environment where the kids are comfortable asking questions. At the time of our interviews, the oldest child was aware that Linnia identified as bisexual but neither parent indicated to me that her bisexuality might be of concern for custody. In fact, many of the queer polys I spoke with were ‘out’ about their sexual identity in those terms but not about their polyamorous identity, which suggests that queer polys perceive LGBTQ+ sexual identities as more socially acceptable than nonmonogamous sexual identities. In other words, it is safer to be ‘out’ as LGBTQ+ than as polyamorous. I will revisit this issue in the subsequent chapter.

Another challenge relating to children and separation is learning to manage relationships with ex-partners’ children that were hindered by the separation. Delilah (pan, woman, white, mid-30s) did not have children of her own but was formerly partnered with a man who had a daughter, Adalynn. Delilah illustrated her connection with Adalynn by describing how well they got along, the activities they engaged in together, the gifts they gave each other, and one
experience in which Adalynn accidentally called Delilah ‘mom.’ Delilah explained how losing this connection with Adalynn upon her separation with Phil was emotionally trying:

“So, this was the hardest part about my breakup with Phil. It was really, really hard. And I was really ambivalent about things from the beginning about this. So, I was very close to his daughter, Adalynn. I … I really … Adalynn’s great and I really cared about her. And still do care about her. […] Um, and so it was hard because um … [heavy sigh] … She had to say goodbye to me too, in a way. And Phil is pretty good about talking with Adalynn. He’s a good dad. Um, and … he – When we broke up he's like, ‘You might not see Delilah again.’ […] Um, [heavy sigh] and so, we told her and I – It was near her birthday, and I brought by a birthday present for her and we sent a couple text messages, right? She would text me. Um, she said, ‘I know I’m not going to see you again but can I maybe text you sometimes if there’s something that reminds me of you?’ and I said, ‘Absolutely.’ I talked to him first; I let him know that Adalynn had contacted me and that I said ‘sure.’ But it was hard.”

Delilah then explained an incident with her family of origin relating to her separation with Phil that exacerbated her emotional struggle with losing ties with Adalynn. In a “character attack,” her sister-in-law ‘outed’ Delilah as polyamorous then accused her of child abuse:

“Then, she brought up Adalynn and how abusive [polyamory] was to children and um that Phil has no business dating and that’s just gonna confuse her and that’s gonna like mess her up for the rest of her life. And I'm abandoning a kid, that’s close to child abuse. And I lost it. I … I lost it. Like I … I was angry but I was also crying angry because she hit somewhere that hurt. And I was really mad at her because she was just trying to get a reaction from me but it worked, which is generally pretty hard. But because Adalynn is so close to my heart, that actually … Because I … There’s a part of me that like knows the concerns about and has the concerns about – and even – it happens in monogamy too. This is not a unique thing to polyamory for a parent to be dating someone and the kid to become attached to the person that the parent is dating and then they break up and then you don’t see the person whom you're attached to in that very deep emotional way again because there is no way that you can control it or um … have any agency at nine years old. Right? There’s this emotional loss and a mourning, um and I know that. But I definitely didn’t want to go there, um at a family gathering. So, it’s hard.”
As Delilah notes, emotional attachments with a partner’s child can be disrupted upon relationship dissolution in monogamous and polyamorous relationships alike; however, this risk might be more pronounced in polyamory as there are more partners to potentially separate with (Sheff 2014). Moreover, the emotional difficulties endured during the process of separating from a partner who has children can be compounded by social stigma and misconceptions about polyamory, as with Delilah’s experience.

Finally, some married polyamorists who value non-hierarchical relationships have considered divorce – but not separation – to address power imbalances. For instance, Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) hoped to eventually form a triad with their current spouse and another future partner, but had concerns about the potential power imbalance that could arise from Nash’s marriage. I asked if he would consider a legal divorce in order to equalize this imagined triadic partnership, and he replied:

“I would, sure. It’s weird, it’s totally weird but I would. […] I never thought I would get married, first of all. Second of all, I went into – when I decided that I would, I was like, ‘Okay but I’m never getting divorced.’ Like [giggles], ‘Just so you know.’ Um, and I think that that would be like one reason that that might actually convince me to do it. Because it's like divorce, but it's not, it doesn't affect your relationship. It still – it doesn't impact the commitment of it. Although you know it does mess with potential you know rights and benefits and all that. But, yea.”

This might seem like an extreme solution to address married-while-poly challenges; however, prior research has found that some polyamorists view this is a suitable method of disrupting power imbalances caused by marital ties. Specifically, Sheff’s (2011, 2014) research revealed some of the creative ways that polys navigate potential or existing power imbalances, including filing for divorce after a triad is formed once a third partner is integrated into the partnership.
Conclusion

The queer polyamorists in this study encountered a variety of family issues, including challenges which were unique to polyfamilies. Being married-while-poly posed challenges such as finding partners or dates and encountering polyphobic stigma. Participants with kids had to navigate unique issues relating to disclosure of their poly practices and identities. Some of these participants had the added challenge of managing disclosure issues while in the process of divorce – disclosure becomes a far more serious concern when custody agreements are being negotiated. Other challenges were not unique to polyamory, such as difficulties dating as a parent or the loss of ties with a partner’s child after separation. Further, some queer polys developed creative solutions for challenges that accompany being (or being involved with) a polyfamily, such as imaginative ways to incorporate a third partner into an existing marriage or partnership.

Imagining Polyfamily

*I totally want like a fabulous poly household!*

–Hannah (queer-gay, woman/genderqueer, mid-20s, white)

The idea of ‘imagining’ has been applied to several studies on queer families and a multitude of sociological or psychological research more generally. Most existing studies do not trace the origins of this concept; however, Katz-Wise and colleagues (2017) describe literature on ‘future perspectives,’ or images we formulate about our futures (Seginer 2009). Part of my interest in speaking to queer poly young adults centers on the ways they reconceptualize ‘family’ through both their practices and imaginations. Employing ‘future perspectives’ in this study, I asked my participants to describe the image of their ideal polyfamilies, if any, as well as other hopes and plans they have for their future familial life. In addition, I apply the concept of life experiments that describes the everyday practices of non-heterosexual people that are outside the
confines of heteronormativity (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001) to ‘future perspectives’

studies. Queer people were free to engage in experimental practices due to the lack of guidelines or cultural scripts for same-gender relationships in the late twentieth century. I propose that processes of ‘imagining’ future families can be conceptualized as ‘cognitive life experiments,’ as queer poly people have very few guidelines or scripts for their relationships and particularly for their families. In other words, queer polys have a unique opportunity to engage in experimental thought about their ideal future families.

I asked my participants what their hopes or plans are for their families – how they plan to ‘do’ family in the future. In these conversations, I probed for details about their ideal household configuration, whether they had desires to marry legally or symbolically, and what parenting arrangements they would like to negotiate if they desired children. Although several participants were already engaged, married, and/or parents at the time of our interview, the overwhelming majority were able to quickly describe an image of how they hope to construct their polyfamilies in the future. Many participants were in the process of materializing this image – in other words, they had already expressed their desires and established agreements with their partners about what their polyfamily will look like and were taking steps to achieve those goals. Others had engaged in recurring or frequent discussions with their partners about their potential future families but had not yet established a plan of action, and some described their ideal family to me but had not yet shared these aspirations with a partner. Only three participants stated explicitly that they did not have an ideal polyfamily in mind. The other queer polys I spoke with illustrated their ideal families with creativity and at times great detail, indicating that they had previously established these images in their imagination. Thus, they had engaged in these ‘cognitive life experiments’ with their partners and/or in their own minds prior to our conversations.
In this section, I present findings on how the queer polys I spoke with envisioned their ideal polyfamilies. I discuss the three broad themes that emerged from the data on how my participants imagined their ideal polyfamilies. In describing their hopes and plans for households, children, and marriage, their discourses centered largely on communal space, coparenting, and validation. In doing so, they revealed several perceived barriers between their ‘ideal’ and what they felt was realistic. These three themes illustrate how queer polyamorists’ ideals and practices both challenge and are constrained by heteronormative family expectations.

**Sharing Communal Spaces**

Nearly two-thirds of the queer polys in this study stated a desire for some form of communal living. Many of these participants preferred a housing arrangement in which they had their own private space such as their own apartment, house, or trailer but had access to each other via doorways connecting the units or common areas. A few queer polys described a duplex or triplex which had internal adjoining doors such as in hotel rooms. These participants imagined individual partners or primary couples living in each unit and having regular access to each other via the adjoining doors. For instance, Lonnie (gay, man, POC, mid-20s) was in a relationship that he described as an “open diamond” comprised of his primary partner, his “boyfriend for all intents and purposes” who was also his best friend, and the best friend/boyfriend’s partner. He had imagined a household similar to a duplex that had separate units for private space but also a communal area in between the two units that would connect the two primary couples as one family.

Jaz, a queer/other woman/other participant of color in her mid-20s, imagined a household with separate units and a shared living space, modeled after her friends’ home:

“I do really like the idea of a poly house. A few friends of mine here actually have a setup that I think is pretty rad, where they have a house that’s three stories and it
has a shared basement. But each of them has a separate unit, with a separate kitchen, two bedrooms, whatever. A couple lives in each floor of it, but they all went in on the home together, financially. They all consider themselves family and they’re intentionally choosing to live together, but they all kind of have their own space. The couple model is one that I’m not married to, though.”

Jaz was not the only participant to imagine a triplex housing arrangement. Spencer (bi, man, white, late-20s) and his partners had discussed buying a “three-level multifamily” home where he and his current cohabiting partner would be in one unit, his other male partner in the second unit, and his female partner in the third unit, potentially with a child. This household was ideal for the group because Spencer “could never live in the same immediate household” with the second male partner, he did not see himself having kids or acting as a co-parent, and his female partner preferred to parent on her own if she decided to have a child.

Other participants imagined structures larger than a duplex or triplex but that were similar in terms of having individual units attached by a communal space. A few of these were described simply as living in the same apartment complex such as having one floor of the complex reserved entirely for their polyfamily or network, and a few others had more unique structures in mind such as a ‘honeycomb.’ For instance, Rochelle’s (lesbian/ace, woman, POC, 40+) ideal living arrangement was inspired by childhood experiences:

“Um, the ultimate ideal for me is like the Ronald McDonald house, you know, those houses they have next to children's hospitals that like parents and families can stay in for free? […] So, I spent a lot of time at the Ronald McDonald house [as a kid], and I just loved it. […] So they built this Ronald McDonald house in [a nearby city] that was a different structure. It's like a – it's kinda like a honeycomb. It has like central rooms and then little rooms off to the side. And so, if I could have my dream house, it would be something like the Ronald McDonald house where you have communal rooms that you share but also there's like wings that are in the house.”

Rochelle described how various wings of the home would be reserved for those with specific family forms or preferences, such as a “doggy wing” for those who have pets and a “kid’s wing”
where parents with young children might live. She gave a variety of reasons why this structure is her ideal, including easy access to different partners and the ability to avoid certain wings of the home such as in the case that someone is averse to animals or kids. She reiterated that “having that like independent structure within a giant like house, that would be a dream come true.”

In addition to communal structures, a few participants imagined having a large plot of communal land. Karl (lesbian, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s) in part desired land as “a lifestyle sort of thing” because they were devoted to a particular form of dog rescue, but also because they wished to form a commune where residents share resources and provide mutual care:

“I'm saving up a lot of money to buy a really nice plot of land. I want to build a tiny house on this plot of land […] I want to have the property big enough so that I can have other people in our – either we’re dating or in relationships with or friends who can also build houses and homes on that property. Then we can all live in sort of a like a mutual commune where we take care of the property and of each other’s pets and loved ones and we kind of like go in together and like, you know, share our resources. That’s my goal one day.”

One participant even had a name for her dream commune. Like Rochelle, Charlie’s (queer/bi, woman, POC, early-30s) ideal living arrangement was influenced by her childhood:

“My dream is what my girlfriend and I call – we’ve been referring to as ‘Flannel Town,’ which is like, if we had a farm somewhere and filled it with lesbians and chickens, basically. And goats. Like, I come from a very agricultural based community, and so I always kind of wanted to have more space and more animals and to have a place where everybody I like, romantically or not, is welcome there and have space for themselves to be there. That’s the dream.”

The name ‘Flannel Town’ wittily intersects lesbian and farm cultures, as a comical play on the flannel-wearing-lesbian stereotype and a reference to farm clothing norms.

Other participants’ idea of communal land could be described as a neighborhood comprised of their polyfamilies and networks. Debbie (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s) had a
small family unit comprised of her husband and children, a larger group of chosen family, and a poly network that engaged in many family-style activities together. She and her network had imagined a neighborhood street they referred to as a “poly-sac,” in which partners or small families could each have their own homes but where the neighborhood would be primarily communal:

“We have talked about what we love and we refer to a ‘poly-sac,’ instead of a cul-de-sac, where we have – and now it’s, eventually we have to take over a neighborhood because we have so many people. And we joke about if we wanted to move, we have like thirty people that we would have to move with us to get everybody involved. I would love to do a communal living situation.”

Her close friend and the friend’s father owned a large plot of land in a rural area of the Midwestern state in which they all resided. Debbie’s friends were interested in forming a community there comprised of people from their poly network:

“They want to do eco-houses where you like build them out of like used tires and recycled material and stuff like that and like basically have this huge community there that would be very commune, hippy, living off the grid, farming, everybody doing artistic stuff and things like that. And if it wasn’t in [that town], I probably would be up for it. I would love to be in a community of all poly-minded people. It would be fantastic.”

Debbie’s reservation in taking steps to materialize this ideal was that the land would be in a small rural town too far from the city where her life was based. She said she would be willing to live outside of the city if the land were closer, but that she is no longer a “country girl.” Debbie concluded that, “For the right circumstances, it would be worth it, sure. I would love to – as long as everybody had their own space, it would be fantastic,” again highlighting the ideal of having private homes within one communal space.

In addition to those whose ideal family arrangement centered on communal land or a shared building with individual units, some queer polys’ ideal involved living in one household. Participants in closed triadic partnerships (including the ‘V’ configuration) were more likely to
want the household only to include the three partners than those in open poly relationships. The latter group desired a “big poly household” comprised of partners, partners’ partners, and close friends – a large household for their chosen family.

In contrast to those who imagined large poly households or communal living arrangements, eight participants did not have a desire to share space with their poly networks or chosen family and few wished to live separately from their own partners. The reasons for their desire to live independently varied, such as they could not imagine living with anyone except their primary partner or that they simply prefer to live alone. However, some participants’ preference to live ‘alone’ did not necessarily involve seclusion from chosen family or poly networks. For instance, Joanne was a white queer woman in her mid-30s who primarily practiced solo-polyamory. She preferred to live by herself but wanted to reside in close proximity to her chosen family, which is comprised of her closest friends. When imagining her ideal polyfamily, she said, “I mean, I think that my ideal family situation is more about chosen family. Like I would prefer to live with people that I'm really dear friends with.”

Finally, a few queer polys were ambivalent about having a shared household or were far less concerned with an ideal household structure. For instance, Nikko (pan/queer, trans-other, POC, mid-30s) did not have a concrete ideal family home and instead emphasized other family aspects such as love and support:

“I would definitely say it would be a household with a lot of love, meaning that it has both my current long-term relationship and my other partners involved in a long-term relationship cohabitating. I definitely see the value in that. And if kids are involved, I definitely think like there’s value in that and multiple parents and support and love. But I definitely think a cohabitation situation where everyone involved or everyone living there is either in a long-term relationship or tangently involved in each other’s relationships, so kind of like a polyamorous cluster. But I think just as long as there’s open communication, I’m not really concerned with how it’s formed. I would like to have like some sort of connection like a duplex, a
connected duplex so that like people can have space because I think there is value in that. But definitely cohabitation in a sense that like everyone’s there to support each other.”

Others did have an ideal but encountered difficulties applying that ideal to their own lives such as Val, a white queer/bi NB/GQ trans man in his early-30s. He explained:

“Yeah, it’s hard for me to imagine that, just because I’ve never even managed to have good friendships with metamours, just like where none of us are living together. Which is something I really want. I think I would really like that sort of kitchen table polyamory and I’ve never had anything close to that. It’s hard for me to picture a household like that.”

At the time of our interview, Val deliberately lived in platonic cooperative housing, thus having experience living with other individuals in a communal house; however, he had difficulty imagining his metamours being present in the household as he had never formed a close relationship with a metamour. Val’s narrative highlights the tensions between having an ideal in mind and the ability to imagine that ideal under their current circumstances.

**Forming Coparenting Arrangements**

The queer polys I spoke with were more likely to illustrate an image of their ideal family household than what their ideal parenting arrangements would look like, in part due to the lack of desire for children that many participants felt at the time of our interviews. However, those who did want children and spoke of parenting roles frequently referenced or described coparenting. Several of these participants did so in describing their household ideal, such as Evie (queer, woman, POC, mid-20s) who had a prior triadic partnership:

Evie: If I got anything from that first relationship, it was sort of that I love the triad structure. That’s not set in stone or anything. I don’t have to have that. But I love the idea of three plus people living in a household together and raising a family. I’ve always wanted a big family and it was just like, ‘Wow, this is perfect!’ You know, you don’t have to have a ton of kids but you can have a ton of adults.
Emily: Yeah. Would you want to have kids be part of that?
Evie: Yeah! Yeah. [...] I don’t want to birth any children. You know, assuming that we’re raising the child, the child would be my child.

Several participants had similar feelings about birthing children – they did not have a desire to be pregnant and/or give birth, but they did want to parent or were willing to take on a co-parenting role.

Others wanted their own biogenetic children but were also open to coparenting for a variety of reasons. For instance, Frances (queer, woman/other, white, 40+) and her partner, Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s), were certain for several years that they wanted children but had recently come to realize that it might not be a reality for them due to Frances’s age and disabilities. She reported that she has “a really hard time sharing space” but nevertheless felt “it would be so awesome to live in, like, a decent sized house enough that we could coparent with another person.” Nash was also interested in coparenting, particularly as they valued communal space and desired a triadic partnership. I will return to Frances and Nash’s discussions on coparenting when I examine barriers to ideal family formation.

Still others were ambivalent or undecided about whether they wanted biogenetic children but were confident that they wanted to raise kids. Jaz (queer/other, woman/other, POC, mid-20s) was unsure about whether she wanted to have children – kids were “a question mark” and her partner was also “on the fence” about kids. Despite her uncertainty, reported that her ideal was “the coparenting model”:

Jaz: The idea of having a poly household where I have other people that I’m emotionally invested in even if we’re not sexually involved or whatever, intentionally raising children together, feels really good. Even if I don’t have children, I would like to be in a place where there are children. I’m happy to help raise children together.
Emily: Would you consider that coparenting, or would you –
Jaz: Yeah, I would. The coparenting model is my ideal probably, right now.
Jaz’s description of co-parenting as “intentionally raising children together” is characteristic of other participants’ views on co-parenting. Most queer polys imagined coparenting to involve a significant role in the children’s upbringing. As discussed in the previous chapter, queer polys who did not have a fundamental parenting role to their partners’ children did not consider themselves a ‘coparent.’ My participants appeared to have the same mentality when imagining their ideal families – that coparenting is a negotiated, intentional decision that involves commitment and stability.

In contrast, J.R.’s notion of coparenting might be more closely aligned with social parenting than a more substantial, permanent parenting role. J.R. (bi/queer, NB/GQ, white, mid-20s) did not desire his own children due to the “level of responsibility” that accompanies “procreating” but could imagine having kids in his poly household:

“Neither Lillian nor I are like particularly big on procreating. So, you know, there are enough people in this world. We don’t need more. And neither of us are really fond of kids, so we wouldn’t probably. [...] But I think that I would be okay with having kids in the household. I’m like – I’m okay with kids but I wouldn’t want my own because I’m just like afraid of that level of responsibility. [...] You know, I think that our current culture pushes people into this idea of like the nuclear family and I’m much more of a fan of the style of childrearing that’s like ‘takes a village to raise a child’ kind of thing. Like, I have no problem being a coparent. And if somebody is like, ‘Okay,’ you know, ‘Hey J.R., me and [partner] are going to go out tonight. Could you watch the kids?’ Like, ‘Yeah, you and [partner] go have a date night. I’ll like make sure the kids don’t kill themselves.’”

