

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FAMILY AND IDENTITY AMONG
POLYAMOROUS INDIVIDUALS

by

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DEDICATION

To my loved ones who continue to give support, love and understanding. I would not be where I am or who I am without you.

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ABSTRACT

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FAMILY AND IDENTITY AMONG POLYAMOROUS INDIVIDUALS

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This thesis is an exploration of how polyamorous individuals construct both their families and their own identities in light of their non-traditional approach to relationships. The research draws on ten in-depth interviews with self-identified polyamorists and participant observation of polyamorous communities in the Washington D.C., Northern and Central Virginia, Maryland and West Virginia. Applying Erving Goffman's theories about stigma and moral career, these interviews indicate that polyamorous individuals come to hold their identity as polyamorists through moral career paths starting with an openness to non-monogamy influenced by their history with family of origin, sexual orientation, religious beliefs (or the lack thereof), and other subcultural interests, particularly science fiction. Polyamorists come to such an identity as a way to become more moral people in their own view and build families of choice (household, extended and tribe) around them from, mainly, other members of the polyamorous community.

INTRODUCTION

In Western society today, monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the putative norm for the structuring of familial relationships. Heteronormativity and mononormativity have attained a near tautological stature as natural states of being. This prevents most individuals from consciously questioning the desirability and inevitability of monogamy, producing great pains and stresses both in terms of identity and societal functioning when such questions are asked. Thanks to the contributions of the feminist and queer academic traditions, there is a substantial body of academic work examining and critically challenging heteronormativity's sacred status. Still, it is only recently that academic scrutiny has turned to the myriad intersectional enforcements of a couple-centric relationship model.

Yet outside of academia, there has been a group exploring diverse alternatives to mononormative relationship structures. This group refers to its approach to relationships as "polyamory," meaning "many loves." Polyamory is perhaps best described in the words of sociologist and Georgia State University professor, Elisabeth Sheff,

...polyamory is a form of relationship in which practitioners have multiple romantic, sexual and/or emotional partners. It differs from swinging with its emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships, and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners in a polyamorous relationship, distinguishing it from polygamy" (Elisabeth Sheff 2005:iii).

Polyamorists as a group give sociologists a chance to study a narrative which questions the hegemonic discourses of mono-normativity. The complex range of shapes which polyamorous relationships take makes the study of polyamory difficult; however, this “deviant” group gives sociologists the opportunity to problematize and study aspects of monogamous culture which might otherwise remain hidden.

With this potential in mind, this research will examine the polyamorous community in the United States. The research will consider whether polyamory is a type of family constructed by polyamorous individuals. The interactions between conceptualizations of family, polyamorous identity, and polyamorous behavior (as in, “doing polyamory”) will be examined. Since intimate relationships typically play a strong role in the reflexive conceptualization and performance of self-identity, and due to polyamory’s status as a loosely knit deviant group, it is expected that polyamorous status will be a strong aspect of these individual’s conceptions of self.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Monogamy is by no means universal in the human story. Historically, most incarnations of non-monogamous relationships have been polygamy of one form or another and have typically been left to the academic attentions of cultural anthropologists. Polyamory is a new form of non-monogamy which developed in the latter half of the twentieth century within, and disseminated across, the developed world. Due to its subcultural emphasis on honesty and consensus, polyamory has oftentimes been given the distilled description of "responsible non-monogamy" (Klesse 2011).

Historically, monogamy was spread far and wide during the European colonial and imperialist eras as described in works on globalization. This spread was much to the detriment of traditional forms of polygamy, mostly forms of polygyny, which had formerly been extant in cultures around the globe. As Zeitzen explains,

The spread of Christianity and European-based legal codes through colonialism, and the imposition of state laws on aboriginal peoples living within the borders of modern nation states, wiped out many forms of polygamous practices both in and outside the Western world (Zeitzen 2008:4).

Thus, by the mid-twentieth century, monogamous marriage (a concept which was experiencing its own conceptual shifts) was, by far, the most widespread, traditional and accepted form of relationship throughout most of the world (Coontz 2005).

Socio-historical Approaches to the Modern American Family

Two major historical events profoundly affected family structures in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. These were the Great Depression and World War II. These two events were etched into the national psyche well into the next century. Middle class families were plunged into poverty, and the plight of those who had already been in poverty before the stock market crash worsened. World War II brought the additional stresses of war on a scale the nation had never imagined. The marriage rate skyrocketed as young men and women tried to keep some form of connection in the face of war and the draft, which was passed in September 1940 (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:153).

The economic and social upheavals of the Depression challenged families in new and unprecedented ways. Families were geographically and socially cast to the wind as they looked for new jobs to replace those that had disappeared in the stock market crash or been replaced by mechanization (particularly farmers). The male unattached drifter entered back into American culture, having traded their spurs and saddles for a bindle and railcars. Somehow, at least in media portrayals, canned beans seemed to have survived the cultural transition as a staple food for such drifters.

In terms of important structural changes brought about by the Great Depression among American families, the father's stature as economic provider and disciplinarian of the family suffered major erosion, as they were overwhelmed because of their inability to support their families. This was noted at the time as being a major source of psychological stress and anomie. Due to economic stresses, the national birth rate fell below replacement level for the first time in American history (Mintz and Kellogg

1988:137). Child labor laws were relaxed, as children began to be expected to have a job allowing them to financially contribute to the family. Educational opportunities for these children were limited. Additionally, the visible suffering of the elderly spurred the expectation that the government had to do something to help (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:140).

The Great Depression dealt severe blows to the idea of limited government, generating “a conviction that the federal government had a positive duty to intervene to rescue families from poverty” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:144). It was a period where Americans came to the realization that private charities and the like just could not meet the needs of Americans. This argument concerning the efficacy and need for government public assistance is one which one can still see happening on both sides of Capitol Hill. Additionally, the federal government came to be seen to have a responsibility to “support the aged, provide jobs for the unemployed, and protect family savings” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:144). This ushered in the New Deal programs (such as the still extant Tennessee Valley Authority) which were federal attempts to invest in the country's infrastructure and social safety net, while reducing the incredible numbers of unattached transients. The Federal government was called upon to be “major guarantor of family welfare” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988). Social Security, one of the most popular federal programs in United States history, is one of the most successful examples of such New Deal programs.

These New Deal programs were just as much social engineering programs as they were economic recovery programs. Of particular interest here are the Civilian

Conservation Corp (CCC) and the Federal Transient Program (FTP). The CCC was a rousing success, aiming to “*prevent transience among young unemployed unmarried, men by placing them in camps to carry out conservation projects*” (Canaday 2009:92). The FTP, which existed from 1933 to 1935, “created a national system of camps and shelters for mostly lame migrants” (Canaday 2009:92). The FTP was significantly less popular than the CCC, having both public and governmental critics. The FTP was plagued by accusations of aiding and supporting individuals seen as sexually perverse (Canaday 2009).

The CCC established quasi-military settings in Army-run camps, where the young men were not soldiers in training, as the camp environment might suggest, but rather “... more akin to breadwinners-in-training” given that the CCC was billed as a family-oriented program. Corps members were required to send most of their monthly income to someone who was loosely defined as dependent on them; those dependents could be defined in terms of blood or obligation. The entire exercise was intended on its public face to save “young unemployed men from ruin, including sexual degeneration. . .” (Canaday 2009:117), using this dependency requirement as a way to ensure that these young men would be guided toward, a “healthy”, socially productive, and socially acceptable family unit by the time they left the conservation camps. Notably, Corps members were paid (keeping in mind that most of this money went to dependents) nearly *twice* as much per week as transients in the care of the FTP. The familial orientation of the CCC was credited as helping save young Corps members from the horrors of the sexual perversion, read homosexuality, associated with transients and the “distinctive

subculture of hobos and bums in which homosexuality featured prominently” and as a way to prevent what was seen as the psychological damage suffered by men exposed to long term unemployment. A major symptom of which was considered was the “assumption of feminine duties around the house” (Canaday 2009:92, 96).