It is unclear whether J.R.’s example of watching the kids during a partner’s date was intended to illustrate “being a coparent” or the benefits of ‘it takes a village’ childrearing.

As discussed above, several participants referenced the ‘it takes a village’ parenting ideology that J.R. mentions. Many of these participants did not desire or could not have their own biogenetic children but were strongly invested in the idea of coparenting. For instance, Jordan (pan, trans-other, white, mid-20s), who could not have biogenetic children due to being
disabled and transgender, saw value in ‘village’ parenting and was hopeful that he could soon coparent with the other members of his poly household:

“So, I’d like to have the ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ kind of deal, but I uh … And hopefully in the next couple of years – Dunstan’s daughter’s planning to have a child in the next couple years, which means that we’ll have a spawn running around that I’ll be involved with. So, that would be great.”

Similar to household ideals, a few participants’ parenting ideals were inspired by their own or others’ childhoods. Ron’s (heteroflexible, man, white, 40+) interest in raising kids in a poly household was encouraged by a friend’s experience: “I know a guy who was raised in a polyamorous household. He has nothing but great things to say about everything that was involved in it.” Ron had not yet had “that in-depth conversation” with his partners but repeated that he does “want kids around.”

There appeared to be a spectrum that participants fell somewhere along in the extent to which they had discussed their hopes and plans about children with their current partners. Ron would be at one end of this spectrum, where he had not had a serious conversation with his partners about kids and Frances and Nash might represent the other end, where they had deep, emotional, ongoing conversations about kids. Christina (bi/pan, woman, white, mid-20s) would fall in the middle of this spectrum. Her narrative represents the situation some other participants were in at the time of our interviews, in which they had had these conversations with their spouse or long-term partner but not newer partners. She explained first that she and her ‘other partner’ had somewhat of an unspoken understanding that they are interested in coparenting together but had not solidified any plans as the relationship was very young:

“My other partner made it known that they really want to adopt and have always thought of themself as being a parent. […] And so, I think we haven’t sat down and specifically been like, ‘Yes, I will have your babies.’ Like, that’s not been a discussion but it’s been known throughout the relationship. Like, ‘I want kids and I want to live with you. You’re going to have to live with my kids and hopefully
you’ll want to parent them equally as well, and if you end up adopting a child, I would love to equally parent them as well.’ So that’s kind of where we are right now and not wanting to freak each other out. […] So I think that we’re both kind of thinking the same thing as in we both have thought like, ‘Yes, we would like to all coparent our children,’ but I think that none of us wants to say it because it’s like, you know, a six month relationship.”

Christina then transitioned into the conversations with her husband, which began when the two were negotiating her other partner moving in with them:

“I had talked to – obviously when we had talked about moving in, I had talked to my husband about, ‘You know, we want kids. How would you feel about my other partner being an equal coparent in this relationship?’ And my husband was just like, ‘Oh yeah, we’ll work everything out. That sounds great.’ Like, ‘Cool, more people to make lunch boxes.’”

Since our interview, this trio began the journey of constructing their ideal polyfamily, as Christina’s other partner had moved in with her and her husband.

**Validating Family Ties**

The third theme that arose in how my participants imagined their ideal families is the necessity of and approach to social and legal validation via legal dyadic marriage and other methods such as commitment ceremonies or symbolic marriage. Most participants did not have traditional views on marriage and many were politically resistant to the institution. They often shared sociopolitical critiques of marriage and the nuclear family model, expressing beliefs that institutionalized marriage is oppressive to marginalized groups and problematic in how it organizes the allocation of rights and benefits. I will return to this finding in more detail in the following chapter. Despite these beliefs, many participants did in fact expect or had plans to marry in order to access those rights and benefits. In addition, many others imagined that they might marry for pragmatic reasons but reiterated that they have little interest in the institution otherwise. For instance, J.R. (bi/queer, NB/GQ, white, mid-20s) said:
“I think that the idea of the institution of marriage and like this on paper recognition, this like government recognition of marriage is kind of like, it’s somewhat like of a necessary thing because it facilitates somebody like having power of attorney […] What I don’t like is the fact that it’s limited to two people. And so for that reason, as well as like historical reasons of, you know, what marriage is culturally, I’m kind of against it. But I think there is a good possibility that Lillian and I might get married at some point in the future anyway.”

Several participants gave similar responses in which they acknowledged the necessity of legal marriage for their own partnerships or families and imagined they might marry “to solidify my partner’s legal rights,” but made clear that they were against institutionalized marriage ideologically.

Other participants who objected to the institution but had plans to marry framed their reasoning in terms of legal and social validation. For instance, Linnia (queer/bi, woman, white, late-30s) saw value in marrying for the benefits, but viewed the need to validate her partner Logan’s role as a parent to her children as far more imperative than accessing benefits:

“Yeah I think that is an interesting question because part of me thinks that maybe we ought to disentangle all of the rights that are associated with – like maybe the problem is that we have too many rights associated with marriage. […] I am the one with the full-time job and I’ll have benefits at my work and Logan, if he marries me, can have benefits through my job, right? Then there’s other like – for us we have much more, like much more intense concerns than that. Like, he is actually a primary guardian of my kids in a practical sense, but not in a legal sense. He doesn’t have the status that one needs in order to be taken seriously within the community of parents. That’s a big problem for him and that’s a problem for our family. So, we talk about the fact that like we want to be married in order to – in large part in order to legitimize his role within the family, which is very fundamental but not recognized from outside of it.”

Several queer polys stressed the importance of parental rights as a justification for marriage even if they did not yet have their own children. Hannah (queer/gay, woman/genderqueer/agender, mid-20s, white), for example, interrupted her discussion of her plans and hopes for the future to
clarify that she would marry in order to protect her family despite her objections to the institution:

“I guess I should backup and say that like if I do raise kids with someone, like I’m not going to be – I’m not going to take that high ground necessarily and say like, ‘No, I won’t get married.’ Like, if I’m raising kids and I need those tax breaks, I’ll get legally married. But it’s not going to be tied to the value of my relationship and it’s not going to be even necessarily a public thing that people need to know. It’s just kind of like a, ‘If this is the legal agreement that I need to get my kid what I need for my kid, then that’s what I’ll do,’ so.”

Like Hannah, a few participants who were averse to the institution of marriage but expected to marry discussed how they would manage the tension between their ideology and behavior. For instance, Karl (lesbian, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s) and Carrie (lesbian, trans woman, white, mid-20s) were planning to marry for insurance and other benefits, but felt strongly that they would not ‘act’ married nor disclose their marital status. Karl explained:

“We’re gonna have to get married here soon, even though I hate the idea of marriage, I don’t believe in the institution of marriage, and I think that the whole thing is a set up by our patriarchal government to like keep nuclear families and special rights tied to certain kinds of relationships that they deem appropriate. Regardless we’re going to have to because I need car insurance and she needs health insurance and its bull crap. But, besides that, um – so that’s gonna happen. Whatever, I’m not going to act like that’s a thing; we’re not going to tell anybody that’s a thing when we do that.”

This solution will allow Karl to outwardly maintain an anti-marriage ideology while being able to access the rights and benefits tied to legal marriage.

In contrast to those who took an ideological stance against marriage, a few participants were uninterested in it for other reasons but still saw value in legal marriage for pragmatic purposes. I asked Morgan, a white pan/ace genderqueer/trans participant in their early-20s if they had any hopes to marry in the future and they replied:

“Probably not marriage just because I see it as a very constricting kind of thing. I might do it if I’m committed to somebody for a long time and it involves a lot of
benefits like from someone’s job having insurance, paying for things that need to be paid, being able to see somebody – like maybe as something that comes up when I’m older, like seeing somebody in the hospital if they’re having health situations. Then I would consider it. It kind of depends on what comes up. Right now, it’s not really of interest to me in the near future just because I don’t really see it necessary. So, until it’s like extremely necessary I probably wouldn’t … I’d try to avoid it.”

Morgan later explained that his lack of desire to marry was “just like, not my preference personally.” Similarly, Cecilia (lesbian, woman, white, 40+) personally felt that marriage was restricting, albeit in a far more dramatic sense. Her attempts to imagine marriage incited anxieties that she described as, “I immediately can't breathe, like I can't breathe.” Nevertheless, despite Cecilia’s aversion to marriage, she told her partner that she would consider it only for social security purposes. She explained:

“I have felt strongly pressured by my partner and the culture to marry and I really resent it. The only reason I would marry is so that she could get my social security if I were to die first. I have more resources than she does. I also have a lot more longevity in my family than she does. So, that's kind of a joke between us. She has probably asked me to marry her 10,000 times over two decades and I have always said no. The last round was when the federal stuff went through, ‘Would you marry me for social security?’ I said, ‘That, I'd consider.’ But that's about as unromantic as you can possibly be in the entire world right? I mean seriously.”

Thus, many marriage-averse queer polys would consider marrying solely for pragmatic purposes, whether their distaste for the institution is rooted in personal, moral, or political reasons alike.

Other participants did not desire legal dyadic marriage but imagined having marriage-like commitment ceremonies to validate their families. J.R. (bi/queer, NB/GQ, white, mid-20s) said, “I like the idea of a ceremony, like some sort of ritual, which defines you now and in the future as being family, you know. Like it says to everybody else that, ‘This person and I, we have been and we are going to be family.’” A few participants mentioned community-specific specific rituals such as the Pagan ceremony ‘hand-fasting’ or ‘playa wedding’ in burner communities.
Ron (heteroflexible, man, white, 40+) imagined the latter in order to signify a symbolic marriage:

Ron: I’ve had some friends get playa married. They’re not like really married. They have a wedding at Burning Man or at a burn somewhere. That’s kind of as official as I might want to get married.

Emily: Okay, so maybe symbolically?
Ron: Symbolically, yeah. I think legally, the only reason to get married is so you might get some government benefit.

Ron’s response about his hopes for the future again highlights the ways that queer polys are resistant to legal dyadic marriage but acknowledge its utility in the form of rights and benefits.

Finally, a few queer polys imagined family validation through other means, such as legal documents that provide access to partners and children or multiple marriage. Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) was married to another participant at the time of our interview and described her ideal family as a triadic partnership with children. She imagined having formal documentation arranged that would serve as a “legally binding” agreement for the triad. She framed this approach has having dual benefits:

“I would love to have a third legal, yea, a third legal equal partner. Um, I think it would feel weird to me if two of us were legal and, you know, the other was not. […] There would be paperwork drawn up in such a way that makes people have equal access to things. Um, you know, assets and resources. And so that's, you know, something that everyone feels equal.”

These legal documents would grant rights to the third partner and allow that individual to feel more equal in the partnership despite that Nash and her spouse would be legally married. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Nash reported that she would also consider legal divorce as an approach to equalize this imagined triadic partnership.

Like Nash, other participants desired the ability to form legally-sanctioned multi-partner marriages. As in previous research (Avarim 2007; Sheff 2011, 2014), my participants were often
ambivalent about or indifferent to multiple marriage; however, some viewed multiple marriage as the ideal approach to socially and legally validate their families. For instance, Sara (pan, trans woman, white, late-20s) felt strongly about the pragmatic and social benefits of multiple marriage:

“So as far as multiple marriage goes, I would love that. I would love to have if it were legal to have a socially acceptable acknowledgement of having multiple partners. I don’t want to ever come to the situation in the future where I’m in the hospital and only one of my partners can see me. You know? So that’s a really, really big thing.”

Others desired multiple marriage to validate their own place in the partnership such as John, a white gay man in his early-30s. He was part of a triad in which his two partners were married to each other. He expressed concern about his lack of rights in the partnership: “It is a pretty big concern because obviously being with a married couple they're married so every legal right they have is kind of theirs whether I am part of that for ten minutes or ten years or twenty years I don't have any rights. It’s definitely something I think about constantly.” John’s family ideal highlights the tensions between what participants hoped for their futures and what they would be able to achieve, as it is unlikely that multiple marriage will be legalized in the U.S. anytime soon.

**Weighing Ideals and Constraints**

In illustrating hopes and plans for their future families, some queer polys questioned how realistic their ideals are or identified constraints that would make their ideal difficult to achieve. Their discussions of this issue took a variety of tones, ranging from lighthearted joking to deep concern or disappointment. A number of queer polys who imagined larger household structures or communal living for their futures specifically discussed or alluded to financial constraints. For instance, Teri (bi, NB/GQ, white, 40+) framed her ideal as an “absolute dream,” suggesting that
she perceives it as unrealistic, and joked about how that ideal will not materialize unless she or someone in her network wins the lottery:

“Both of the women I’m in love with, we joke about the perfect situation for us would to be have a commune, like a big piece of land like, you know, 100 acres with little cottages all over it and everybody gets their own cottage. We all talk about how that would be the absolute dream because you can still have your own space and live alone but also live with your people. But, you know, nobody is winning the lottery any time soon, so we aren’t going to get that!”

Teri’s reference to the lottery reveals how she views her family ideal as entirely unreachable because she believes a hefty sum of money is required to found a commune. In contrast to Teri’s lightheartedness, Sara (pan, trans woman, white, late-20s) expressed sadness when discussing her ideal of a large poly family household. She said, “It’s a really, really good thing for me and it’s a nice ideal and I really wish I could have it but I feel like I can’t get there. […] I feel like if I had the space or the means, I could start one myself. But, I don’t think I have the space or the means right now, or ever will. … [heavy sigh].”

Other participants expressed disappointment at the slow progress of achieving their ideal family situation but were optimistic that it was attainable with enough savings and pooling of resources. Karl (lesbian, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s), who was saving money to purchase land where their partners and chosen family could build ‘tiny homes’ and share resources, was frustrated with others’ lack of effort to materialize that goal. Karl and I had the following brief exchange after they described their ideal family situation:

Karl: Hard finding people who want to do that.
Emily: Oh? I’ve talked to several who want to.
Karl: Yes, everybody wants to and then nobody is, like, doing it.
Emily: Yeah, that’s the problem. And there’s the whole financial aspect.
Karl: Yeah. I have this much money for plot of land, if other people would go in with me, we could all buy a plot of land and we could start building our houses. Anyway, that’s my ideal future.
Economic constraints might severely impede some queer polyamorists from achieving their family hopes and plans.

Others foresaw emotional or other material constraints, rather than monetary limitations. When I spoke with Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s), he and his spouse were in the process of making a difficult decision about family formation as they had unsuccessfully tried to have a child over the past few years. He viewed the ideal of having a biogenetic child as unrealistic due to these failed attempts, his wife’s physical and mental health, and his inability to act as the primary caregiver for both her and a child. However, Nash described an alternative ideal in the case that he and his wife decided to stop trying to have a biogenetic child. As mentioned above, this ideal centered on forming a triadic partnership with children. Nash toggled between these two ideals in his narrative but made clear his ultimate desire was to have children, as expressed in this excerpt:

“So, my ideal isn't necessarily realistic. Only because, here's why, I mean it's complicated for us. We've been trying to have a kid for three years now, um, through various means. And because of my wife's age and chronic illnesses, it's not going to happen for her biologically. Um, and for me, we've tried, you know, several different ways, and that hasn't worked out so far. And I'm getting older and … [sigh] you know, just realizing more about my wife's physical and mental health needs. It may not be in the cards for us after all. But, that's very new and something I literally – like that's two weeks old of a potential decision we might be making. Um so, I think my ideal would be either a triad situation where there are three equal partners with equal say, with equal commitment in the relationship. And if we – if the two of us aren't able to bring a biological kid in the situation, I would love it if a third party would bring, you know, that into the situation. One or two or whatever three kids. But um, also on the table is fostering and adopting. But again, because of my wife's stuff, it would be very difficult for me to be the primary breadwinner, the sort of emotional management person of our relationship, which is what I am often because of her stuff, and to be the primary parent as well. To like add that in, I think that would be difficult for just me to do. So, if it was just the two of us, I think that dream of having a kid would probably be unfulfilled. Um, if there were three of us, especially if another person brought kids into it or was able to biologically have kids, none of that makes any
difference to me, how we acquire them, um, I mean that would be ideal for me. I mean I really love children. My wife does too. Um, and we think we have a lot to offer and contribute to parenthood.”

Although Nash viewed having a biogenetic child with his spouse as unrealistic, his other ideal illustrates how polyamory can help people achieve their hopes for the future, such as acquiring children and having more adults in the home to take on a caregiving role. Other participants were at a similar crossroad in terms of having children, such as Meredith (pan, woman, white, late-30s) who was “in the middle of figuring out” her “goal.”

Curiously, Meredith initially responded to my question about future family that she did not have an ideal as far as relationships or households, but then appeared suddenly overwhelmed and said, “Wow, Emily, that’s a huge question. Few people are comfortable in their own skin and I would say that I’m about 95% there.” Meredith was not alone in her resistance to this question. A couple other queer polys cited various reasons why they were uncomfortable with imagining their family ideal. For instance, Lonnie (gay, man, POC, mid-20s) was resistant to the question because he felt that having an ideal creates complications and can have emotionally adverse consequences. In the following conversation about Lonnie’s hopes and plans for the future, he reacted by stating that my question was “loaded,” then described how he has “fantasized” about his future family household arrangement while reiterating that it might not be realistic:

Lonnie: I think that’s such a loaded question. I think that’s also the part where it creates the complication, when you put an ideal out there.

Emily: Alright –

Lonnie: But that’s not to say that I haven’t fantasized about it.

Emily: Is there one situation that you tend to think about more?

Lonnie: I do, and it has to do with like an attached house that it could potentially be like separate families but still be connected in one space.

Emily: Like a duplex?

Lonnie: Almost like a duplex but like a space that’s shared between the two. But, at the same time, I don’t think that’s ideal. Like, there’s the … emotionally
optimistic part of me that’s like, ‘Oh, that’s awesome. That would be awesome.’ And then there’s the pragmatic side and realistic side of me that would be like, ‘I couldn’t handle Joss and Hanson fighting across the way all the time.’ And I couldn’t handle Hanson’s grumpiness, when he’s grumpy. I couldn’t handle Joss being anxiety-prone and needing to shut himself out from the world sometimes, all the time. But that also, you know, not that I couldn’t, just that I guess at this point I wouldn’t want to, but I could if I needed it. It was just, you know, the two different sides of my idealism, you could say. But a duplex would be cool.

Emily: Yeah, you can shut each other out if you want.
Lonnie: Yeah, exactly.
Emily: You can open the doors if you want.
Lonnie: Make the separation wall like super thick, ‘Oh, they’re fighting,’ close.
Emily: Okay, so you had these kind of fantasies but you try not to –
Lonnie: I try not to put that as an ideal because then that puts an expectation into my reign, into my heart, and then it puts more disappointment if it doesn’t happen. Kind of like the I see candy but I can’t touch it type of thing. You know. I try to tend to be more realistic, on that.

Thus, Lonnie had formulated an image of his ideal future family but was constrained by both pragmatism and emotion. On one level, he questioned whether his fantasy is truly ‘ideal’ due to unpleasant dynamics between and characteristics of his partners, and on another level, he feared a disappointed heart if his ideal never lived up to his expectation.

Another participant appeared hesitant to answer the question due to imposter syndrome.

Christina’s (bi/pan, woman, white, mid-20s) ideal was a small triadic family, which she felt might be in tension with how others view polyamory:

“I feel like my idea of poly or my life and like the way I live poly might not be the most open. Like, I feel like a lot of people who live out and who are like polyamorous, they’re much more free and flowing. Like I’m going to – they don’t do it so that they can like settle down and have kids with more than one person, I guess. Like that’s in my mind, like that’s not – I want to be poly but I just want to add somebody to my white picket fence like two-and-a-half kids and a dog life. So, I kind of feel I guess guilty that, you know, by going in and announcing myself like, ‘I’m poly’ and then falling in love with this person and them falling in love with me but still what I want is a house and a dog and kids. And like I feel
like if they didn’t want that, like I could see that because kind of the ‘fake poly’ I feel like. So, you know, by saying that I’m poly like might not – it might mislead people I guess.”

Christina’s guilt for being a queer polyamorist who desired a heteronormative “white picket fence” poly family was quite unique in this study. Other queer polys who wanted a triadic nuclear family with children did not view their ideal as heteronormative, or at least did not express guilt for those desires nor dissonance between their identities and ideals. Interestingly, Christina was unable to see the political power behind her plans to form a queer polyamorous multi-parent household.

**Conclusion**

My participants creatively (re)imagined ‘family’ in ways that challenge the heteronormative nuclear model and looked forward to the process of forming their own queer polyfamilies if they had not yet done so. In fact, several queer polys expressed a delightful enthusiasm and were eager to illustrate the polyfamilies they had imagined or discussed with their partners. Hannah (queer/gay, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s) offered one such response that revealed how “super pumped” she was for her “fabulous” future polyfamily:

“I totally want like a fabulous poly household! I don’t know – I don’t have specifics of like I’m picturing this kind of house in this city, in this … But I would love to have an environment where – and I want it with Evie. Like that’s my reality right now is that I don’t see a future without her, that I would love for us to live together and I would love for the long-term for a third partner or maybe we each have partners or, you know, some other folks who are wonderful, loving people to be in our lives to either live with us or to spend a lot of time there. We definitely want kids, which will be fabulous. I’m super pumped. Not right now, but like later. And I don’t know what that – you know, I would love – I kind of absolutely love the idea of raising kids in a poly household because they can only benefit from having more wonderful, supportive adults who can teach them different skills than just two folks would be able to do. I’m super excited about that.”
Similarly, Lynette (queer, woman, white, mid-20s) initially responded, “I love this question! I think about this all the time.” She had taken a road trip with her best friend the weekend prior to our interview and the two discussed their hopes for the future, which included living together. Lynette’s ideal also included having children with her current partner and co-parenting with a close friend, both of whom had expressed interest in the arrangement. She said, “I envision, like, right now my dream is to live in a house with the three of them and raise children. Yeah. I definitely don’t want to get married but like having … establishing a family in that way.” At the end of our interview, I asked Lynette if there was anything about queer polyamory she would like to discuss that we did not cover. Her response represents a common enthusiasm among many of the queer polys I spoke with:

“I’m glad we talked more about family stuff. That’s a big part of it that I don’t always associate but is very much a part of my plan for my life and my reconfiguring of what, because when I decided to stop being monogamous, I really had to reimagine what my future life would look like. I always imagined that I would have children, so then it was like … It was a scary moment of ‘How do babies happen? How am I going to make babies happen in my life?’ It’s been a really wonderful experience of reimagining all the ways that I can create an environment to raise children in. Yeah. It’s been interesting to me how that’s connected to so many other parts of my life.”

The queer polys in this study shared creative and unique visions of their future families. They largely prefer communal living, are invested in ‘village’ parenting, desire coparenting arrangements, de-emphasize biological relatedness, and prioritize friends and networks.

**Doing Polyfamily**

My participants’ narratives reveal that they ‘do’ family – in both their present familial roles and plans for future polyfamilies – in ways that have potential to disrupt assimilationism. Prior studies have found that polyamorists challenge conventional notions of family, gender
relations, and parenting (Iantaffi 2010; Pallotta-Charolli & Lubowitz 2003; Sheff 2005, 2006, 2014). Similarly, the queer polys in this study understandings of ‘family’ that center heterosexual monogamous married parents via their unique parenting roles, living arrangements, sociopolitical critiques of institutionalized marriage, and more. Some queer polys explicitly expressed a lack of interest in or aversion to heteronormative life trajectories, such that “dating, move in, marriage, kids” are not “necessary steps.” In addition, my findings support existing research on the perceived benefits of having polyfamilies (Pallotta-Charolli 2010; Sheff 2014), as several participants felt that polyfamilies were beneficial to children and adults. They expressed beliefs such as “I honestly think a big poly household is the best economically speaking thing you could do” and “I think that’s really what polyamory is great for, raising children.” In contrast to prior studies, my participants’ family ideologies heavily centered on families of choice, as one participant explained, “Your family is always composed of different people and it could be composed of friends who you choose as family, and it can be composed of multiple people from different relationships and of different relationship types, but it’s always family.”

Further, prior research has identified several challenges that polyfamilies face such as facing social stigma and dealing with families of origin (Sheff 2014) or making disclosure decisions when interacting with children’s schools (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010). Similarly, the queer polys in this study who had formed families – in whatever way family meant to them – encountered challenges and difficult decisions related to marriage, children, and separation. A key challenge that my participants stressed in their interviews is legal recognition and protection. Despite their anti-assimilationist views, many participants expected to participate in the strongest component of assimilationism – institutionalized marriage – due to the ways protections and benefits are allocated on the basis of legal marriage. Thus, there is tension between queer
polyamorists’ anti-assimilationist ideals and pragmatism, as they often view marriage as the only pathway to gain full familial rights. This finding highlights how the institution holds coercive power over people who are fundamentally against it. Other barriers might also obstruct queer polyamorists’ ability to enact non-normative family practices. Economic constraints in particular were a concern for several participants who desired communal living arrangements but did not have the financial means to buy a large home or plot of land.

Despite these constraints, some participants had already constructed their ideal families and many others had concrete plans or had taken steps to do so. Moreover, many queer polys will likely ‘do’ marriage in ways that challenge heteronormativity by engaging in unconventional marital practices. For instance, a few participants already engaged in non-normative marital practices such as removing their wedding band or reversing traditional gender roles, and others planned to ‘downplay’ their marriage by not disclosing it or not ‘acting’ married. In other words, legal constraints might impact some queer polyamorists’ decisions to marry, but the ways they enact marital roles can still challenge heteronormative practices.
Chapter Seven
QUEERING INTIMACY:
Reconfiguring Relationships, Families, and Sexual Citizenship

[There’s] the incredible freedom of, ‘Fuck it, I’m queer and poly and I get to figure out what my life is and what my relationships are,’ that’s also really scary because you don’t actually have a map.
–Jaz (queer/other, woman/other, POC, mid-20s)

In my discussions of queer polyamorists’ relationship and family practices and ideologies, I focus on the ways in which they depart from the dominant heteronormative ideology that privileges families comprised of married, monogamous, cisgender, heterosexual parents and their biogenetic children. This cultural level ideology “is a body of ideas that is used by members of an institution or group to justify a given social order” (Burke & Olsen 2011:342) that serves to oppress LGBTQ+ and nonmonogamous groups. However, these marginalized groups often challenge the heteronormative ideology by constructing families in unique and creative ways (Boggis 2012) and engaging in everyday practices of freedom (Foucault 1978) in their partnerships in ways that produce an ‘informal’ intimate revolution (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001). In other words, my participants ‘queer’ the heteronormative ideology through their public and private familial and relational practices and ideologies.

To ‘queer’ something means to challenge or disrupt the normative ways in which that thing is done. It is a practice that is against the very idea of ‘normal’ (Warner 1993, 1999). My conceptual framework of queering intimacy is inspired by Oswald, Blume, and Marks’s (2005) discussion of ‘queering the family.’ (Although other scholars had applied a queer perspective to family practices, such as Goss’ 1997 work on Queering Procreative Privilege and Grindstaff’s 2003 article Queering Marriage, Oswald et al. provide the conceptual framework that situates
queer theory within family studies.) In arguing that queer theory is a fruitful perspective to examine family practices, Oswald, Blume, and Marks use *queering processes* to refer to “acts and ideas that resist heteronormativity by challenging the gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries” (2005:146).

The practice of ‘queering’ is applicable to other areas of social life. For instance, the phrase ‘queer it up’ applied to a fashion show would suggest that the designers are expected to produce attire that is anomalous: Entirely unique and eccentric in ways that push the boundaries of cultural understandings of proper attire. The act of ‘queering’ something can also be a politically-motivated practice intended to address oppressive social norms, expectations, and assumptions. For instance, activists who take a queer perspective on institutionalized marriage (such as the group Against Equality) are interested in deconstructing cultural meanings of marriage, questioning the justifications behind its relationship to state and federal benefits, and exposing how it further harms many already marginalized groups. To ‘queer’ marriage then involves political objectives such as reconfiguring its purpose by detaching it from governmental regulation and allowing it to exist purely for the purpose of declaring partnership or familial commitments. I use *queering intimacy* to describe processes of weakening conventional expectations and norms that constrain intimate relationships, decentering the heteronormative nuclear family model, and carving out space for new meanings of family and relationships.

Interestingly, the literature on LGBTQ+ relationships and families lacks attention to queer theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, it has revealed the myriad ways in which these “‘alternative’ familial arrangements are doing much to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about the meaning of family” (Burke & Olsen 2011:342). For instance, studies demonstrate how queer people have used *practices of freedom* to construct unique relationship forms and prioritize
chosen family (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001; Weston 1991), reconfigure practices and meanings of motherhood, fatherhood, and kinship (Goodfellow 2015; Mezey 2008; Sullivan 2004), and weaken heteronormativity by legally marrying (Kimport 2014).

However, some of these practices have the opposite effect: They perpetuate heteronormative ideologies and privilege the nuclear family form. Kimport found that lesbian and gay participation in institutionalized marriage has “both liberatory and assimilationist possibilities.” Kimport concluded:

“...It matters whether the practice of same-sex marriage comes with a strong critique of heteronormativity bent on revolutionizing the social order or with a weak critique that is more focused on expanding the boundaries of marriage. The consequences of same-sex marriage for heteronormativity depend on the accounts we give of what marriage means. The disruption of heteronormativity can take place only when (same-sex) marriage is accompanied by an articulated critique of hegemonic heterosexuality. Without a narrative that consciously embraces a challenge of heteronormativity, it is more likely that gays and lesbians will be assimilated into the cultural norm based on heterosexuality than that their participation in marriage will undo heterosexual privilege.” (2014:158)

All relationship and family practices and ideologies have the potential to disrupt or perpetuate assimilationism. Abiding by heteronormative expectations – dating monogamously, marrying legally, buying a nice suburban home, then having children – is an assimilationist practice, even if the intent is to challenge heteronormativity. As Kimport found, same-sex couples who married ‘for the cause’ sought to weaken heteronormativity simply by participating in one of its most dominant practices, yet their weak political critique “demanded only an expansion of who it admits: same-sex marriage was about inclusion, not social revolution” (2014:64).

Assimilationism has come to dominate LGBTQ culture, particularly in how ‘gay rights’ became synonymous with ‘marriage rights’ and the reality that same-gender partners are increasingly likely to marry, have children, and abide by heteronormative expectations.
Polyamorous queer people, in contrast, appear to strongly value anti-assimilationism and engage in – or plan to engage in – a variety of non-normative relationship and family practices. Their family ideologies and performativity particularly hold enormous potential to disrupt the assimilationist movement. As we have seen, queer polyamorists ‘do’ family in unique and imaginative ways. For instance, queer polys provide intimate support to metamours, form non-dyadic or non-nuclear family households, prioritize families of choice, and enact creative solutions for challenges they face as queer polyfamilies. These practices resist heteronormativity and challenge cultural notions of what it means to be a ‘family.’ Moreover, their hopes and plans for the future discussed in the previous chapter, if materialized, will pose even stronger challenges to assimilationism as they openly resist heteronormative practices and construct polyfamilies in ways that ‘queer’ intimacy and family.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the ways that the queer polys in my study reconfigure meanings and practices of relationships, families, and sexual citizenship. The first section centers on the ways my participants challenge cultural notions of romance and the heteronormative relationship ideal and provides a multidimensional conceptualization of intimacy that illustrates the various types of intimate relationships queer polys have. The second section focuses on how participants challenge traditional notions of ‘family’ via their views on families of choice, institutionalized marriage, and familial rights. The third section connects these findings to sexual citizenship, including both how queer polys carry enormous potential to redefine but are simultaneously constrained by conventional notions of sexual citizenship.
Reconfiguring ‘Relationships’

I’m so glad you’re bringing this up because something that’s really integral to my understanding of polyamory is, like, my close friendships.

–Lynette (queer, woman, white, mid-20s)

In a heteronormative intimate culture, relationships are imbued with the expectation of romantic love. We are socialized and coerced into an ideology that frames romantic intimacy as a necessary feature of successful partnerships that has implications for our perceived individual welfare. Ingraham (1999) emphasizes how ideologies obscure the realities of social life and establish idealized notions in place of realistic notions. Romance is an ideology that “works to secure in the popular imagination the notion that enthusiasm or the promise of love, lust, and passion are what constitutes real love,” that ultimately produces a “reassuring illusion or the promise of well-being and bonding” rather than inspires a genuine process of “learning to love the real person and in real conditions of existence” (1999:123-125). The romantic love ideal is contingent upon a monocentric belief system that elevates monogamous dyadic partnerships as the elite form of intimate relationship and marginalizes all other forms. Romance ideology is part of the heterosexual imaginary, “that way of thinking that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being and oneness” (Ingraham 1999:26). Thus, queer polyamorists must navigate the romantic love ideal under both heteronormative and monocentric forces.

Romance is the relational expression of what Ingraham describes as feelings of ‘falling in love’ or having ‘chemistry’ – the personal manifestation of the romantic love ideology. Thus, the romance ideology materializes in intimate relationships when partners express these feelings to each other through elaborate and mundane actions. For instance, expressions of romance might involve casual complimentary remarks (such as ‘You’re so beautiful’), concerted eye contact
(such as described in the phrase ‘I love the way he looks at me’), verbal expressions of love (such as ‘I have fallen in love with you’), and exchanges of gifts or experiences (such as giving flowers, taking a partner out on a date, or ‘making love’). As Ingraham notes, sexual intimacy was also socially constructed a necessary component of ‘real love.’ In a heteronormative intimate culture, the presence or absence of these interrelated elements of intimacy defines whether a relationship is a partnership or friendship and ideologies of romantic and sexual intimacy then reinforce the firm boundary between ‘friends’ and ‘partners.’ In contrast, the great majority of the queer polyamorists I spoke with had experiences with partnerships that did not involve romantic and/or sexual elements of intimacy. Their experiences underscore how intimate relationships are multifaceted and far more complex than can be characterized by the common descriptors ‘friend’ and ‘partner.’ In addition, their narratives suggest that emotional intimacy is the crux of queer poly relationships and typically far more meaningful than romantic or sexual intimacy.

I conceptualize intimate relationships in seven distinct but interconnected categories, based on their inclusion or exclusion of emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy. Diagram 1 below provides a visualization of these categories. In the image, each sphere represents an element of intimacy – emotional, romantic, and sexual. Independently, each sphere corresponds to a category of intimate relationship. Platonic friendship is synonymous with the common understanding of ‘friendship,’ people who are emotionally close but neither romantic nor sexual. Purely romantic relationships would not involve sex nor a strong emotional bond, such as a new relationship in which emotional intimacy is gradually developing. Purely sexual relationships are the equivalent of what the heteronormative culture labels “fuck buddies” or “hookups.”
The other three relationship categories then arise from each of the intersections of the intimacy elements. The intersection of emotional and romantic intimacy represents romantic friendship, in which friends maintain a close, loving, and often flirty connection that is physical (but not sexual) involving activities such as cuddling or holding hands. Where romantic and sexual intimacy overlap represents an infatuated relationship, such as when persons might feel they are ‘falling in love’ and have a strong passionate connection but have not established emotional intimacy. Relationships with both emotional and sexual intimacy are commonly referred by nonmonogamists as intimate friendships, in which friends maintain a close emotional bond and at times have sex. Finally, the center of the diagram – where these three forms of intimacy intersect – represents the ideal heteronormative partnership, in which emotional, romantic, and sexual elements are present.

Figure 1. Forms of Intimacy and Intimate Relationship Categories.

The queer polys I spoke with described these relationship categories when we discussed intimacy, and a few of these categories were explicitly named in their accounts of prior or current partnerships. The types of intimate relationships my participants practiced were diverse
and complex, and often obscured the borders between common understandings of ‘friends’ and ‘partners.’ They largely rejected the notion that partnerships must involve emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy and had many experiences in which they maintained different forms of intimacy with different partners. In the clearest example, Theo (queer, trans man, POC, early-20s) explained, “I’ve been in one relationship where I got a different element from everyone. [...] I got the romantic part from my girlfriend. I got the passionate part from one of my boyfriends. I got the more, like, emotional support from my other boyfriend at the time.” This partnership was a closed quad in which each of the other three partners offered a different element of intimacy for Theo. In the remainder of this section, I outline the experiences and conceptions my participants detailed in our discussion of relationship intimacy. Their narratives revealed a distinct emphasis on emotional intimacy and the capacity for different forms of intimacy to fluctuate, again highlighting the central theme of fluidity.

**Prioritizing Emotional Bonds**

Many of the queer pols I spoke with prioritized emotional bonds, describing various partnerships that were primarily or purely emotional. Throughout their narratives, some participants identified which elements of intimacy they had with each of their partners, with the common denominator typically being emotional intimacy. Likewise, many participants spoke of variations in only the romantic and sexual elements, underlining how the emotional element is assumed for the connection to be considered a partnership. For instance, while offering examples of their experiences with intimacy, several queer pols included some iteration of ‘I had both the romantic and sexual aspects with Partner A, but only the romantic aspect with Partner B.’ Or, as Nash (queer, trans–other, white, mid-30s) noted, ‘I’ve definitely had romantic relationships without sex, romantic relationships with sex, um sexual relationships without romance, like
[giggles], you know, all different.” In addition, some participants discussed partnerships that had always excluded a particular element of intimacy, with phrases such as ‘we were never romantic’ or ‘we just didn’t have the sexual spark.’ Others had experiences with partnerships in which the romantic and/or sexual elements diminished over time while emotional intimacy persisted. Thus, some partnerships could be characterized as having static elements of intimacy, others involved fluidity or were described as having the capacity to change, and many involved both static and fluid components.

My participants’ narratives on prioritizing emotional intimacy revealed the centrality of intimate friendships. For instance, Joanne (queer, woman, white, mid-30s), who preferred solo-polyamory, explained, “I dated a guy and I dated a woman at the same time. And oddly enough, neither of those had romantic capacities. Um, they were completely sexual but also emotional. Um, we were friends. I had deep connections with both of those people.” Joanne framed these relationships in a way that obscures the heteronormative boundaries between friends and partners – that she had ‘dated’ her ‘friends.’ This finding supports existing literature on the ways polyamory blurs the line between friends and partners (Klesse 2006, 2007; Sheff 2005, 2011). Similarly, Jaz (queer/other, woman/other, POC, mid-20s) maintained sexual friendships that had the ability to develop a romantic component: “With some friends, some of my friends in New York, I have a very emotional connection to them as friends, and also we have a sexual component, and sometimes that develops into, ‘Oh, I totally have a crush on you.’” This capacity for naturally evolving partnerships again highlights how queer polyamorists value relationship fluidity. Ron (heteroflexible, man, white, 40+) spoke of his ‘BFFWB’ – best friends forever with benefits – the extra ‘BF’ indicating that this is a meaningful, long-term best-friendship that involves sex, in contrast to the classic ‘FWB’ relationship.
Some participants expressed frustration at how cultural understandings of intimacy perpetuate social distinctions between ‘friends’ and other relationships. When asked about experiences with different forms of intimacy, Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) responded with a deconstruction of the notion of ‘friendship’:

“Yea ... See, this is where it all gets – everything gets thrown out the window, right? Cause I've had so many conversations with people about, ‘Well uh, if it's not sexual then why is it different from friendship?’ ‘Well uh [giggles], it just is. I don't know how to tell you, like.’ [...] We're complicated people. We're nuanced idiosyncratic amazing beings. We can meet someone one time and feel like we have a soulful connection with them, that like I don't know, would they be your ‘friend?’ I mean, depends on how you define friendship. Many people define friendship as a built relationship overtime that involves reciprocity, that involves shared experiences like, but you aren't sexual with them so they're not like a ‘girlfriend’ or a ‘boyfriend’ or even a ‘one night stand.’ They're not [giggles] like how do you ... [sigh]. It's way too complicated to try to suss out what those labels are.”