The short lived Federal Transient Program was intended to provide help to those who were already transient, with the goal of stabilizing their lives and reintegrating them into a community. This was paired with a public relations campaign on the part of the FTP meant to spread the message that “transients were normal people in danger of being corrupted on the road” and that there were major differences between the Depression transient and the perverted, pre-Depression, drifter hobo (Canaday 2009:103). However, unlike the CCC, the FTP was unable to escape the social association of gender segregated camps and the homosexuality associated with the pre-Depression transient.

What is most interesting about the short-lived FTP was that it was one of the last American social provision programs which operated on an individual basis separate from the family economy. Future New Deal and other welfare programs, such as the Works Progress Administration and Social Security were structured to provide the vast majority of their relief efforts to the promotion and relief of heterosexual families, leaving very little support for unmarried men and women, as well as other individuals situated outside of the heterosexual familial economy. These programs were not simply attempts by the state to curb the impact of one of the greatest economic disasters of the twentieth century, but also desperate attempts by a wounded United States government to preserve the “traditional family” in the face of such a disaster. This examination is pertinent to the

examination of polyamorous individuals and families because their family structures place many of them outside the traditionally defined dyadic heterosexual family requirements placed upon current welfare provision programs.

World War II helped pull United States families out of the Depression, but put a different range of stresses upon the American family structures. American families were left to face the challenges of wartime “. . . with little governmental assistance” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:174). Not only that, mothers and families were cited as the cause of the challenges created by wartime stresses (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:174). The war's consequences included a dramatic upsurge in the marriage and birth rate during the war, followed by a post-war surge in the divorce rate with a concomitant decline in the severity of stigma associated with divorce. One of the developments with the largest impact upon American family structures was the large wartime influx of women and teenagers into the labor force. This led to a readjustment of many such individual's perceptions of themselves in relation to family. The removal of a vast number of American men from the everyday family environment led to necessary adaptations by those left behind in order to socially and economically maintain their families, especially in light of the war's housing shortages and lack of child care services.

The post-world war 1950s is held up by many today as the golden age of the American family. However, given the impacts of the Second World War and the Great Depression, it should not be surprising that patterns of family life underwent major changes unseen before. The marriage rate rose dramatically, while the age of first marriage hit a low not seen before or since in American society. Marriage was touted as

being absolutely essential to individual well-being. Given the general cultural consensus that women's place was as the hostess and consort of the family unit, large numbers of women failed to pursue employment or higher education. Large family size and a leveling off in the rate of divorce also mark the 1950s as an outlier decade in terms of long-term social and familial trends (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:178–179, 181, 186–187). These changes in marital and familial patterns produced what is commonly known today as the baby boom.

Much of the reason that the 1950s have been construed as a quiet decade in the American cultural consciousness can be laid at the feet of the massive success of the television during the decade and the concordant shift to TV and away from movies in terms of America's dominant form of entertainment. Television offered a tool to convey cultural images, values, and a narrative discourse to a degree never seen before. The 1950s was the birth of families gathering together to watch TV as a familial past-time (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:191). The aforementioned leveling of divorce rates was not due to the popular image of happy American families. Many of the marriages in question were not successful, but the stigma of divorce and not being part of a family unit kept many a couple together in their misery for quite a long time (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:194).

The 1950s as a decade was a metaphorical duck on the water. To the casual observer, the duck sitting on the surface of the water looks calm and serene. But upon closer examination, it would be paddling away vigorously under the surface. The 1950s was a period during which American culture and families attempted to come to terms

with the massive changes in the world around them produced by the first half of the twentieth century. Given all the social paddling going on under the surface, the cultural upheavals, explosions and revolutions of the 1960s should hardly surprise.

The 1960s was the decade when the turmoil which had been desperately churning away beneath the surface of American society exploded in a massive series of social changes. Divorce rates began to rise again, with divorce restrictions loosening. Perhaps one of changes most salient to modern day family was the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which declared anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional. Along with the counter-culture turmoil, the acrimony surrounding the Vietnam War and military draft, sexual revolution(s) and other societal upheavals of 1960s, the ground was set for much of the modern exploration of what family can mean. Experimentation with communes and alternative relationship structures were pretty much hallmarks of the decade.