Nash ultimately abandons their attempt to describe a relationship that is more meaningful than a ‘friendship’ but does not involve a sexual component. This and other statements participants shared such as “there aren’t really adequate labels” highlight the difficulties many poly people face with the lack of available language to describe their various forms of relationships. Some participants employed a combination of common vocabulary (such as ‘boyfriend’ or ‘fuck buddy’) with a more refined lexicon shared among polyamorists (such as ‘intimate friendship’ or ‘tribe’) and kinksters (such as ‘play partners’). For instance, Charlie (queer/bi, woman, POC, early-30s) explained:

“Usually if I say ‘relationship’ like, ‘This is my girlfriend’ or whatever, that means that all three of those components are present. If one of them is missing, it’s probably the sexual one because I’m totally willing to be in a committed relationship with somebody that I’m not sleeping with for whatever reason. Otherwise, if it’s like we’re good friends and we have sex, then like, ‘play partners’ or ‘fuck buddies’ or just, you know, ‘intimate friendships.’ Yeah.”
Other participants did not convey outright frustration with the lack of descriptors for close or intimate friends, but clearly articulated how central these friendships are to their lives. When asked about experiences with different forms of intimacy, Lynette (queer, woman, white, mid-20s) responded,

“[I]’m so glad you’re bringing this up because something that’s really integral to my understanding of polyamory is, like, my close friendships. And I wouldn’t necessarily call those people ‘partners’ but my best friend in Boston is someone that I … communicate with regularly, we have life plans together, just as much an important part of my life as my partners. So yes, definitely. I might not refer to them as a ‘partner’ but they’re just as much someone in my life who I consider and talk to and care for and make plans with as someone who is like a romantic sexual partner.”

Lynette’s inclusion of this intimate friend in her future highlights the centrality of emotional closeness in her relationships. She made clear that the presence of romantic and sexual intimacy does not inherently prioritize ‘partners’ over her ‘best friend’ as it often would in the dominant culture.

A few participants expressed confusion, ambivalence, or outright disinterest about romantic intimacy. For example, some were unclear on what ‘romance’ entails, responding with brief statements such as, “I don’t understand the difference between the romantic and the emotional part.” Lonnie (gay, man, POC, mid-20s) voiced uncertainty about what romance is, coupled the romantic and emotional elements, then ultimately described romance as mundane, indirect expressions of respect or love, such as remembering to stop at the store:

“I feel the like the ‘romantic’ is very … Now that I’m older it’s a very weird thing to define a relationship as, – because … I don’t know, it’s just weird because romantic and emotional almost coincide for me for relationships because, like, if I end up remembering to buy toilet paper, that’s like romantic.”

It seems that many queer polys can easily identify whether their relationships involve a romantic component, yet often encounter difficulties in describing how romance materializes in their
partnerships or how it is distinguishable from emotional intimacy. This is an interesting finding given the dominant culture’s emphasis on romance as part of the heterosexual imaginary. Queer polyamorists’ ambivalence and uncertainty about the romantic element appears in stark contrast to the dominant culture’s romantic love ideology, in which romance is assumed to be necessary for both healthy partnerships and individual happiness.

In addition, some of the queer polys I spoke with described relationships that lacked a sexual element due to one or more partners falling on the asexual spectrum or because sexual intimacy simply was not central to the partnership. For example, Tasha (queer/bi, woman, white, mid-20s) identified with the asexual spectrum, as demisexual in her screening questions and as graysexual in our interview. She felt that opening her marriage to polyamory significantly reduced her husband’s frustrations relating to their lack of sexual intimacy:

“I identify as gray-asexual, meaning that I don’t frequently feel the need to have sex. That was really stressful for my husband, because he, you know, has a regular libido. I think after we opened up our relationship, that weight was kind of lifted off for him and he didn’t have to worry about it as much because he was free to do what he wanted.”

Tasha went on to explain that she maintains emotional and romantic bonds with both her husband and her other partner, but that neither relationship involves sex (or it seldom occurs). The variation in my participants’ experiences and conceptions of romantic and sexual intimacy further suggest that emotional intimacy is at the core of queer poly relationships.

Although most participants felt that an emotional component of intimacy was fundamental to their partnerships, a few offered examples of relationships that lacked this component. Shari (queer/bi, woman, POC, mid-20s) explained, “I felt like very, like romantic. I could do all these things for her. I’d cook dinner and … We weren’t that close. There wasn’t really the emotional component. I liked hanging out with her, but yeah.” In our conversation,
Shari appeared to attribute the lack of an emotional element to the woman’s “serious boyfriend,” suggesting that his presence might have created a barrier to emotional intimacy or he forbade other emotional relationships altogether.

A few woman-identified participants specifically stated that they encounter difficulties forming emotional bonds with cismen, unsurprisingly (based on their experiences related to relationship negotiating influence described in Chapter 5). Carmen was a pan/bi NB/GQ woman of color in their mid-20s who had adverse experiences dating cismen. They explained,

Carmen: Well if we use emotional as a friendship thing, I would say that most men I don't have an emotional attachment to.

Emily: Is this cisgender men?

Carmen: Yeah.

Emily: Why do you think that is?

Carmen: Cismen aren’t very good peoples. I'm saying that as my partner is a cisman, but in general I don't really even like talking to them very much because I just have very different views on the world. So, it’s hard to build a friendship on that.

Similarly, Mabel, a white pan/bi woman in her mid-20s, appeared to question whether emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy can be simultaneously maintained with any one person, but particularly with cismen: “So far, I haven’t even met one person that all three are present, really present. I have this habit of meeting emotionally devoid men. Or like, just men that have one of those things or maybe two of those things and not a third.” Thus, although my participants strongly prioritized emotional intimacy, they at times encountered difficulties materializing this element with cismen due to hegemonic masculinities. The complications that woman-identified participants expressed about their experiences dating cismen extends far beyond troubles with emotional intimacy, as we saw in Chapter Six.
Fluidity and Interconnectedness

Several queer polys’ narratives revealed how different elements of intimacy can shift concurrently, particularly in terms of sexual intimacy. Lance (queer, trans man, white, mid-20s) briefly explained that the absence of a sexual component shifted his interest towards romance with one partner: “I think with Julia, I was very much more invested in the romantic aspects of it, and I think that's because we just didn't have the passion between us.” Similarly, some participants articulated an understanding of intimacy as fluid, noting an ebb and flow to the presence or prominence of different elements. For example, Delilah (pan, woman, white, mid-30s) used the very term ‘fluid’ to describe the sexual aspect of one of her partnerships: “With sex it’s fluid, sometimes it’s sexual and sometimes it’s not.” William (gay, man, white, mid-30s) also perceived sexual intimacy to fluctuate within his partnership. His response to my inquiry about whether he had experiences with partnerships that had different elements of intimacy follows:

“Yes. Very much so. So, um I would say – and the example that I always have given to people when they talk about it, very much along those lines, is there's people I love, there's people I'm friends with, there's people I have sex with. And the best kind of sex is with someone I love, but that's not to say that having sex with someone I don't love isn't good. So, you know, along those same things, exactly. Now, you know, with my husband obviously all three of those things. But we've hit times in our relationship – I have a much more rampant sex drive than he does. And so that's one of the things where, you know, keeping our relationship stable, having a third there who's comfortable meeting my needs when he’s not comfortable doing it was something that was very good for us.”

William appears to distinguish between a holistic view of his marriage – that it ‘obviously’ had all three elements – and particular points in time where the marriage did not involve sex. This phrasing raises the question of whether claiming that emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy are each present in one’s marriage can be compulsory, as William appears to assume that a spouse inevitably has all three elements. In contrast, several queer polys had spouses with whom
they were perpetually uninvolved in the sexual arena but maintained committed emotional and/or romantic bonds, indicating they likely do not view the presence of all three forms of intimacy as an inherent characteristic of marriage.

Other participants experienced fluidity in intimacy with a gradual loss of romance or sex. For instance, Brooke (queer/lesbian, trans woman, white, 40+) had lost the sexual and romantic components with her spouse after transitioning, but the two remained married and maintained a strong emotional bond:

Brooke: We essentially – our own relationship has lost the sexuality element to it with like my transitioning as a trans person. Um, and so that's kind of [sigh] part of what prompted the discussion of what led into this. […] We're still probably like best friends and affectionate but just not in a sexual way sort of thing. […]

Emily: Would you say you're still romantic with your spouse?

Brooke: No…? Yea, mostly just emotional connection with that. […] No sexual part and the romantic part but we're still very much emotionally attached, so.

Brooke’s wife was in a relationship with a man at the time of our interview and Brooke herself was dating. This situation highlights how polyamory can suit the needs of partners who continue to deeply care for each other but have lost romantic and sexual intimacy. Rather than ending the marriage, they negotiated a polyamorous structure to maintain their partnership with emotional bonds while having the ability seek romantic and sexual intimacy with other people.

In addition, many queer polys I spoke with expressed an understanding of different elements of intimacy as interconnected with, prerequisites for, or encompassing of one another. For example, Delilah (pan, woman, white, mid-30s) explained that emotions are necessary for her to have a sexual relationship, even with a BDSM play partner. Likewise, Spencer (bi, man, white, late-20s) was thrilled to discuss the romantic element he has with a partner but appeared to stumble upon how to express that he views the emotional aspect as producing the romantic
aspect. He stated, “Oh, we’re just gross. We’re just very cute. I mean, it’s not … and our … no, I mean, it’s – I think the romance is a product of the emotional relationship. It’s not something in and of itself.” Similarly, Evie (queer, woman, POC, mid-20s) felt that the emotional and romantic elements were “based in” sexual intimacy for one of their partners:

Evie: Sierra and I had at first – it seemed like we had more of an emotional … there was an emphasis on our emotional relationship, whereas with Lori and I, there was an emphasis on our sexual relationship. So, yeah. There was sort of that imbalance. Yeah.

Emily: Did that persist through the relationship or was that just the beginning?

Evie: I would say with Lori it persisted because we didn’t really evolve at all.

Emily: Okay. And so, do you feel like you had a romantic connection with her or a deep emotional connection?

Evie: I felt like we did but I don’t think it was … I think it was just sort of based in the sexual relationship.

Emily: Okay, and then what about with Sierra?

Evie: I think we … we did have sort of a well-balanced connection in all of those areas but they just sort of faded over time.

The use of ‘imbalanced’ and ‘well-balanced’ are interesting descriptors here. It is unclear whether ‘imbalance’ refers to unequal weight among different components of intimacy (such that one aspect is stronger than others) or whether the partnership itself is imbalanced (such that lacking some aspects of intimacy undermines the relationship as a whole). Evie’s experiences again highlight how intimacy can be at once static and fluid within one partnership, as the relationship described above was a triad.

Flexible Normativity

Only five participants claimed to have emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy present in all their poly partnerships; however, their narratives still pointed to an element of flexibility. One of these five expressed an openness to relationships that do not include all of these elements as well as prior attempts to spark romantic intimacy with intimate friends. Val (queer/bi, NB/GQ
trans man, white, early-30s) specified, “They’ve always had all three. I would be open to having a non-sexual relationship and I do feel like I’ve tried to turn very intimate friendships into more romantic friendships and had, like, had that not work because people don’t want that. Yeah.” This phrase highlights the frustrations some queer polys feel with the divisions our culture draws between friendship and love or romance. Consistent with other literature on polyamory (Klesse 2006, 2007; Sheff 2005, 2011), my participants often blurred the lines between ‘friends’ and ‘partners’ in both practice and ideology. Likewise, another of these five participants declared that relationships require all three aspects, while suggesting that the boundaries between different forms of relationships are muddled. Mae, a lesbian/queer woman/other participant of color in her mid-20s, stated:

“[That didn’t have] all three? Um, no. Not that I would call a relationship. For me, a relationship has to have all three components for it to be like my romantic relationship. Um, I do have friends that I've got a really close connection with. Like they're some of the closest people to me emotionally and we're very physically affectionate but we don't have sex and we're not romantic with each other. So the lens gets kind of wibbly wobbly.”

Other participants also voiced contradictory experiences. For example, Mathis (gay, man, white, mid-30s) stated, “For me and my experience, it’s involved all three. If it didn’t involve the three, it was a very short-lived relationship. It may have had two of those components but it didn’t end up lasting.” Within one response, Mathis claimed that his relationships have had and may not have had all three elements of intimacy. The important distinction is that a lack of one or two forms of intimacy inevitably meant the relationship could not survive.

Other participants’ narratives implied that having emotional, romantic, and sexual bonds is important to them, even if they were reluctant to admit it. For instance, Hannah (queer/gay, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s) expressed difficulties moving on from a former partnership that involved all three of those elements: “I was really invested in that relationship and that was very
much all three, which made it, like I said, it was really hard to get closure on that relationship.”

Hannah had easily described other former relationships that did not involve each of these components of intimacy; however, it was the partnership with all three components that elicited complicated feelings – enough to provoke a rambling tangent until she finally concluded, “So anyway, what was I saying? So with her, it was all three.”

**Conclusion**

An investigation of emotional, romantic, and sexual components of intimacy is valuable for identifying ideals and experiences of intimacy within poly partnerships; however, it is certainly not a flawless approach. One could claim that it is reductionist, diluting relationships to only emotions, romance, and sex. Polyamorous relationships are tremendously complex and certainly involve components beyond these three forms of intimacy. To be sure, one participant felt that intimacy is the crux of polyamorous relationships but noted another important element:

“I definitely feel that there are the three pillars of intimacy. I think that’s really what it comes down to, is intimacy. But I also think that there’s a social component as well. That is not necessarily a part of the intimate but is also deeply important. […] The social one is the one that I think probably varies the most, because, you know, when you have someone who maybe works all the time, doesn’t want to go out, versus someone who does like being out and when they get off work just wants to party. You know? So that’s going to mean that that’s going to greatly vary. The other three I try to make sure that there’s some balance in that, and I do think that they’re all important.”

Here, Phil (bi/pan, man, white, 40+) described a social component as ‘deeply important,’ yet ultimately appeared to ascribe more value to emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy by highlighting efforts to ‘balance’ those elements and reiterating their importance. Although most queer polyamorists I spoke with have experiences with relationships that lack some form of intimacy and many likely value other components beyond emotions, romance, and sex, they often appear to idealize these three elements of intimacy for their partnerships.
Nevertheless, examining different forms of intimacy within queer polyamorous relationships exposed the wide degree of variation in experiences and understandings of intimate ‘relationships.’ My participants’ narratives reveal how queer polyamorists deconstruct, reconfigure, and/or abide by conventional understandings of intimate relationships. Most queer polys did not subscribe to heteronormative romantic love ideologies and several did not perceive sexual intimacy as an inherent characteristic of ‘real love’ (Ingraham 1999), although a few participants did frame intimacy ideals somewhat heteronormatively. My participants’ experiences with intimacy support the underlying theme of fluidity and flexibility within queer poly relationships and these experiences coupled with their critical reflections on intimacy and ‘relationships’ suggest that queer polys actively challenge heteronormative relationship expectations. This is particularly significant for recent trends in queer culture, as it has the potential to disrupt assimilationism and contest hegemonic respectability politics.

Reconfiguring ‘Family’

*With monogamous relationships, I feel like a lot of people are very possessive of their children and I feel like that isn’t the way that queer people should be.*

–Sara (pan, trans woman, white, late-20s)

As previously discussed, the mainstream LGBTQ movement developed over the past several decades to align with ‘respectability politics.’ The political divide between the identity politics camp that values normalization and social respectability and the queer politics camp that values non-conformity and anti-assimilationism has leaned substantially in favor of the former. As a part of this victory, many LGBTQ people (and the public in general) set their eye on same-sex marriage rights as the civil rights issue of the early 21st century. Gaining access to legal marriage represented a cultural shift in which LGBTQ people were thought to finally be
welcomed into sexual citizenry (Mezey 2015; Walters 2014). The process of becoming a sexual citizen, however, has mandated that queer people assimilate into a heteronormative family life—a child-centered, monogamously married, two-parent family. In other words, queer people are “forced to ask for equal rights on the basis of their similarity to heterosexuals” (Brandzel 2005:190).

The identity political camp and its drive towards heteronormative family expectations neglects the costs of assimilationism. For instance, assimilationism perpetuates an already narrow vision of sexual citizenship that is largely exclusive to privileged groups. The path to sexual citizenship is near impossible to tread for queer people who are nonmonogamous, kinksters, gender non-conforming, and so on, and for those who prioritize families of choice. Similarly, the focus on marriage equality reinforces racial and class inequalities, as marriage is most accessible to and has more gains for white, middle-class people. Moreover, it pulls attention away from more pressing issues within the queer community, such as job and housing protections, youth homelessness, violence against trans people, and so on and ultimately fails to critique heteronormativity or reimagine ‘family’ in non-oppressive ways (Brandzel 2005; Smith 1997; Walters 2014). (See Chapter 3 for more on this discussion.)

Despite that many queer people support identity politics and are increasingly forming conventional, heteronormative families, there are some who continue to question family normativity and/or actively push back against assimilationism (the Against Equality organization, for instance). The queer polyamorists in this study were far more likely to align with queer politics than identity politics, whether or not they viewed their family practices and ideologies as a queer political statement. Many participants criticized the conventional, heteronormative family in their interviews despite that I did not specifically ask for their
thoughts on the matter. Many were passionate about this subject, although some were ambivalent about marriage and children. It appeared that the latter group struggled with tensions between their personal desires to parent and be married and their anti-assimilationist family ideologies.

The prior chapter summarized the ways that the queer polys in this study reconceptualized what counts as ‘family’ and engaged in family performativity through various familial roles, unique challenges, and creative solutions. I also introduced their views on institutionalized marriage, exposing the tensions between their anti-assimilationist values and the pragmatic reasons they did or expected to marry. In this section, I further explore their sociopolitical critiques of the heteronormative nuclear family model, linking my participants’ views to queer political critiques of marriage and family. I also discuss the potential alternatives and solutions my participants felt would be appropriate to address the allocation of family rights should they not be awarded strictly to the heteronormative nuclear family model.

**Queer Critiques**

Several participants spoke of the harms of cultural idealization of the nuclear family. Spencer (bi, man, white, late-20s) explained, “I think that as a society we need to stop prioritizing the nuclear family over other family models, especially in a society with so many – and this is not a poly thing specifically, with so many single parents. And I think that incentivizing the nuclear family leads to a lot of very unhealthy situations.” Some participants stated outright that they believe the nuclear family model can be harmful to children such as Lynette (queer, woman, white, mid-20s) who worked with kids. She felt that ‘isolated nuclear families’ can be damaging to children and restrictive for parents. These statements were often framed in terms of anti-heteronormativity, which is at the heart of queer political critiques of ‘the family.’ Others were wary of the nuclear family model but did not necessarily identify how it can
be harmful. For instance, Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) was troubled by our cultural shift from more communal living “into this rugged individualism kind of thing” where only two adults comprise “little insular families” who live in the suburbs and rarely interact with each other.

Most of the queer polys I spoke with also took issue with the institution of marriage, particularly in terms of the government’s role in allocating benefits and the ways it delegitimizes families outside of the two-parent nuclear family model. These queer polys cited several reasons for having anti-marriage ideologies, such as how the institution perpetuates race, gender, class, and other disparities or has constructed discriminating barriers in terms of legal access to non-married partners. For instance, Dee (queer, woman, POC, late-20s) felt that marriage “is a sexist and racist and ableist social institution that privileges people in unfair ways and puts other people at risk.” Some were quite passionate about their feelings on the matter, such as Hannah (queer/gay, NB/GQ woman, white, mid-20s), whose discussion of her ideal future family involved the following tangent:

“Marriage, the institution, the privileges, a monogamous couple and legal and societal ways, it’s not my thing. And particularly – and that’s not just because I’m poly. It’s also because I am sort of aware of the fact that like single moms with kids don’t get those same tax breaks. Like grandmas raising their kids don’t get those tax breaks. Like that pisses me the fuck off, honestly. What pisses me off is that gay activists have treated that like it’s a holy fucking grail and I am just done hearing that. Like I’m really glad it’s passed. I’m really glad gay people can get married. I’m not opposed to weddings. I’m not opposed to marriage itself. I’m opposed to the fact that like we keep talking about legal benefits but we don’t look at whether those legal benefits are actually like a good idea. So anyway, feelings about marriage.”

These critiques of institutionalized marriage mirror some of the queer arguments against the marriage equality movement, which we should consider “in light of current struggles over citizenship” (Brandzel 2005:172).
I identified five key arguments against the marriage equality movement, many of which were raised by the queer polys I spoke with either in their critiques of institutionalized marriage or in their proposed alternatives. First, the benefits associated with legal marriage should not be tied to marriage, but rather partnerships, familial/parental ties, and/or the household. As Warner notes, “the only kind of benefit that is necessarily linked to marriage is divorce” (1999:120).

Second, marriage perpetuates race and class inequalities and serves to further advantage already-privileged groups (Ingraham 1999; see the Against Equality anthology). The queer perspective argues that we should not promote an institution that disadvantages people who are of color and low-income. Marriage is in fact constituted in classist and racist regimes that the queer political camp seeks to dismantle. For instance, the “queer radical critique of gay marriage exposes how capitalism structures our notions of ‘family’ and the privatization of the social relationships we depend on to survive” (Nair 2014:20). Third, marriage ‘equality’ is a misnomer – access to marriage is not equal as disadvantaged social groups, including polyamorists, have less access than white, middle-class, monogamists. Moreover, the fear of having rights stripped away by an anti-gay administration (including the looming threat that marriage rights can be overturned by the Supreme Court) that queer people must tolerate clearly indicates that ‘equality’ is misleading.

Fourth, instead of viewing same-sex marriage as a route towards sexual citizenship, the queer perspective questions why social status should rely on access to marriage and notes that the movement perpetuates the rigidity of sexual citizenship. Brandzel argues, “advocacy for same-sex-marriage rights has not critiqued citizenship and its tendency to exclude or differentiate, but it has reproduced the myth of universal citizenship as a great equalizer” (2005:196). In addition, by coercing queer people into assimilation to achieve citizenship, the movement produces a hierarchy among queer people – the good gay / dangerous queer
dichotomy that I introduce in Chapter Three. Rather than reimagining the possibilities for sexual citizenship, we ‘other’ the dangerous queer: “The problem, always, is that embracing this standard merely throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder of respectability. [...] What could have been seen as a healthy variation is now seen as deviance” (Warner 1999:60).

Finally, ‘gay rights’ appeared to have become synonymous with ‘gay marriage’ due to the marriage movement. This tunneled vision of ‘gay rights’ points to an abandonment of liberationist politics that was at the heart of early queer rights movements. Suzanna Walters asks us to question this political shift:

“We need to reckon with why gay marriage has become the sign of all things gay – for advocates and opponents alike. Why did a walk down the aisle replace a walk on the wild side, and why does marriage and family rhetoric hold such powerful sway? [...] For no other minority group do we imagine this: Do we think misogyny has been vanquished now that legal gender discrimination is a thing of the past? Do we think anti-Semitism is gone because Jews no longer must wear the yellow star? Has the integration of women into the workforce eradicated sexism? Has the election of a black president and the end of legal segregation slain the scourge of racism?” (2014:174/201).

Walters makes the point that ‘marriage equality’ will not lead to full sexual citizenship as proponents of the movement argue. Moreover, this narrow view of ‘gay rights’ masks more pressing issues such as queer youth homelessness and suicide prevention, reducing violence and murders of trans women of color, gaining access to healthcare for low-income or HIV+ queer people, and so on. In other words, we should focus on protecting marginalized queer folks before all else.

My participants either directly stated or touched upon these arguments in our conversations about their current families, future families, and family rights. In general, they expressed strong anti-assimilationist sentiments that align with queer political critiques of
marriage and family. Where they diverged, however, is how they felt that families should be
contstructed and (de)institutionalized.

Queer Solutions

The queer polys I spoke with proposed different and sometimes opposing alternatives or
solutions to institutionalized marriage and the nuclear family model. Some took strong anti-
marrige stances but admitted that access to the institution should be available to all until
alternatiive solutions could be materialized. For instance, I asked Spencer (bi, man, white, late-
20s) what his thoughts were on ‘marriage equality’ for polyamorists, and he replied:

“I’d rather get rid of the institution. I think that marriage is what it is and currently
it’s a partnership between two people and it’s an institution that was designed to
prioritize the nuclear family and it still is that. And I think it’s fantastic that same-
sex couples who want to get married can. I hated those people who are like, ‘Oh, I’m not happy about this.’ Like, ‘If I don’t get it than nobody should get it’ or ‘I
think it’s garbage so nobody should have it.’ And I agree that nobody should have
it but for as long as we have it, everyone should have equal access to it.”

Like Spencer, several participants felt it would be best to abolish the entire institution, but that
everyone – including polyamorists – should have equal access to marriage as it stands now since
it has significant implications for partner-partner and parent-child rights. In contrast, some
criticised the ideology that the institution should be dissolved, such as Logan (heteroflexible,
man, white, early-30s) who explained:

“I think marriage is actually, as much as I’m progressive and have problems with
marriage as a historical institution, I think people who want to just discard
marriage all together are talking from a position of real privilege of never having
to had rely on this. These are the people who haven’t had to watch spouse die or
haven’t gone through a messy, terrible divorce and needed the legal protections
that marriage affords.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, several of those who took issue with government-
sanctioned marriage struggled with how else to gain access to familial rights. Like Logan, many
of my participants had plans to marry for practical purposes or acknowledged that legal marriage is necessary or beneficial in some situations, despite their anti-marriage mentalities.

Other participants focused on families more broadly in their discussions on alternatives or solutions to oppressive marriage and family norms. Several queer polys emphasized the benefits of chosen kin networks. They argued that families should be not be constructed on the basis of romantic or sexual relationships and several specifically referenced ‘families of choice’ or ‘chosen family’ in their discussions on family rights or ideologies. Val (queer/bi, NB/GQ trans man, white, early-30s) explained:

“I really like the idea of broader family networks, like families of choice. I don’t like the idea of romantic relationships being the most important relationships. Ever. I think that it would be great if people could, you know, sort of have recognized ties to each other that weren’t just a married couple but also not just to have a polycule, you know?”

This participant saw value in larger, chosen families that extend beyond a ‘polycule,’ which is typically comprised only of one’s partners and metamours.

Similarly, Joanne (queer, woman, white, mid-30s) felt that family rights should not be associated with sexual ties:

“I think that we should move away from family as um, conjugal. I don’t think that’s how we should be defining family. I don’t think that’s how we should be defining who gets rights to what. I think that anyone should be able to self-identify who their family is and who gets those medical rights, those legal rights, and all of those things. I think that you should be able to walk into a courthouse, sign some papers like a marriage certificate, but with whoever you choose your family to be. I think that having it based off of who you’re having sex with is stupid [giggles] and really limited. And I feel like we could do it all in one fell swoop if we just stopped [giggles]. Cause there are so many people who need those rights. And, you know, might have something to do with sex, it might not. I think it’d be just better to take sex out of the equation.”

Joanne’s solution was to construct a legal process that allows people to self-define their families and extend familial rights and protections to named individuals, similar to the marriage
certificate but not restricted to two individuals. Lynette (queer, woman, white, mid-20s) also proposed a system of self-declaration: “Yeah, if you could just, like, sign a form together and be like, ‘We’re a family. This is our family. Here, government, this is our family.’ Something like that that at least provides kind of baseline protections for families.”

Lynette also referenced polyamory itself as a superior alternative to dominant family norms and expectations, as many other participants did. These queer polys felt that polyamory had potential to disrupt the heteronormative nuclear ideal by combating traditional gender roles and parenting assumptions and by providing healthier environments to raise children. For instance, Lynette was particularly interested in the implications polyamory might have for societal understandings of families and parenting because she worked with children and had spent time thinking about how children are raised. She explained:

“For me, polyamory is really important in kind of breaking down the nuclear families. I think that that’s … I think isolated nuclear families are really bad places for kids to grow up. They’re a really bad place for parents to be parents. The more like community kind of place you can have for children to be growing up and for parents to be raising their children is better. I think it’s really important to break down those barriers and stereotypes about what it means to be a good parent and how you can have a nurturing environment for children.”

Several participants shared Lynette’s belief about community parenting. In fact, seven participants specifically referenced ‘it takes a village’ parenting in their discussions on family practices and ideologies.

Some participants also discussed the benefits of poly families in terms of pooling resources. Nash (queer, trans-other, white, mid-30s) felt that having more than two adults in the home ‘makes sense’ and has numerous benefits:

“I also think that sort of socioeconomically and just like socioculturally, it kind of makes sense to have more than two adults living in a space together. […] If you're a parent, the more adults there are, the more the kids are supported, the more the
adults are supported, the more – if you're doing it well and communicating and over-communicating, all these things, it can be such a supportive community for everyone. And it's like, if one person is out of town or one person is sick or one person is whatever, you still have other people to fall back on.”

Like Nash, Dee (queer, woman, POC, late-20s) felt that polyamory “is a really good way for people to still have sustainable relationships through resource sharing and, you know, helping with parenting in ways.”

Even participants who were not practicing polyamory at the time of our interview expressed an appreciation of polyamory for its transformative potential. Linnia (queer/bi, woman, white, late-30s) was not strictly polyamorous and explained that she had “political reasons why I value it” because:

“I think that trying to change the way we think about relationships in a way that’s less controlling and possessive is important, and I think like trying to figure out how to love somebody without needing to possess them is – all of that I think is very important. I think that just breaking out of relationship molds is politically important too. So, I think there’s a lot of reasons why I would totally defend polyamory regardless of how much I am practicing it.”

A few of the queer polys I spoke with felt that queer people should take the unique opportunity they have to reinvent oppressive marriage and family norms. Cecilia (lesbian, woman, white, 40+) was raising two children with her long-term partner. She felt that queer people should question the heteronormative nature of institutionalized marriage and reported being perplexed by ‘very’ queer poly people who value the institution. She said, “I’m fascinated by very queer, very poly folk who are really interested in getting married. I find it – it’s all I can do to be like, ‘What?!’ They sound just like straight people when they talk about it.” Cecilia felt that queer and poly people who are interested in marriage have lost the “radical energy” that often accompanies queer and poly identities.
Similarly, Sara (pan, trans woman, white, late-20s) felt that queer people should not participate in heteronormative family trajectories. She felt that queer people have an opportunity, or perhaps an obligation, to reimagine family norms:

“The biggest problem for me is that, well right now with monogamous relationships, I feel like a lot of people are very possessive of their children and I feel like that isn’t kind of the way that queer people should be. This is a big ideological thing. I feel like most non-heterosexual people should not kind of – shouldn’t strive for the standard marriage model with children and everything else like that. Besides the fact that it’s harder to reproduce [as queer people], it’s also kind of reinforcing this harsh patriarchal thing that just doesn’t seem right for a lot of reasons. It seems antiquated. It seems wrong. I would love to have other people’s children I could look after and love. I would love to have children of my own that I could have other people help me raise. Very much so.”

Sara was in a relationship with her partner, Jules, at the time of our interview. Despite her queer political mentality, she ended this part of our conversation with, “The assumption is that if I’m with Jules for a few more years, we’re going to get married for financial reasons. Then we’re going to try to look into getting children.” Like many other queer polys I spoke with, Sara’s narrative highlights the tensions between ideology and pragmatism.

**Conclusion**

My participants’ ideologies and practices suggest that queer polyamorists hold the potential to help offset the assimilationist family trajectory that will continue to marginalize many American families if it goes unchallenged. The power for queer polyamory to disrupt assimilationism has implications that extend beyond the queer community, as the heteronormative family ideology constrains queer and non-queer families alike. Thus, there is value in ‘queering the family’ for all families. Similarly, conventional notions of sexual citizenship serve to restrict all people’s sexual lives through its coercive and normalizing power. Queer polyamorists’ investment in queer political ideologies suggests that they hold enormous
potential to challenge conventional sexual citizenship; however, they are constrained by monocentric social forces in ways that limit this potential.

**Reconfiguring ‘Sexual Citizenship?’**

*I think that it became apparent to me that polyamory was a good way to fight the downfalls of capitalism.*

–Mae (lesbian/queer, woman/other, POC, mid-20s)

‘Sexual citizenship’ is a complex term that has multiple definitions and applications in various areas of sociological literature. In its most basic form, sexual citizenship refers to the allocation of social and civil rights to individuals on the basis of their sexual identities and practices. As Chapter Three outlines, sexual citizenship is inexorably intertwined with heteronormativity. To review, in order to gain access to sexual citizenship, queer people were forced to abandon their history – unique community norms around dating, sex, relationships, and families – in favor of more ‘respectable’ ways of participating in relational and familial life. Queer people were systemically coerced into presenting as ‘normal’ citizens who value monogamy, marriage, and family, and forced to assimilate into the dominant heteronormative culture. Assimilationism then produces social hierarchies among queer people, perpetuates the privileged status of heteronormativity, and further narrows an already restrictive notion of sexual citizenship.

I am particularly interested in an aspect of literature on sexual citizenship that centers on “a *queering* of citizenship, opening up the possibility of transforming the norms of citizenship as a whole” (Richardson 2018:29). The ways that queer polys practice and understand ‘relationships’ and ‘family’ have great potential to destabilize contemporary notions of sexual citizenship. Reconceptualizing intimacy as multifaceted and fluid weakens the rigidity of the
ideal heteronormative partnership, opening more space for variations in intimate relationships. In addition, challenging traditional notions of ‘family’ weakens the heteronormative nuclear family ideal and allows for more flexibility in how we understand what counts as family. Further, applying a queer political critique to marriage and family and questioning their connections to the state exposes the myriad alternatives that might be better suited to support contemporary relationships and families.

My participants’ narratives revealed a strong investment in queer political ideologies; however, the great majority of queer polys I spoke with failed to recognize how their relationship and family practices align with radical queer politics. In other words, I found a disconnect between my participants’ anti-assimilationist values and practices and their understandings of their own participation in queer polyamory as non-political. In addition, there appears to be great tension between queer polyamorists’ anti-assimilationist values and some of their practices as they are deeply constrained by cultural monocentric forces. I explore these findings in this section, including how these issues weaken the transformative power that queer polyamorists have to reconfigure conventional notions of sexual citizenship.

**Queer Politics and the Poly Politics Paradox**

Despite the overwhelming support of queer political ideologies that emerged in their narratives, only a fifth of participants explicitly stated that their involvement in polyamory stemmed from political or social reasons. These queer polys framed polyamory in two broad ways: As a potential avenue to challenge heteronormative families and as part of a larger social issue relating to individual rights. The latter group used a language of freedom, emphasizing the importance of people’s “right to do what they want,” to “feel like a free agent,” or to “challenge the assumption that you have to follow this [normative] path.” The others focused on how
polyamory challenges traditional gender roles and conventional parenting assumptions, as well as the harms of institutionalized marriage (as discussed above). I was surprised that so few participants conveyed their views about the harms of social institutions, particularly marriage and family, when I asked about the connections between their polyamorous practices and their politics. My participants were far more likely to respond with anti-institutionalist sentiments when I asked about legal rights for poly families. This again points to the disconnect between their ideological investment in queer politics and views of their participation in polyamory as non-political.

Overall, the majority of queer polys I spoke with did not cite political reasons for practicing polyamory and instead expressed essentialist notions of identity, describing polyamory as “natural” to them or explaining that nonmonogamous is a fundamental part of “who I am.” Others framed their involvement in polyamory as an active decision they made for themselves, stating that it was a “personal choice” or describing nonmonogamy as what “works best for me.” A few participants appeared to conflate essentialist and sociopolitical purposes for having interest in polyamory. For instance, Logan (heteroflexible, man, white, early-30s) explained:

“Oh, sure. I would say that, yeah. I think I’m, you know, fairly skeptical of traditional institutions. My general orientation isn’t to be like, ‘Oh, I was born and this institution existed, and therefore I should assume it is good and do it.’ You know? My general orientation is toward like, ‘Oh, traditional institutions are probably oppressive, so we should question them.’ And so it came natural. […] I think it is politically powerful to embody non-normative practices. Sure. […] There’s something to be said for challenging oppressive institutions through actually practicing something that’s non-normative. […] Does it feel political to me? Yeah, it’s political. But it is, you know, it’s also an honest desire and those two things probably aren’t disentangle-able.”
Logan’s view is that polyamory was ‘natural’ to him because of his political orientation, but also that his politics and ‘honest desire’ for nonmonogamous relationships are too intertwined to disentangle. I asked, “So you see it as a little bit of both personal and political?” to which he replied, “Yea, yea. The personal is political, you know. But yes.” He was not the only participant to use this phrase, although this mentality was far less common than I expected.

Other participants who had anti-assimilationist ideologies attributed their involvement in polyamory to their backgrounds rather than their politics. For instance, Shari and Jaz both related their discomfort with the nuclear family model to their upbringings. Shari (queer/bi, woman, POC, mid-20s) attributed her views on the nuclear family model to her childhood family structure: “I don’t really like the two-parent model so much because I grew up with a single mom but we had a very nice network of family friends and they would, like, watch me after school and we would take vacations together. So, I think there needs to be a different idea of the normal family unit.” Similarly, Jaz (queer/other, woman/other, POC, mid-20s) saw her non-normative family ideology in part as a product of her racial/ethnic community:

“I think it’s silly to have just two adults in a home. That makes no sense to me. Makes sense to other people, totally respect it. But for me, I’m like, ‘That’s so much space for two people! You could share so many chores, and responsibilities, and, like, money. Why would you not do that?’ I think that’s partly because I’m Latina. I didn’t grow up in a stereotypical family. With a million people in the home, I grew up with my mom, my dad, my grandma, and my other grandma moved in when she widowed. So, it was never like two people and a child. That just doesn’t compute in my brain, having two people in a home by themselves.”

Like Jaz, other participants framed having a non-normative family household in terms of what ‘makes sense.’

An interesting pattern emerged in the narratives of participants who said that practicing polyamory was not tied to politics. Nearly half of those who reported no political intentions for their participation in polyamory included a qualifier in their response. Their answers to my
question about political motivation took the form of, “No, but ….” These queer polys explained that they did not come to polyamory or continue to have poly relationships for political reasons, but that their participation in polyamory aligns with their “personal values” or “fits with my social-political world view.” Delilah (pan, woman, white, mid-30s) was one such participant who understood her politics as aligning with polyamory but not as a reason for having poly relationships. In response to my question about whether there were any political reasons she practiced polyamory, she replied:

“I mean, I guess it ties in with a lot of other … I mean, I – To answer your question directly, no? But it ties in with my political sentiments and beliefs. Like, I’m very much an anarchal communist […] Like, it’s just part of my larger ethic of being good to people and respectful to people and having love for difference. So, it fits in with it but that’s not the reason; it’s not causal.”

Similarly, several queer polys noted that “the politics came after” their involvement in polyamory rather than as a reason to have poly relationships. For instance, when I asked Mae (lesbian/queer, woman/other, POC, mid-20s) if she had any social or political reasons for practicing polyamory, she replied, “Um? Initially, no, but I think that it became apparent to me that was a good way to fight the downfalls of capitalism. That the more people you have contributing to a house, the better off the household will probably be financially.”