From the 1950s to early 1970s the standard family model – that is, the nuclear family with a working father, a stay-at-home mother and two children -- was one of the hallmarks of the then dominant structural-functionalist theoretical framework in sociology. As Froma Walsh describes, this reinforcement of “normalcy” sprung largely from the ripple effects of the work of Talcott Parsons. “Talcott Parsons's influential studies of ‘the normal family’ in the 1950s made a theoretical leap from description of a sample of typical white, middle-class, suburban, nuclear families to the prescription of those patterns, such as rigid gender roles, as universal and essential for the healthy development of offspring” (Walsh 2003:6). After a profound impact on social theory

across a wide swath of the social sciences, structural-functionalism began its march to the graveyard of academic theories due to its inability to interrogate the changes in family structure or analyze the lived experience of real families in an increasingly diverse United States population. By the 1970s something different was needed in the study of family, leading to the rise of social constructivist and other theoretical models which allowed not only for the analysis of the family as a social unit, but also of the symbolic negotiations which occur within families. Still, traces of functionalism linger in the study of the family, as well as in non-academic discussions of family forms (Scanzoni 2001:693).

These new theoretical approaches rejected structural-functionalism's emphasis on culture as "the ultimate source of social patterns" (Scanzoni 2001:694). Rather, constructivist theories treated families as "produced and created by the actions of persons operating within the social structure and cultural milieu that surrounds them" (Scanzoni 2001:694). This allowed room for innovation of family forms, styles, roles and structures. This was constructivism's strength over Talcott Parson's structural-functionalism; the theories allowed for the changing nature of both family and other social institutions as individuals and groups. Sociologists and those in Family Studies needed (and developed) tools to address the fact that the traditional family exhorted by shows like *Ozzy and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*, were not static institutions, but increasingly diverse sites for and of innovation and variety.

The progress of polyamory from the 1960s onward is elaborated in the next section of this discussion, but family remains an important related institution. Just as many American families in the 1960s worked to allow heterosexual couples of different races

to marry, today we see a similar struggle to, at least legally, free the institution of marriage from heteronormative strictures. This effort has yielded great progress in recent years. However, how can polyamorous individuals fight for similar rights and recognition for their own families, given that polygamy (note, most emphatically not polyamory) is listed on the slippery slope of reasons to deny marriage equality to homosexual dyads? To answer this question, to fulfill our duties as sociologists to help those we study, more research will be necessary.

Polyamory as Concept and Practice

The phenomenon of polyamory finds its roots in the sexual and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Examples of similar practices prior to this time period were typically communes drawing upon either religious impetus or the transcendentalist movement. These included the famous Oneida community founded in 1848, Brook Farm and Nashoba. The boom in alternative relationship structures in the 1960s and 1970s drew upon new focus points, as they were mostly driven by the various countercultural groups which appeared on the scene during that period. These included communes, which experienced their first real resurgence since the late nineteenth century, multilateral/group marriage, the fight for access to birth control and gender equality by feminist activists, and swingers. Other historical influences which are still felt include post-1960s alternative cultures, alternative spiritualities, as well as the science fiction/fantasy fandoms and related fandoms (Anapol 2012; Aviram 2008). Today the overlap between these subcultural groups and the polyamorous community remains strong and these overlaps have served as secondary social networks which allow polyamorous individuals to network and form bonds with other polyamorists they encountered at subcultural events.

Popular culture also made its contributions. Alternate relationship styles could be found in many prominent works of fiction such as Ursula K. Le'Guin's classic *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), as well as Robert Ansem Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), among others. This was fertile ground for investigation by a variety of social science disciplines, resulting in what family studies scholar Roger Rubin referred to this as, "...a period of intense

reexamination of interpersonal relationships, marriage, and family life” (Rubin 2001:711–21). However, with the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, investigation of alternative families and lifestyles waned as research funding dried up. With professionalization -- described by Wendy Brown in her book *Edgework* as an intensifying demand that knowledge be applicable and marketable -- a decline in funding for any research concerning non-monogamies began in earnest (Brown 2005:70; Rubin 2001:711–27). Additionally, the voices of radical feminists, who made up a large majority of the academic advocates and activists engaging in investigating non-monogamy’s latent emancipatory and liberatory potentials, began to wane on the subject, as will be addressed later.

The actual origins of the term, “polyamory” are cloudy, as there are several possible origin points. According to polyamory activist Deborah Anapol, one of the strongest claims for the term’s origin is the 1990 coining by Morning Glory and Oberon Zell. Oberon Zell and Morning Glory are the founders of the Church of All Worlds, a neo-pagan church which draws a great deal from Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The term has become popular as a shorthand for responsible non-monogamy (a practice which had previously struggled for a coherent descriptive term) and has engaged enough public interest that the word entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006. Since around 2004, academic and theoretical examination of modern non-monogamies has begun to reemerge across disciplinary boundaries, with the first international academic conference focusing on polyamory, in its many forms, being held in 2005, and a slow

growth in the body of academic articles on the subject (Barker and Langdrige 2010:705).

The polyamorous sub-culture espouses a variety of feminist related ideals such as negotiation, egalitarianism, consent (a quality they share with the sexual kink community, with which, as noted earlier they share a large demographic overlap), and honesty in relationships across the sexual spectrum. Barker and Langridge describe this communal attitude thusly,

Whilst it is often seen, from the outside, as fulfilling men's fantasies (representing the possibility of infidelity without guilt and having sex with more than one woman), many within the polyamorous community regard it as a more 'feminine' way of managing relationships, with much emphasis placed on the importance of open communication, the expression of emotions, and support networks (Barker and Langdrige 2010:141).

Feminists have a historical vested interest in the investigation and problematization of monogamy. The fact that the evolution of the various forms of non-monogamy which would eventually lead to the growth of polyamory took place during the height of second wave feminism helps explain why feminist scholars took interest in non-monogamy and its possible emancipatory potential. In their paper comparing feminist attitudes and critiques of monogamy in the 60s-70s and at the time of their writing in 2004, Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott note that in today's environment of "ostensibly greater sexual freedom ... the critique of monogamy has become so muted as to be 'almost inaudible' among feminists." On the other hand, such critiques in the 60s and 70s were "central. . . to the politics of the personal, seen as a challenge to oppressive

heterosexual relationships – by both lesbian and heterosexual feminists” (Jackson and Scott 2004:151).

Jackson and Scott indicate that the retreat from the study and advocacy of various non-monogamies by political and academic feminists had a variety of roots, including the decline of feminist theoretical interest in various forms of non-monogamous relationships, especially as their possible emancipatory attributes became “associated with a libertarian, individualistic, hedonistic pursuit of sexual variety.”. With this change of political, practical and theoretical orientation, heterosexual non-monogamous feminists were once again seen as sleeping with, not just one, but “at least a battalion” of the enemy (Jackson and Scott 2004:153). This removed an important source of support for heterosexual feminists involved in negotiating their way through to non-monogamy. Jackson and Scott also point out the devolution over time of feminist critiques of monogamy. Over the past thirty to forty years, the very way in which feminists talk about non-monogamy has changed, adopting an implicit attitude that women in heterosexual relationships are harmed by non-monogamy.

Ritchie and Barker remark upon the fact that, before a successful December 2006 edition of the journal *Sexualities* and other attention, "the main literature consisted of a small number of papers considering non-monogamy as a feminist way of managing relationships," reminding us, the readers, that "there is not one single feminist agenda but many" (Ritchie and Barker 2007:144). In addition, they note that most of the feminist authors who had written on non-monogamy prior to 2007 were “coming from a broadly socialist feminist perspective, perhaps with some elements of radical and postmodern

feminist influence” (Ritchie and Barker 2007:144). Barker and Ritchie distill three main arguments from this particular branch of the feminist critique of monogamy: that monogamy benefits men rather than women, that the gendered power dynamics of monogamy prevent opportunities for women to develop self-identity due to the emphasis placed upon "stability of the couple over individual experiences and solitude,” and the existence of monogamous mechanisms implicit within the couple relationship which serve to separate women from their friendships with one another, thus weakening feminism (Ritchie and Barker 2007:144–145). In the case of feminist examinations of lesbian and gay relationships, the arguments are similar, concerning such individual choice of monogamy due to heteronormative pressures to appear “normal”, especially in light of recent efforts towards legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