Whereas only one-fifth of the queer polys I spoke with viewed their participation in poly relationships and families as a radical political act, the overwhelming majority were invested in queer political ideologies. Only a handful of participants appeared to be ambivalent about politics or stated outright that they are non-political, such as one who said, “I don’t like politics. I avoid them like the plague.” An underlying theme of queer politics was intertwined with all other participants’ narratives. As such, it seems that many queer polyamorists fail to recognize the social and political implications of their own poly relationships and families despite having an
understanding that non-normative relationships and families serve to destabilize oppressive heteronormative cultural ideals. I call this disconnect the poly politics paradox. Queer poly people view their participation in polyamory as personal rather than political, despite their political investments, suggesting they have constructed a private/public divide.

I can only speculate as to why queer polys are resistant to connect their practices to their political ideologies. The public/private divide might serve to protect queer polys from public stigma or backlash that they risk if they frame their practices as an open political statement. For instance, Jane Ward points out that the dangerous ‘born that way’ argument “feels much safer” to gay people than a view of sexuality as social constructed (or political). Encouraging a notion of sexuality as essentialist and deeply personal promotes social tolerance and protects gays and lesbians from homophobic people and heterosexist institutions. Similarly, viewing polyamory as personal, or keeping it within the private realm, might help protect its practitioners from perceived social consequences. The ability to perceive oneself as engaging in radical political acts through poly practices might hinge upon one’s experiences or understandings of monocentrism. Further, the actual political implications of poly practices in part rely on queer polyamorists’ ability to successfully navigate monocentrism, particularly regarding their disclosure decisions about being queer and polyamorous.

Monocentrism and the Disclosure Dilemma

Queer polys face social challenges and barriers that constrain their potential to reconfigure sexual citizenship. The strongest barriers that emerged in my participants’ interviews are social and institutional monocentrism. The former appears to materialize most commonly for queer polyamorists in the form of microaggressions – verbal or non-verbal statements that indicate anti-polyamory sentiments. Microaggressions range from simple eye-rolling, intentional
looks of disgust, or non-threatening statements-in-passing to more threatening statements or those imbued with notions of moral superiority. My participants typically encountered verbal microaggressions when explaining their relationships or polyamory more generally to someone who was uneducated on the matter. Participants commonly encountered phrases such as:

- “I could never do that, but whatever works for you.”
- “So, you just want to like fuck a bunch of people?”
- “That’s wrong; that’s cheating.”
- “That’s homewrecking, how could you?”
- “You want to have your cake and eat it to.”
- “Why can’t you just settle down?”
- “Aren't your kids confused?”
- “You're nuts; you're crazy; you must be really insecure.”
- “Your life is really fucked up.”
- “What’s wrong with you?”

Friends and family were often the perpetrators of these microaggressions, but some came from strangers. One participant received the following message from a stranger on a dating website:

“It’s such a shame, your profile is really great until you get to the poly thing.” This comment illustrates how monogamous people can feel compelled to push microaggressions on queer polys even when entirely unsolicited as well as how monocentrism can impact queer polyamorists’ dating prospects or mark them as potential targets for online harassment.

Enduring microaggressions was the most common experience of social monocentrism among the queer polys I spoke with; however, several participants had also encountered more severe circumstances such as falling out with family or losing friends. A few participants reported that people they were close to had terminated their friendship after the participant came out as poly. For instance, Charlie (queer/bi, woman, POC, early-30s) was ‘friend-dumped’:

“When I came out to my friends that I was dating these two guys who are best friends, a bunch
of them just like friend-dumped me immediately. They were like, ‘You can’t do that. That’s so fucking up. Why would you do that?’”

A few queer polys felt they had been discriminated against for their poly identities or practices, which is a form of institutionalized monocentrism. Debbie (bi/ace, woman, white, late-20s) was one such participant. When I asked if she thought she had experienced poly-related discrimination, she replied, “Job-wise, yeah. I’ve had issues since I decided to be out and loud about poly and bisexuality where employers weren’t comfortable with things because of that.” She recited a story in which a law firm did not select her for the receptionist position she had applied for because they found a quote about polyamory on her Facebook cover photo. She continued:

“The question that they asked was, ‘Because we looked at your social media sites,’ (and the only one I have is Facebook) ‘is there anything that was there that you wish had not been there before we looked at it?’ That was the question that they asked me. So, they didn’t like directly address my sexual identity, but he knew. Like, it was very clear what he was talking about and where that came from. And my response was, ‘Yes, this is how I identify, since you brought it up. And if you have a problem with it, I don’t need to work here. This is who I am. My relationships will not cause drama in my workplace. I keep them very, very separate. I’m very picky about the people that I date because I don’t want drama in my life and I don’t want it to interfere with my workplace. So, if you have an issue with it, then I don’t need to work here.’ And it was part of their decision in not hiring me.”

Debbie was one of the few participants who were comfortable being ‘out’ and proud in the workplace as well as one of the few who reported job discrimination. This raises the question of whether more queer polys would have experienced this form of institutionalized monocentrism had they been out at work.

My participants’ narratives on disclosure point to another way they experienced institutionalized monocentrism – a fear of or perceived inability to be out as polyamorous. For
instance, they feared losing their jobs due to the lack of legal protections for polyamorists if their employers or coworkers found out about their poly relationships. Consequently, few participants were out at work. Many queer polys in this study were also ‘closeted’ about being poly to their families of origin. As we saw in the prior chapter, origin families can react very negatively to polyamorous disclosure.

This particular barrier has implications for queer polyamorists’ ability to challenge restrictive notions of sexual citizenship. Visibility of marginalized sexualities is vital in this process, but queer polys remain invisible if they are closeted about their poly identities or relationships. This disclosure dilemma again reveals a divide between the private (being in the closet) and public (being out). Social tolerance and understanding of polyamory is not likely to progress if people remain closeted about their poly identities and practices, which in turn perpetuates monocentric social forces that coerce polyamorists to be closeted. Research on LGBTQ social acceptance has found that acceptance increases when people know or have met an LGBTQ person (Morales 2009; Powell et al. 2010), which is likely the case for other sexual minorities such as polyamorists.

A few participants explicitly discussed the necessity of being out in order to create social change. Jaz’s (queer/other, woman/other, POC, mid-20s) narrative represents this position as well as reveals her feelings on several other issues discussed in this chapter. At the end of our interview, I asked Jaz if there was anything else about queer polyamory she would like to discuss. Her lengthy response included the following excerpts:

“For queer people, I feel like there’s this double-edged sword of, ‘You can assimilate or you cannot.’ There is this sense of both pressure to conform because you are already deviant in certain ways – the more that you can assimilate to dominant ideas of relationships, the safer you might feel. Also, the incredible freedom of, ‘Fuck it, I’m queer and poly and I get to figure out what my life is and what my relationships are,’ that’s also really scary because you don’t actually
have a map. If you're trying to find language that works for you, structures that work for you, and you don’t have role models [...] It’s hard to break from traditional story lines of romance, period. It’s hard to be poly, period. [...] So, that’s also circling back to this whole fucked up responsibility to be out, and again within a certain parameter of safety, being visible to give resources to people and just be able to show people, ‘We are here, we exist. If you identify with this, there is space for you. You are valid and valuable.’ That’s part of why I do it. And I think it’s really important that any of us who can, do so. Because there are so many people who don’t feel like they can and don’t feel like they have a space. The social change – so much shifts based on when people have a person that they know. [...] That’s what it all boils down to: Changing the world and having fun while doing it.”

**Conclusion**

My interest in studying queer polyamory stemmed in part from a desire to understand how the intersection of heterosexism (or cissexism) and monocentrism produces unique challenges and experiences for queer polyamorists. Ultimately, however, I found that heterosexism (and cissexism) were far less constraining to my participants than monocentrism. In general, the queer polys I spoke with were comfortable being out as queer but not as poly and reported encountering monocentric attitudes and behaviors but not heterosexist (nor cissexist) ones. Heterosexism systemically oppresses and marginalizes all queer people, but it appears that monocentrism more heavily impacts the lives of polyamorous queer people than does heterosexism. Monocentrism then heavily constrains queer polyamorists’ transformative potential to reconfigure sexual citizenship.

My participants’ narratives revealed two interesting phenomena related to politics and sexual citizenship. First, the *poly politics paradox* refers to how queer polyamorists often fail to discern the powerful connections that their family and relationship practices have to queer politics and sexual citizenship, despite their deep investment in queer political ideologies. Second, the *disclosure dilemma* describes how the potential for queer polyamory to reconfigure
sexual citizenship in part relies on its practitioners’ openness about their identities and relationships; however, most of my participants were not open to their families of origin nor workplaces about polyamory. They were far more likely to be out as queer in multiple aspects of their lives, if not all, whereas most were only out as poly to their close friends.

**Queering Intimacy**

Despite monocentric barriers that constrain queer polyamorists’ ability or desire to be out as poly, my interviews suggest that there are several ways in which queer polyamory has considerable potential to deconstruct and reconfigure conventional notions of sexual citizenship. One is when queer polys are open about their identities and practices, particularly when they chose to educate people who have misconceptions about queer poly relationships. For instance, some participants felt that encountering a microaggression was “an opportunity to educate.” Another way is through articulations of their anti-assimilationist views on marriage and family. They offered witty and compelling remarks about the connections between the state, institutionalized marriage, and family rights such as one participant who stated, “Let’s stop tying the white dress and the black suit to my ability to raise children with another human or three!”

Although identity politics came to dominate the LGBTQ movement over the past few decades, there remains a scholarly and public debate about the benefits and harms of assimilationism. For example, online news and culture sites continue to publish articles that question the LGBTQ community’s trajectory (such as the Advocate’s *First We Rebelled. Then We Assimilated. What Do We Want Now?*). Queer polyamorists have much to say about institutionalized marriage and the heteronormative nuclear family model, which gives voice to the queer critique that struggles to break free from the margins of public discourse.
In addition, queer polyamorists deconstruct and reconfigure conventional understandings of intimate relationships, which has implications for understandings of sexual citizenship. Most queer polys did not subscribe to the *heterosexual imaginary* that positions romance at the crux of well-being and several did not view sexual intimacy as central to ‘love’ (Ingraham 1999). They also conceptualized intimacy in ways that expose the multitude of intimate relationship forms, which can weaken the hegemony of the ideal heteronormative partnership.

Finally, the very act of engaging in non-normative relationships and families can ‘queer’ intimacy (Burke & Olsen 2011; Dozier 2015) through the ‘informal revolution’ that occurs in everyday life (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001). Queer polyamorists have the unique opportunity to reinvent relationships and families due to a lack of cultural guidelines, just as non-heterosexual people did with their *life experiments* during the late twentieth century. These everyday ‘practices of freedom’ (Foucault 1978) then challenge hegemonic heteronormativity and produce intimate practices that “can influence the available possibilities for thinking and doing citizenship” as they are “the real measure of the transformation of intimate life” (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001:199/187).

This perspective is perhaps ‘idealistic’ as one can question “whether it is possible to embrace an understanding of queer non-monogamies and polyamories as ‘practices of freedom’” due to the nuances and complexities of queer poly practices and meanings (Klesse 2007:148). As Klesse found, queer polys simultaneously challenge and embrace heteronormative expectations; however, one does not necessarily negate the other. Queer polys can be transgressive in their relationship and family practices despite succumbing to some elements of heteronormativity.

What I found to be more limiting are monocentric cultural forces that coerce queer polys into being ‘closeted’ about polyamory rather than proudly ‘out’ as they are queer. The
transgressive power of queer poly practices is also stifled by the common understanding of polyamory as a personal choice rather than a political act. This finding was immensely perplexing as my participants narratives pointed to an overwhelming investment in queer political ideologies. This *poly politics paradox* raises questions about the authenticity of queer polyamorists’ political discourse – are they truly invested in the ‘queering’ of relationships, families, and/or sexual citizenship more broadly, or are they regurgitating political dogmas that align with their socialization of what it means to be ‘queer?’ Like Klesse, I cannot confidently draw conclusions on the matter from my participants’ narratives. I would like to think that they are truly invested in queer politics as they appeared most passionate about it, and that perhaps they are unable to connect their ideologies and practices due to the weight of monocentric constraints.
Chapter Eight

QUEERING (RESEARCH ON) POLYAMORY:
Findings, Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

You’re giving a voice to a misrepresented group.
I think that’s awesome.
–Teri (bi, NB/GQ, white, 40+)

My initial interest in studying polyamory originates with media. The episode ‘I’m Polyamorous’ on MTV’s docuseries True Life first introduced me to polyamorous relationships. Positive media portrayals of polyamorous partnerships and families was virtually nonexistent at the time this show aired in 2009. Over the course of my studies, however, a ‘discursive explosion’ (Foucault 1978) of sexual discourse on polyamory has occurred. Polyamory became the focus of television shows (e.g., Showtime’s Polyamory: Married and Dating), movies (e.g., Angela Robinson’s Professor Marston and the Wonder Women), news/culture sites (e.g., Mic’s Is the Family of the Future Polyamorous?), young women’s magazines (e.g., Glamour’s 7 Polyamory Myths It’s Time to Stop Believing), nationally-renowned news outlets (e.g., the New York Times’s Dating Experts Explain Polyamory), international news outlets (e.g., BBC’s Polyamorous Relationships May Be the Future of Love), and more.

In addition, I have special interests in gay assimilationism and processes related to ‘queering the family.’ Assimilationism upheld its hegemonic status during the period in which this project took place, particularly with the passage of ‘marriage equality’ in 2015 as participation in institutionalized dyadic marriage is one of the strongest components of normalization. On the other hand, however, young adults appear to have more fluid notions of gender and sexuality and are more open to a variety of relationship forms than older generations (GLAAD 2017; Katz-Wise 2015). These developments suggest that the practices and beliefs of
young people might destabilize assimilationism and carve out space for the ‘queering’ of American relationships, families, and sexual citizenship.

The recent proliferation of polyamorous discourse and transformation of understandings of gender and sexuality suggest that this project is quite timely. Queer polyamorous practices and meanings illustrate how young queer people actively challenge assimilationism and weaken the rigidity of sexual citizenship. However, queer people who have poly relationships are simultaneously constrained by elements of these processes such as heteronormative values of romance and conventional notions of social respectability. The juxtaposition of queer polyamorists’ progressive ideologies and practices with assimilationism’s cultural hegemony is a fascinating position from which to study queer polyamorous relationships and families, particularly against a backdrop of polyamory’s increasing popularity in pop culture.

In this chapter, I review key findings of my research on queer polyamory, in part situating these findings within existing literature. Next, I discuss this project’s contributions to the literature and theoretical implications. I then address this study’s limitations, propose directions for future research, and conclude with a brief summary and discussion that resituates queer polyamory in larger social contexts.

**Revisiting Key Findings**

To explore queer polyamorous relationships and families, I conducted in-depth interviews with 55 LGBTQ+ identified adults who had experience with at least one polyamorous partnership. By constructing an inclusive and diverse group of participants, I was able to capture experiences and perspectives of people who had been marginalized in research on polyamory, particularly queer people of color, those from working-class/poor backgrounds, and who identify as trans*/gender-nonconforming. Due to the intimate nature of our conversations and the time
participants devoted to our interview, I gave each participant a $20 gift card in compensation. Interview recordings and notes were transcribed and data were coded with the assistance of qualitative coding software. Utilizing grounded theory allowed conceptual categories to arise directly from the data, producing fresh theoretical insights that can be applied beyond queer polyamory to intimacy, relationships, and families more broadly. Although I describe in Chapter Four the ways my participants defined or understood ‘polyamory’ and the relationship structures they had been involved in, the subsequent three chapters comprise my primary analyses. Broadly speaking, these chapters focus on queer poly relationships, queer poly families, and the linkages between queer polyamory and sexual citizenship.

**Practicing Polyamory**

In Chapter Five, I selected elements of my participants’ relationship practices that have been overlooked in prior literature on polyamory. I first discuss how the queer polyamorists I spoke with first became involved in polyamory and classified participants into four overlapping groups. *Chance discoverers* framed their entry into polyamory in terms of discovery and often had experiences that sparked their interest in poly relationships via conversations with friends, meeting polyamorists, or learning of polyamory in the media. *Identity explorers* described initiation stories that centered on developing sexual and gender identities, particularly on shifting sexual interests, sexual or relationship experimentation, and involvement in sexual communities. The narratives of *relationship redesigners* were characterized by fluid transformations in their partnerships or ideologies – they had redesigned their current relationships to make space for polyamory. I call the final group *perpetual polyamorists* as they either reported feeling polyamorous all their lives or could not clearly identify how they initiated polyamory and had non-linear accounts or complicated introductions to poly partnerships.
Building upon existing literature on how polyamorists negotiate relationships (Bettinger 2005; Coelho 2011; Frank & Delamater 2010; Klesse 2007; McLean 2004; Pallotta-Charolli & Lubowitz 2003; Wosick-Correa 2010), I outline how my participants established agreements with their partners. My participants’ agreements fell into two broad and interwoven categories: Values-based and practical. The former centered heavily on expectations of honest communication and mutual respect whereas the latter included established agreements about disclosure, sex, and relationships or household parameters. In contrast to prior research, however, my participants’ narratives revealed a strong emphasis on fluidity and flexibility in their negotiations, even when they had negotiated specific agreements. They valued openness to allow their agreements to evolve over time or did not negotiate boundaries at all. In addition, my participants engaged in a great deal of emotional labor, such as among the queer poly women that Deri (2015) studied, but the queer polys I spoke with typically reconfigured these processes as constructive rather than as a form of ‘polyagony.’

Finally, with insights from existing literature on queer and nonmonogamous relationships (Klesse 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), I adapted Peplau and colleagues’ concept of ‘relationship defining power’ to relationship negotiating influence to demonstrate how systems of power impact queer poly relationships in material ways. I use this term instead of the former due to its emphasis on the interpersonal or collaborative process of negotiation. In addition, my participants typically viewed social positioning as neither translating into the ability to ‘define’ relationship parameters nor as producing ‘power’ struggles. Participants described situations in which differential positioning might have led to their own or a partner’s stronger influence in relationship negotiations. They also illustrated how it created uncomfortable situations in dating or tensions in relationships that were not related to negotiations. The queer polys who did have
concerns about differential positioning and relationship dynamics formulated unique solutions to address existing imbalances. Additionally, many participants acknowledged their own privileges and discussed the steps they take to equalize potential imbalances.

**Doing Polyfamily**

In Chapter Six, I borrow the notion of ‘doing family’ (Morgan 1996) to describe the ways my participants perform polyamorous families. I classified their family performativity in the broad categories: Giving time and support, managing shared and independent spaces, and constructing chosen family. The ways my participants performed familial roles centered on emotional and material support such as advice-giving, crisis-solutions, or financial assistance; however, this support was shared with metamours and tribes rather than confined to a nuclear family or household. Others did family simply by living together – nearly all participants considered cohabiting partners as family and several considered all people living in the household as family whether or not they were partnered together. Those who had constructed large families of choice engaged in family performativity that mirrors smaller families such as providing support, spending time together, joining for holidays, and so on.

Supporting existing research (Pallotta-Charolli 2010; Sheff 2014), I also discuss how my participants navigated a variety of challenges unique to (queer) polyfamilies, particularly relating to being married, having children, and dealing with separation and stepfamilies. Those who had experience with marriage spoke of relationship issues such as (re)negotiations and imbalanced dynamics, and some spoke of public stigma or misconceptions that appear to be largely a product of the pervasive cultural idealization of institutionalized dyadic marriage (i.e., the idea that marriage is ‘sacred’). Parents discussed challenges relating to children, particularly in how having kids reduces an already miniscule poly partner selection pool and necessitates tough
decisions about disclosure of poly identities and partners. Successful navigation of separation or divorce was another major concern for the queer polys I spoke with, particularly if children were involved.