All of these problematic points are part of the overall phenomenon which, in a call for papers for the first international conference on polyamory, Bauer defined as “mono-normativity” (Bauer 2005). Mono-normativity is an analogous concept to heteronormativity, and refers to the assumptions within dominant societal discourses of the normalcy and characteristic naturalness of monogamy and coupledness. Mono-normativity makes itself felt through a variety of mechanisms, such as in the construction of “dyadic containment” which can be found even within polyamorous relationships. Dyadic containment has been described by Mark Finn and Helen Malson as “a constitutive logic and practice that works to delineate a core couple relationship and that serves to characterize it, and the desire of its occupants, as fixed, enclosed and exclusive, and thus as ostensibly authentic” (Finn and Malson 2008).

Linguistic constraint on meaning is one mechanism by which mono-normativity is achieved. The conceptual boundaries imposed by language and vocabulary constrain the possibility of exploring our identities, experiences and emotions (Butler 1997). Without suitable linguistic tools such exploration is exceedingly difficult. Thus, in order to expand their options some within the polyamorous community have pursued the development of new linguistic devices in order to make their relationship options more socially intelligible. The development, incorporation, and acceptance of such linguistic devices by the polyamorous community is made more difficult by the dominance within Western culture of the ideal of the soul mate, the one perfect partner who will eliminate any desire or need for any other romantic connections in the future.

The negotiative creation of linguistic devices is an inherently communal project of creating a new symbolic social reality better fitted to polyamorous life. There is little doubt that the internet has had a profound impact upon this project by allowing geographically widespread community members to communicate and redefine their symbolic and discursive existences through tools such as the alt.poly usenet group, various Livejournal groups, and websites such as meetup.com which facilitate the physical gathering of local community members. It should be noted that such linguistic innovation does not free individuals, but rather, creates new norms which, while better suited to the “doing” of non-monogamy, are constraining in and of themselves.

The larger point here in regard to the construction of family and familial roles and ideals within the context of polyamory, is the sheer impact that the dominant symbolic discourse, mono-normative and heteronormative as it is, has upon such constructions and

their negotiation. The meanings that are attached to the actions and categories of “family” in such discourse limit both the personal exploration of such meanings and our sociological interrogations. By engaging in meaning-making divergent from what is held by society at large, polyamorous individuals are what Herbert Blumer would have referred to as “acting units interpreting the situation with which they are confronted” (Blumer 1986:89).

This societal privileging of dyadic containment, or coupledness, is part of a larger structure of intersecting oppression and privilege which Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza termed “kyriarchy”, “...a complex pyramidal system of intersecting and multiplicative social and religious structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression” (Fiorenza 2009:9). While the kyriarchy as a concept is a bit abstract, it is a conceptual tool which allows for much better evaluation of the various nuances of oppression and privilege which arise around and within relationships. The symbolic language I have been speaking of is simply one of the more pervasive aspects of this system of intersectional inequalities.

Social theory has made great strides in examining the heteronormative effects of the kyriarchy, but by focusing on certain kyriarchical segments such as sex/gender, sexual orientation, race and class, it has let other oppressive systems remain obscured and allowed them to exercise their power without challenge or critique. In 2005, Pieper and Bauer coined the term mono-normativity for the, previously unnamed (and thus in some ways, unstudied) aspect of the kyriarchy, which was later extended by Pallotta-Chiarolli as involving

. . . the formation of new boundaries and borders fitting between the legitimate [heterosexual monogamous nuclear families] and the about-to-be legitimate [homosexual monogamous nuclear families] from those relationships and sexual practices which become more intensively inscribed as illegible [bisexual, multisexual, multipartnered families] (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:11).

Mono-normativity serves to make the dyadic couple seem just as much of a default in terms of relationship structure as heterosexuality is seen to be in relation to sexual orientation by the mechanisms of heteronormativity.