Finally, I introduce the idea of ‘imagining’ polyfamily, what I consider to be cognitive ‘life experiments’ (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan 2001), to illustrate how my participants plan to do family in the future. Three themes emerged from their narratives: Sharing communal spaces, forming coparenting arrangements, and validating family ties. The majority of the queer polys I spoke with desired some form of communal living arrangement and they had creative and diverse ideas or plans. Some wanted larger households where everyone shared living spaces, others described private living spaces with a shared communal area, and others imagined communal land where each person, partnership, or family had their own cottage or trailer. Participants who desired or had children described their ideal family situation as involving coparenting arrangements, including participants who did not want biogenetic children of their own. In our conversations of their ideal families, many queer polys discussed the necessity of social and legal validation and how they would approach this issue through legal dyadic marriage and other means. My participants’ narratives also illuminated social and legal barriers to family formation such as emotional, economic, and other material constraints. Nevertheless, their explanations of the images they had constructed of their ideal polyfamilies were enthusiastic and surprisingly descriptive.

Queering Intimacy

Chapter Seven more closely examines the ways that the queer polys in this study reconfigure meanings and practices of relationships, families, and sexual citizenship and considers the sociopolitical implications of these reconfigurations. I focus on the ways in which
my participants challenge the dominant heteronormative model, suggesting that they ‘queer’ intimacy through their relationship and family practices and ideologies. Queering intimacy then has the power to disrupt assimilationism, which has benefits for all partnerships and families (as discussed in Chapter 3). However, monocentric cultural ideals constrain queer polyamorists’ intimate decisions and limit their access to sexual citizenship.

I first discuss how my participants reconfigured ‘relationships,’ illustrating a conceptual model of intimacy that developed as I analyzed their narratives on relationships. Three overlapping elements of intimacy emerged in their narratives – emotional, romantic, and sexual – which then classify different types of intimate relationships where the elements intersect or exist independently. My participants had experiences with each of the six types of relationships in this model, highlighting one way in which they depart from the heteronormative relationship ideal. They also challenge heteronormativity by obscuring the borders between friends and partners (Klesse 2006; Sheff 2005, 2011) and often by not subscribing to the heterosexual imaginary nor viewing sexual intimacy as central to ‘love’ (Ingraham 1999). The queer polys in this study strongly prioritized emotional bonds and spoke of the intimacy elements with a language of fluidity and interconnectedness. In addition, I discovered a degree of flexibility within the narratives of the few participants who had more normative relationship experiences and ideologies.

Next, I take a deeper look at how my participants reconfigured ‘family’ both in ideology and practice, supporting prior research on the ways polyamorists challenge heteronormative notions of family, gender relations, and parenting (Iantaffi 2010; Pallotta-Charolli & Lubowitz 2003; Sheff 2005, 2006, 2014). I describe the linkages between queer polys’ anti-assimilationist ideologies and queer critiques of marriage and family, particularly queer arguments against the
marriage equality movement. I also offer examples of the alternatives to institutionalized marriage and the heteronormative nuclear family model that my participants proposed. Some argued that marriage should be abolished, some felt that governmental benefits should be tied to ‘families of choice’ rather than be allocated on the basis of romantic or sexual relationships, and many expressed the belief that polyamory itself is a solution to the harms of contemporary nuclear families and possessive dyadic relationships.

I then take a broader perspective by connecting queer polyamorous practices and ideologies to sexual citizenship. As some people view polyamory as a political statement (Klesse 2006; Sheff 2014; Wilkinson 2010), a few of my participants saw their practices as a radical political act. However, the great majority of the queer polys in this study did not view their involvement in poly relationships or families as a political act. I discuss the disconnect between queer polyamorists’ strong investment in queer political ideologies and their understanding of their own participation in queer polyamory as non-political, or what I call the poly politics paradox. I also expose how queer polyamorists are heavily constrained by monocentric cultural forces despite their anti-assimilationist practices and investment in queer political ideologies, which in turn has implications for sexual citizenship. More specifically, the disclosure dilemma refers to the cyclical process of how forms of social and institutional monocentrism act as barriers to queer polys’ willingness or ability to be out about their poly identities and practices, which weakens the transformative power queer polyamorists hold to reconfigure sexual citizenship. Nevertheless, my participants’ narratives suggest that queer polys’ relationship and family performativity still have important implications for sexual citizenship. They ‘queer’ intimacy by shaking up rigid heteronormative expectations and roles and providing new models of relationships and families.
Contributing to the Literature

This research sought to address the dearth of sociological knowledge of polyamorous relationships and families. I identified substantial gaps in the existing literature, primarily related to how queer perspectives have been marginalized or virtually silenced for some queer polyamorists. My interviews with queer people who had experience with polyamory revealed important themes missing from the literature on poly relationships and families. In addition, my findings speak to larger social phenomena related to contemporary relationships, sexual citizenship, and the future of American families.

Bodies of Literature

Broadly speaking, the literature on contemporary families continues to center on trends and practices that have become quite normative in American culture such as cohabitation, stepfamily formation, dating later in life, and so on. This literature lacks attention to non-normative family forms and practices. For instance, the sociological families reader that I hold in the highest esteem has a couple chapters on queer families but none on poly families, swingers, open marriages, nor families of choice. I argue that the sociology of families literature would greatly benefit by incorporating the perspectives of other family forms, particularly in the ways that social inequalities continue to constrain marginalized families and how those families combat oppressive social forces. This study provides insights into the unique challenges queer polyfamilies face in a monocentric culture as well as how they disrupt identity political movements that serve to push already marginalized families further down the social ladder.

Similarly, research on LGBTQ intimacies focuses largely on couple relationships (for instance, a search for ‘lesbian and gay couples’ in the title of peer-reviewed journal articles brought up four times the results as a search for ‘lesbian and gay relationships’). The current
study decenters dyadic relationships and offers new insights into the ways queer people continue
to engage in life experiments in the age of assimilationism through their unique and creative
family and relationship practices and ideals. My participants’ narratives also speak to the current
state of LGBTQ politics, specifically how queer polyamorists are deeply invested in queer
political ideologies. Thus, this research contributes to a ‘queer’ perspective within LGBTQ
Studies. In addition, my findings suggest that heterosexism is far weaker than monocentrism in
shaping identity disclosure decisions for queer polyamorists. Therefore, this research provides
important insights into research on disclosure practices within LGBTQ studies.

Further, this study clearly advances the literature on polyamory by focusing on an
understudied group. Prior studies drew participants primarily from the mainstream poly
community and lacked inclusive samples. The perspectives of people who are not white, middle-
class, cisgender, straight, or straight-passing (e.g., bisexual women partnered with heterosexual
men) have been severely marginalized in this literature. Consequently, many important questions
about polyamory have been overlooked in the literature such as how queer people understand
and experience polyamory or what queer polyamory means for the current state of LGBTQ
politics and assimilationism. To help fill these gaps, this study centered on queer polyamorists,
with special efforts given to recruit participants of color, who are low-income or of working-
class/poor backgrounds, or who identify as trans or are otherwise gender-nonconforming. In
addition, I focused on several themes that were overlooked or understudied in the literature on
polyamory such as emotion work, family performativity, and queer politics. In doing so, my
findings provide a closer account of the nuances in people’s understandings of ‘polyamory’ as
well as of their relationship and family practices and ideologies.
Theoretical Frameworks

In addition to general contributions towards literature on polyamory, LGBTQ studies, and contemporary families, this research provides theoretical insights on intimacy and sexual citizenship. First, I reconceptualize ‘relationship defining power’ (Peplau, Veniegas, & Miller-Campbell 1996) to be better suited for relationships that involve elements of fluidity and flexibility within processes of negotiating relationship agreements. *Relationship negotiating influence* rejects an understanding of relationship power as a tool to ‘define’ relationship parameters, decisions, or dynamics. Whereas to ‘define’ lacks attention to an interactive component, to ‘negotiate’ implies a social interaction; a collaborative process in which influence can shift between different individuals involved. *Relationship negotiating influence* then emphasizes interpersonal processes of negotiation and suggests the possibility of fluidity and flexibility.

Further, the multidimensional model of intimacy that I present in Chapter Seven has implications for academic and professional understandings of contemporary intimate relationships. This model highlights how intimate relationships can take a variety of forms and reveals the need for language to identify these varying relationships. Moreover, this model suggests that having only the one term – ‘intimate relationship’ – perpetuates the hegemony of the ideal heteronormative relationship that is not representative of many people’s lived experiences or ideologies and serves to marginalize other relationship forms.

More broadly, this study furthers the conceptual framework that conceives ‘queer’ as a radical political act that challenges heteronormativity. I present my participants’ practices and ideologies under the framework of *queering intimacy*: Queer polyamorists deconstruct and reconfigure conventional notions of ‘relationships’ and ‘family’ in ways that reject the rigidity of
sexual citizenship and have potential to disrupt assimilationism. However, there are monocentric forces that obstruct these possibilities, particularly in positioning queer polys within a social environment that forces them to face the disclosure dilemma. Moreover, the politics paradox undermines the claim that queer polyamorists actively ‘queer’ intimacy. Despite this disconnect and dilemma, I argue that queer polyamorous family and relationship practices ultimately contribute to a queering of intimacy in America.

**Addressing Study Limitations**

With this project, I hoped to fill gaps in literature on polyamory and queer families more broadly, both through constructing an inclusive sample of queer people who had experience with polyamory and with the theoretical questions I pursued. I am glad to have interviewed a diverse group of queer polys and identified fascinating themes in their narratives; however, there are goals I was unable to achieve as well as other limitations that should be addressed.

**Methods**

There are three potential concerns related to participant recruitment and sampling. First, many of the queer polys in this study had some type of connection to each other. This is a common limitation with qualitative studies on small populations that require snowball sampling. Several participants were in social circles together such as friend groups or queer or poly communities, some were current partners or ex-partners, and a few were engaged or married. It is possible that my participants’ connections to each other swayed their responses to my interview questions. For instance, one participant was hesitant to describe her family hopes for the future because she thought I would later interview one of her partners and feared that her partner would give a diverging response. In addition, having several participants from one community might lead to my findings being more representative of that particular community than queer
polyamorists in general. Nevertheless, interviewing queer polys from four areas of the country helped minimize this concern.

Second, although the queer polys I spoke with come from diverse backgrounds and identities, my sample was less inclusive by age. In response, I closed off the study to anyone younger than 50 towards the end of the data collection process; however, I was unsuccessful in conducting interviews with older queer polys despite having scheduled several interviews. (Their decisions to not participate, particularly among those who ‘ghosted’ me after contacting me with interest and scheduling interviews, are perplexing.) Consequently, my findings lack the perspective of older queer polys who might have different ideologies, practices, and understandings of polyamory than many of the participants in my sample and I was unable to make any meaningful comparisons between older and younger queer polys. However, my findings are not limited only to the perspectives of young adults as I had twelve participants who were 35 years of age or older.

Third, the majority of queer polys I spoke with reported being raised middle-class and all had at least some college education (with one-fifth holding a graduate degree), which likely has implications for the ways they articulate their practices, ideologies, and understandings of queer polyamory. Although my sample is more diverse by way of education and social class than prior research on polyamory, my findings represent a group of queer polys who have class privilege. I did not, however, identify patterns related to social class or education, apart from how class relates to relationship negotiating influence.

**Analysis**

Social class and other areas of social location also come into play with regards to my findings. My social positioning as a white, cisgender, highly educated person who was raised
middle-class (albeit currently ‘middle-class poor’) likely colored my interpretation of participants’ narratives. I was particularly concerned with racial differentials when interviewing queer polys of color. Our interactions may have been limited by my lack of ability to relate to racial oppression and marginalization when we discussed those issues. A couple of participants expressed gratitude for my efforts in reaching QPOC, but I suspect that even their responses might differ if their interviews were conducted by a person of color.

In addition, I was unable to address all of my research questions about queer polyamory in this dissertation. I had planned to analyze participants’ narratives on the ‘het/bi’ versus queer poly community divide but found that doing so would be too large of an undertaking for this project. I am fairly confident that my data confirm my suspicion of the ‘great community divide’ (as discussed in introductory and literature review chapters); however, I am unable to present any findings about the issue at this time.

Finally, as with most qualitative research, I cannot generalize my findings to a larger population. I did take steps to address the limitation that many prior studies on polyamory encountered, as I located participants across the U.S. rather than drawing a sample from one local poly community. Nevertheless, my findings do not represent the understandings, practices, or ideologies of all queer polyamorists.

**Proposing Directions for Future Research**

As research on queer polyamory is still lacking, there are many avenues future studies on the topic could take. There are a few analyses I plan to conduct with my data that I briefly describe below. In addition, the current study revealed important insights into the ways that queer polys understand and practice relationships and families but also raised some questions
about queer polyamory that deserve more attention. Further, with insights from this study, I have identified several directions for future research that take a broader focus on intimacy in America.

**Queer Polyamory**

As I was unable to answer all of my research questions in this dissertation, I plan to conduct further analyses with my data. First, I am interested in examining the embodiment and performativity of gender within queer poly relationships. My participants’ narratives include fascinating commentary on gender play, gender dynamics, and other related topics that I am eager to analyze. Second, I would like to investigate meanings of queer poly community, particularly as they relate to the ‘great community divide’ between het/bi and queer polyamorists. My participants expressed a fundamental need for queer poly community, including those that center QPOC, and had interesting experiences with and understandings of the mainstream poly community. Third, I plan to take a deeper look at queer polyamorists’ feelings about ‘family’ and their interactions with families of origin. My findings in pursuing these analyses would contribute to the literature on gender performativity, queer subcultures, family dynamics, and more.

This study’s methodological constraints and findings also suggest important areas for future projects on queer polyamory. For instance, inspired by the queer versus polyamorous disclosure discrepancy, I view research on disclosure practices and meanings among people with multiple marginalized sexual identities as an important area of investigation. Similarly, the politics paradox raises questions about the interconnections between queerness, polyamory, and politics. Future studies could examine the complex interplay between sexual identities, political ideologies, and related systems of power. It is also critical to investigate the ways that institutionalized monocentrism and systems of power constrain queer polyfamily formation.
processes. Such studies might have policy implications to help support marginalized queer and polyamorous families.

**Intimacy in America**

More broadly, my suggestions for future research focus on conceptualizations, experiences, and practices of intimacy. As I discuss in Chapter Five, the concept of *sexual fluidity* has multiple meanings: A label that rejects static identities; the acknowledgment that sexuality has the capacity to change; and discrepancies between sexual identities, desires, and behaviors. I posit that *sexual fluidity* can be applied to a broader range of experiences and understandings, such as those my participants’ narratives revealed. Employing this concept in studies on intimacy could reveal whether other groups have dynamic and elastic notions of sexuality and relationships as the queer polys in this study had. This might prove particularly interesting for ‘millennials’ who are developing fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, as discussed in this chapter’s introduction.

In addition, the concept of *relationship negotiating influence* can be applied to a broader focus on contemporary intimacy. For instance, how do the social locations of new partners impact their interpretations and assumptions about the emerging relationship? In what ways does negotiating influence shape desires and decisions around sexual, emotional, and romantic intimacy? How do partners identify and manage the risk or presence of negotiating influence? Qualitative interviewing might only address these issues on the surface. I suggest that ethnographic research employing a framework of *relationship negotiating influence* would offer invaluable data on polyamory. Similarly, this framework can be applied to other forms of intimacy such as monogamous relationships (in processes of dating, transitioning to exclusivity,
or household decision making) or kink (in processes of negotiating ‘scenes’ or developing relationships with ‘play partners’).

Furthermore, longitudinal research would provide fascinating insights into the life trajectories of people who had experience with polyamory in young adulthood. Longitudinal studies would reveal how polyamorists construct, manage, and terminate intimacy in their relationships and families over time. This research would also allow for a deeper investigation how conceptualizations of polyamory and intimacy more broadly transform over the life course.

The interview with my oldest participant suggests that witnessing (or living) the 1960’s and 70’s counterculture that prized nonmonogamy and sexual fluidity might have considerable implications for older queer polyamorists’ meanings and practices of polyamory. Further, longitudinal studies could examine whether or how younger polyamorists materialize their future polyfamily hopes and plans and how those ideals adapt to various stages in the life course.

**Queering (Research on) Polyamory**

This study reveals how queer people’s understandings of polyamory and the meanings they associate with poly practices are nuanced and complex. My participants’ narratives illustrate an underlying theme of fluidity in their relationship practices that appears to depart from other studies that emphasize rules and boundaries. Their stories also revealed phenomena unique to queer polyamory such as queer-specific reasons to have poly relationships and the discrepancy between being ‘out’ as queer versus poly. In my discussion on navigating relationships, I propose the adapted concept of *relationship negotiating influence* to describe the ways social inequalities can permeate queer poly relationships. This concept weakens the focus on having ‘power’ to ‘define’ relationships and instead points to an interpersonal process that has space for fluidity and flexibility. This study also brings queer polyamory into focus within a family performativity
perspective. My participants ‘did’ family in material and imagined ways that were creative and
diverse but also limited by pragmatism.

Further, in examining the linkages between queer polyamory and queer politics, I identify
an interesting politics paradox among queer polyamorists: There is a puzzling disconnect
between their investment in radical queer politics and the perception of their own involvement in
polyamory as non-political. I also found that social and institutional forms of monocentrism
impede the transformative power of queer polyamory to disrupt assimilationism and
conventional notions of sexual citizenship. This conflict involves what I call the disclosure
dilemma: Queer polyamorists typically are not ‘out’ as poly due to experiences with and fears of
monocentrism but cannot effectively weaken cultural monocentric ideologies and increase
acceptance of polyamory without being ‘out’ as poly. My findings thus highlight the ways that
queer and poly people actively challenge but are simultaneously constrained by oppressive social
forces.

* * *

Queer polyamory is situated in a social environment that has become considerably more
welcoming to LGBTQ couples but continues to stigmatize and marginalize nonmonogamies.
However, the recent proliferation of media interest in polyamorous relationships and families
suggests that American culture might be on the same trajectory with polyamory as it was with
LGBTQ issues two decades ago. Consequently, studying queer polyamory at this juncture –
where queerness is accepted (or at least tolerated) and polyamory has entered the public eye –
has been a fascinating endeavor. Although this study has important academic implications such
as contributing a fresh perspective to the literature on polyamory and providing theoretical
frameworks that inform literature in the fields of LGBTQ studies and the sociology of families, I
hope that my findings contribute to a broader conversation on sexual citizenship, the future of families, and the queering of intimacy in America. Moreover, my participants were thrilled to share their experiences with hopes that their stories would one day reach the public. Thus, I am committed to engaging in public discourse that helps facilitate the trajectory of acceptance of polyamory. As promised to the queer polyamorists in this study, my next steps with this project involve developing an accessible book that presents key findings of this research and furthers both public and academic understandings of queer polyamorous relationships and families.
REFERENCES


Laboratorium 3(2):4-25.


Appendix A

GLOSSARY**†

Part I: Gender and Sexual Identities

Agender: A person who does not identify with any gender or rejects gender categorizations

Alphabet Soup / LGBTQ+: The acronym that refers to non-heterosexual or non-gender-conforming people, commonly used as ‘LGBTQQIAP’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual) – synonymous with queer or GSM

Androgynous: A person who presents their gender as simultaneously feminine and masculine or prefers their gender to be vague or undefined

Androsexual: A person who is attracted to men, male-bodied people, or masculinity

Asexual: A person who “does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN 2018)

Bigender: A person who identifies as both a woman/feminine and man/masculine

Bisexual: A person who is attracted to women and men

Cisgender: A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth

Cisman: A person who was assigned male at birth and identifies as a man

Ciswoman: A person who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman

Demisexual: A person who “can only experience sexual attraction after an emotional bond has been formed” (AVEN 2018); often understood as an asexual identity

Gay male: A person who identifies as a man and is attracted to men

Gender of Object Choice: The gender of whom a person is sexually or romantically attracted to

Genderqueer: ¹A person who does not identify with any specific gender, prefers their gender to be vague or undefined, or rejects gender categorizations; ²An umbrella term for gender non-normativity or gender variance, including identities such as transgender, bigender, agender, and so on – synonymous with trans*

Genderfluid: A person whose gender shifts between gender identities or expressions

GSM (Gender or Sexual Minority): An umbrella term for non-heterosexual or non-gender-conforming people, thought to be more inclusive and convenient than the traditional ‘LGBTQ’ acronym – synonymous with LGBTQ+ or queer

* Author’s definition unless otherwise noted with citation
† "A person who…” refers to either the way someone might self-identify or a basic descriptor for attractions and/or behaviors
Graysexual: A person “who identifies with the area between asexuality and sexuality” (AVEN 2018); often understood as an asexual identity

Gynosexual: A person who is attracted to women, female-bodied people, or femininity

Intersex: A person who was born with “a variety of conditions” related to “a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (ISNA 2018) and may identify as any gender

Lesbian: A person who identifies as a woman and is attracted to women

Pansexual: A person who is attracted to any or all genders

Polysexual: A person who is attracted to any combination of multiple genders but not all genders

Queer: 1 An umbrella term that refers to non-heterosexual or non-gender-conforming people – synonymous with LGBTQ+ or GSM; 2 An umbrella term that refers to anyone who practices non-normative sexualities, including polyamory, nonmonogamy, kink, swinging, same-gender relationships, and so on; 3 A person who identifies as ‘queer’ for the purpose of being vague; 4 A description for a person who does not identify with any sexuality or rejects sexual categorizations

Romantic Orientation: An identity based on gender of object choice that refers to romantic attraction, as distinct from sexual attraction – such as aromantic, biromantic, panromantic, lesbiromantic, and so on

Skoliosexual: A person who is attracted to trans* people or gender non-conformity

Trans*: An umbrella term for gender non-normativity or gender variance, including identities such as transgender, genderqueer, agender, and so on

Transsexual: A person who identifies as a gender other than that assigned at birth, and has or will undergo medical treatment to align their morphology with their gender identity

Transgender: A person who identifies as a gender other than that assigned at birth (with or without the desire to medically transition)

Transgender FTM: A transgender person who has transitioned or has intent to transition from female to male

Transgender MTF: A transgender person who has transitioned or has intent to transition from male to female

Trans man: A transgender person who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a man

Trans woman: A transgender person who was assigned male at birth and identifies as a woman

Two-Spirit: 1 A Native American person who has the soul of both a woman and man or identifies as both feminine and masculine; 2 A queer Native American person
Part II: Polyamorous Identities and Practices

Consensual Nonmonogamy: The practice of being involved with multiple romantic, emotional, and/or sexual partners in which each relationship is actively negotiated and consented upon by all partners.

Het/bi polyamory: Polyamory practiced within the community primarily comprised of heterosexual cismen and bisexual ciswomen.

Intimate Friendship: A form of polyamory in which two or more people maintain strong emotional partnerships that may or may not involve sex.

Intimate Network: A form of polyamory in which a group of people are romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually involved with each other, without the level of commitment of partnerships.

Nonmonogamy: An umbrella term that refers to the practice of being involved with multiple romantic, emotional, and/or sexual partners simultaneously.

Polyaffectivity: The “nonsexual emotional ties that bind people in poly families together” (Sheff 2014:207).

Polyamory: The practice of being openly and honestly involved with multiple partners in meaningful romantic, emotional, and/or sexual relationships.

Polyfidelity: The practice of having closed-group polyamorous relationships; fidelitous poly partnerships.

Polyfluid:¹ A person who is open to practicing polyamory or monogamy but does not identify as either polyamorous or monogamous; ² A person’s identity or partnerships shift between monogamy and polyamory.

Primary Partnership: A form of polyamory in which two partners consider their relationship foremost over their other intimate partnerships.

Quad: A form of polyamory in which four partners comprise one intimate relationship.

Queer polyamory: Polyamory practiced within LGBTQ+ / GSM communities.

Secondary Partnership: A form of polyamory in which people maintain relationships that are second to their primary partnership.

Triad: A form of polyamory in which three partners comprise one intimate relationship.

Vee: A form of polyamory in which three partners comprise two intimate relationships.

Wedge-in-a-Vee: A person who has two simultaneous intimate partners who do not maintain an intimate relationship with each other.
This study seeks to learn about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who have been involved with polyamory. I am looking for participants who:

1. Identify as LGBTQ+ (including: queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans*, genderqueer, transgender, non-label, or any other non-heterosexual or gender-variant identity)
2. Have ever been in one or more polyamorous relationships
3. Are 18 years of age or older

Participation consists of one interview (1-2 hours) at a location of your choice. Our conversation will be kept confidential and only the researcher will have identifying information. You will receive a $20 gift card for participating in the study. People of color are encouraged to respond!

Please contact Emily Pain by email at queerpolyamory@gmail.com or by phone at 405-830-2409 for interest in the study or for more information.

Emily is a doctoral candidate through the Department of Sociology at the University at Albany, SUNY. The university’s Institutional Review Board (Ph: 866-857-5459) has approved this study.
Queer Polyamory Study

This study seeks to learn about the experiences of queer/trans people who have been involved with polyamory.

I am looking for participants who: identify along the queer spectrum (including: queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans*, genderqueer, transgender, non-label, or any other non-heterosexual or gender-variant identity), have ever been in one or more polyamorous relationships, and are 18 years of age or older.

Participation consists of one interview (1-2 hours) at a location of your choice. Our conversation will be kept confidential and only the researcher will have identifying information. You will receive a $20 gift card for participating in the study. QPOC are encouraged to respond!

Please contact Emily Pain by email at queerpolyamory@gmail.com or by phone at 405-830-2409 for interest in the study or for more information.

Emily is a doctoral candidate through the Department of Sociology at the University at Albany, SUNY. The university’s Institutional Review Board (Ph: 866-857-5459) has approved this study.
Non-monogamy Study

Are you lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and 50 years of age or older?

Have you been in relationships that can be described as polyamorous?

If so, I would like to interview you!

This study seeks to learn about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans people who have been involved with a form of ethical non-monogamy in which relationships have the ability to involve multiple, meaningful, ongoing partnerships with the consent and disclosure of everyone involved.

In this phase of the study, I am looking for participants who:
1. Have ever been in one or more relationships as described above
2. Identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, etc
3. Are 50 years of age or older

Participation consists of one interview (1-2 hours) at a location of your choice. Our conversation will be kept confidential and only the researcher will have identifying information. Each participant will receive a $20 gift card.

Please contact Emily Pain by email at queerpolyamory@gmail.com or by phone at 405-830-2409 for interest in the study or for more information.

Emily is a doctoral candidate through the Department of Sociology at the University at Albany, SUNY. The university’s Institutional Review Board (Ph: 866-857-5459) has approved this study.
Appendix C

ELECTRONIC CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

LGBTQ+ Polyamory Study – Call for Participants:
I am conducting a study on experiences that LGBTQ+ people have with polyamory. If you identify as LGBTQ+ (including: queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans*, genderqueer, transgender, non-label, or any other non-heterosexual or gender-variant identity) and have had one or more polyamorous relationships, please consider participating in this research!

Participation involves an in-person or online video interview that is expected to last from 1-2 hours. Participants will receive a gift card in compensation for their time.

People of color and those with working-class or low-income backgrounds are encouraged to respond.

Please email Emily Pain at queerpolyamory@gmail.com or call 405-830-2409 to participate in the study or receive further information.

Emily is a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany, SUNY. The university’s institutional review board has approved this study.

Please pass this information along to anyone who may have interest in this study. Thank you.

[Attach flyer]

Queer Polyamory Study – Call for Participants:
I am conducting a study on experiences that queer/trans people have with polyamory. If you identify along the queer/trans spectrum (queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans*, genderqueer, transgender, non-label, or any other non-heterosexual or gender-variant identity) and have had one or more polyamorous relationships, please consider participating in this research!

Participation involves an in-person or online video interview that is expected to last from 1-2 hours. Participants will receive a gift card in compensation for their time.

People of color and those with working-class or low-income backgrounds are encouraged to respond.

Please email Emily Pain at queerpolyamory@gmail.com or call 405-830-2409 to participate in the study or receive further information.

Emily is a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany, SUNY. The university’s institutional review board has approved this study.

Please pass this information along to anyone who may have interest in this study. Thank you.

[Attach flyer]
Appendix D

SCREENING QUESTIONS

Email script: Thank you for your interest in this study. My goal is to learn about experiences that LGBTQ+ people have with polyamory, by interviewing queer individuals who have been in poly relationships. Before we begin to schedule an interview, I would like to ask you a few initial questions. Please respond to this email, answering the questions below. Feel free to add any questions you have about the study.

Phone script: Thank you for your interest in this study. My goal is to learn about experiences that LGBTQ+ people have with polyamory, by interviewing queer individuals who have been in poly relationships. Before we begin to schedule an interview, I would like to ask you a few questions.

1. Have you been involved in (one or more) polyamorous relationships, currently or in the past? [Yes or No]

2. What is your sexual identity? [List all identities you commonly use]

3. What is your gender identity? [List all identities you commonly use]

4. As of today, are you 18 years of age or older? [Yes or No]

5. Where do you live? [List city and state]

Candidate: Great, thank you! At this time, do you have any questions about the study? I’d love to set up an interview with you [in person / online via Skype or Google Hang Out]…
   a. Let’s schedule a date and time that works best.
   b. However, I need a little more time to organize the schedule. Would it be okay if I contact you later to schedule our interview?

Not candidate: Thank you! Unfortunately, I won’t be able to interview you for this study because _______. I do appreciate your interest and time, and hope that you’ll consider passing along my information to any others you know who may have interest in the study. Thanks again!
**Appendix E**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Interview Number: ______  
Signed IRB Form?  _____  
Date/Time: _____________________  
Permission to Record? _____  
Location: _____________________  
Notes: ________________________________________________________________

---

**Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I’m interested in your experiences as a queer/lgbt person who practices polyamory. Anything you say will be kept confidential and you will not be identified in any future presentations or publications. You are free to skip questions if you feel uncomfortable, and you may stop the interview at any time. I’m going to record the interview so that I don’t have to take detailed notes and can focus more on our conversation; however, I may take some notes as we go along.**

I’ll first ask some questions about your experience with polyamory, then we’ll talk more specifically about your relationships and community, then social issues.

**POLYAMORY**

Would you tell me the story about how you first got involved with polyamory?

What have you enjoyed about being in poly relationships? If no longer involved w/polyamory: Were there any particular reasons you decided against having poly relationships?

Do you identify as polyamorous?

Identify: is that because you feel polyamorous or did you adopt that identity because it is something that you practice, something you do? [Probe for explanation]

Do not identify: Are there any reasons why you don’t want to identify as polyamorous?

People have many different understandings or definitions of polyamory. What does polyamory mean to you? How would you describe polyamory?

**RELATIONSHIPS**

**Now, let’s turn to your poly relationships.**
Would you tell me about your current or most recent polyamorous relationship(s)? [Some people use terms such as ‘vee’ or ‘triad’ to describe their partnerships, do you have a term you would use for this relationship?] What other types of poly partnerships have you been involved in?

Could you tell me a little about how close you are with your partner(s) in your current/most recent relationship(s)? [Some people use labels such as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ to describe their partners, do you use any terms like these?] [Probe for how they feel about hierarchies]

Have you been in poly partnerships where you were either emotional, romantic, or sexual with a partner but not all of those? [Do you have specific terms or labels for any of these relationships?] How invested would you say you are with romance in your partnerships? What about with sex?

What would you say is the most important aspect of your poly partnerships, such as love, commitment, independence, and so on? (In other words, is there a value that you hold above all others?)

**I have a few questions about families and households now.**

Have you ever lived with one or more partners when you were polyamorous? Would you describe that experience? (Were there people in the household who weren’t part of the poly relationship?) Do/did you consider yourself a family?  

  **No:** Did you ever discuss the possibility of living together?

Have you ever been involved in a poly family otherwise? (For example, dated someone in a complex poly family or become part of an existing poly family?) What was that experience like for you?

Have you been in poly partnerships that involved children? Do you think the presence of children impacted your experiences with polyamory in any way?

Have you been in poly partnerships where anyone (including yourself) was married, either legally or symbolically? Could you describe that experience?

**Now I’d like to talk about how you negotiate rules or boundaries for your relationships.**

What types of rules or boundaries have you negotiated with your partners? How did you decide about ____________, could you walk me through that process?

Have you had any negative experiences when negotiating your relationships? How did you address those issues?
Have you had any relationships where one partner seemed to have more advantage or influence in the relationship over another? How so? What do you think created this advantage?  
[Probe for social location and positioning in the relationship]

Have you ever had poly partners who had a different background than you, in terms of characteristics like race, social class, gender, or religion? Would you tell me about that experience?  
[Probe for tensions in negotiations]

**Now, let’s talk about gender and sexuality.

Have you ever been in poly relationships with people who weren’t part of the queer/lgbt community? (For example, a bisexual person who generally doesn’t hang out with queer/lgbt people?) What was that experience like?  
[Probe for how it’s different from queer relationships and whether there was conflict]

Trans participants: Have you ever felt that being trans*/transgender impacts your experiences with polyamory? Could you explain or give some examples?  
[Probe for both relationships and community]

Has either your gender or sexual identity ever changed because you were involved in poly relationships? [Some people in poly relationships express different gender presentations when they spend time with different partners, have you ever had that experience? (Could you describe it?) What about with sexuality – do you ever change your sexual identity or practices, depending on which partner you’re spending time with at that time or if you have new partners?]

Are you involved in any other types of sexualities, such as kink/BDSM or swinging? Is there any overlap between these practices for you? [Some poly/kink people organize their relationships around kink roles – have you ever been in relationships like that?]

**I have one last question about relationships.

What plans or hopes do you have for your future, in terms of relationship structure, marriage, and family?

COMMUNITY

**At this point, I’d like to turn to questions about communities.

People often think of themselves as belonging to various communities. What types of communities do you belong to? What are your experiences like in the ____________ community? Would you say that one community is more important to you than another?

If poly community: Would you describe your poly community? What does it look like (in terms of sexuality, gender, race, etc)?
Have you ever attended any poly events, or would you be interested to? Could you describe them or give an example?

SOCIAL ISSUES

**Now, if we could turn to social issues, I have some questions about things like coming out, politics, and challenges you face.

Would you describe how ‘out’ you are as a queer/lgbt person? What about as a person who has poly relationships / a polyamorist? **If discrepancy:** Why do you think there’s a difference between your degree of openness about being queer/lgbt versus being involved in polyamory?

Were there any social or political reasons behind your decision to practice polyamory? (For example, to challenge the status quo?) Do you have any thoughts on legal rights for polyamorous people or families, such as multiple marriage or hospital visitation?

What would you say is the biggest challenge you face(d) in being a queer/lgbt person who practices polyamory?

Is there anything else about polyamory that you’d like to discuss, or any issues we didn’t cover that you think are important?

BACKGROUND

**Thank you for sharing your experiences and thoughts with me. We’re done for the most part; I just have a few questions about your background before we end.

What is your age as of today?

What is your current job or career?

What is your highest level of education?

What social class do you consider yourself? Is this the same social class you were growing up?

What is your racial identity or background? Do you have a specific ethnicity or heritage?

What pronouns do you prefer?

Thank them again and remind them that they can contact you for any questions or concerns.
Appendix F

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

LGBTQ+ Polyamory Study

Research Investigator:
Emily Pain, M.A.,
Doctoral Candidate
University at Albany, SUNY

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you have identified yourself as an LGBTQ+ person who has experiences with polyamorous relationships.

Purpose of study: To learn about experiences that queer people have with polyamory on relationship, community, and social levels.

Study procedures: Your participation in this study will involve one interview lasting approximately 1-2 hours. You will be asked about meanings, experiences, and issues related to being an LGBTQ+ person who has practiced polyamory. The interview will be audio recorded with your permission, for the purpose of transcription.

Risks and inconveniences: The researcher does not anticipate any risk in your participation other than you may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You are free to stop the interview at any time or choose not to answer particular questions should you become uncomfortable.

Benefits and compensation: Some participants find that sharing their experiences is relieving or therapeutic. In addition, your participation will help to increase knowledge of queer relationships and polyamory. For compensation, you will be rewarded with a $20 gift card at the end of our interview session.

Confidentiality: All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Data will be kept private electronically under password-protected folders and physically in locked cabinets. Any identifying information will be removed and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in related publications. Audio recordings will be deleted upon transcription. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, the sponsor of the study (e.g. NIH, FDA, etc.), and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

Rights: Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Even after you agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise have been entitled. I will retain and analyze the information you have provided up until the point you have left the study unless you request that your data be excluded from any analysis and/or destroyed. Research at
the University Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the
Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If
you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject or if you wish to report any
concerns about the study, you may contact University at Albany Office of Regulatory &
Research Compliance at 518-437-3850 or orrc@albany.edu.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this study, please contact the Principal
Investigator: Emily Pain at epain@albany.edu or 405-830-2409 and/or her faculty advisor, Dr.
Glenna Spitze at gspitze@albany.edu or 518-442-4666. You will be offered a copy of this form
to keep.

I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby consent to
participate in the study.

I do □ / do not □ give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.
(Please check one box)

Print Name: _______________________

Signature: _______________________
Date: _______________
## Appendix G

### PARTICIPANT IDENTITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>City Size, Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Nonbinary, woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Woman, other</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/ Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree*</td>
<td>Medium, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>Hetero-flexible</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Small, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>Queer, bi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/ Poor</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Trans woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.R.</td>
<td>Bi, queer</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/ Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Queer, bi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>early-30s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Upper-middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>Trans woman</td>
<td>late-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>late-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>Hetero-flexible</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>early-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/ Poor</td>
<td>Graduate degree*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>Queer, bi</td>
<td>Trans man, genderqueer</td>
<td>early-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree*</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nash</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Trans-other</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/ Poor</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>City Size, Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmett</td>
<td>Pan, gay</td>
<td>Trans man</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>Trans-other</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shari</td>
<td>Queer, bi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Queer, lesbian</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>late-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>late-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Queer, gay</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>Trans man</td>
<td>early-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lance</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Trans man</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper-middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carole</td>
<td>Queer, gay</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>late-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathis</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>late-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theo</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Trans man</td>
<td>early-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>City Size, Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Bi, ace</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>late-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working/Poor</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garry</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Tech certificate</td>
<td>Medium, SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mabel</td>
<td>Pan, bi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaz</td>
<td>Queer, other</td>
<td>Woman, other</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree*</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>early-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Tech certificate</td>
<td>Medium, SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Pan, bi</td>
<td>Woman, genderqueer</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikko</td>
<td>Pan, queer</td>
<td>Trans-other</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neal</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>early-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Medium, SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>early-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Queer, gay</td>
<td>Woman, genderqueer</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynette</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>City Size, Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>Pan, ace</td>
<td>Genderqueer, trans man</td>
<td>early-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teri</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Large, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td>Lesbian, queer</td>
<td>Woman, other</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochelle</td>
<td>Lesbian, ace</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Some college*</td>
<td>Small, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>Queer, ace</td>
<td>Trans-other</td>
<td>early-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delilah</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Graduate degree*</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>Queer, bi</td>
<td>Woman, genderqueer</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle/Poor</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayden</td>
<td>Lesbian, ace</td>
<td>Nonbinary, woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Large, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>Queer, lesbian</td>
<td>Trans woman</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Bi, pan</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>Woman, genderqueer</td>
<td>mid-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>Bi, pan</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Large, WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linnia</td>
<td>Queer, bi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>late-30s</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Medium, NE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*POC refers to people of color including Native-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latinx, black, and mixed
*Denotes that the participant was a student at the time of our interview