The theoretical interrogation of mono-normativity is extremely important as Western society moves toward greater acceptance of homosexuality (or, rather, certain acceptable and palatable presentations of homosexuality), yielding the creation of a homo-normativity which delineates acceptable norms of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. This homo-normativity is in turn informed and molded in form by mononormative and other oppressive assumptions and forces through kyriarchical interactions. A salient example is the marginalization of bisexual individuals in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts because they muddle the dominant discourse's categorization of clear cut sexual identities (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:35–36).

Polyamorous individuals, while engaging in the negotiation of how exactly to functionally define their personal conception of polyamory and its relation to other social institutions such as family, are just as vulnerable to intersectional oppression and privilege, as well as our society's hegemonic discourse concerning what a "proper" relationship structure looks like. One can only pursue conceptual innovation beyond the dominant cognitive symbology so far, before said symbology starts pulling back and preventing further reconceptualization in very subtle but strongly influential ways.

For example, Elizabeth Sheff, one of the few researchers currently conducting research specifically focused on polyamorous individuals and families, while exploring the nature of polyamorous male identities and performances in light of Raewyn Connell's framework of symbolic constructions of masculinity, found an intriguing mix of engagement and rejection of the hegemonic masculinities among the polyamorous males she interviewed (Sheff 2006). Beyond its value as a contribution to the relatively small amount of study we have concerning masculinity and men's intersectional experiences, her research widens our understanding of how we might remedy intersectional inequalities such as gender and relationship statuses. Additionally, her research serves as a map of how difficult it is to extricate oneself from society's discursive patterns even if one is aware of the pattern to one degree or another. Sheff found that most self-identified polyamorous men generally espouse, advocate and embrace egalitarian attitudes, but also that these men, in wide and varied ways, continued to discuss their various relationships in ways that retained elements of patriarchal and gendered attitudes. For example, "While most poly men relished the affective components of their relationships, some exhibited the hegemonic patterns of emotional avoidance and ineptitude" (Sheff 2006:628). What is very interesting here is that Sheff's research examines the nuances of the symbolic/social dynamics each poly male has to deal with both internally and externally. Only through understanding the polyamorous experience and the strategies of kyriarchal interactions of polyamorous individuals across the gender spectrum can we fully begin to examine the full range of emancipatory possibilities and knowledge that may be gained through the study of this group.

It should be noted that, while the vast majority of polyamorous identified individuals support the cause of gay marriage, for some in the polyamorous community it is seen as a necessary step in the recognition of their own relationship forms; contrarily, the efforts of the homosexual community to appear “normal” and politically correct in order to appear more acceptable to mainstream society have contributed to the reinforcement of mono-normativism, and continue to do so. This serves to make future legal, cultural and social acceptance of polyamorous relationships more problematic and difficult.

The polyamorous community’s stance towards polyamorous political activism, or the lack thereof, has been remarked upon and was the subject of research by law professor Hadar Aviram (Aviram 2008). As noted earlier, the actual cultural characteristics of the polyamorous community have been strongly influenced by its associated subcultural groups. According to Aviram’s research, these influences result in a strong subcultural emphasis upon creativity and individuality. These emphases have resulted in “a community that focuses on diversity and tolerance for individuality and personal freedom at the expense of finding common ground,” echoing the kink community’s standard joke, “your kink is not my kink, but your kink is okay.” The community’s general perception of law as a ridged and confining system and an emphasis on personal freedom and relationship development, yields the perception that the law is neither legitimate nor able to govern and organize relationships and feelings, especially without resorting to limiting relationship structures that may be embraced by polyamory. In short, the polyamorous community holds a cultural toolkit which emphasizes a

utopian, visionary background, strong sentiments against government dictating “who they did and didn’t love,” concerns about exposing themselves to societal stigma and fears of negative governmental/legal attention; this toolkit has been spread by the online community to other parts of the world (Aviram 2008:278).

As noted earlier, after the 1970s, when some feminists saw non-monogamy “as a potentially radical alternative to being in a couple,” feminist and general academic interest in non-monogamies waned. Academic work on the subject was scant until interest, both public and private, began to grow in the latter half of the 2000s (Barker and Langdridge 2010:749). As discussed earlier, the term mono-normativity was coined in 2005 to refer to the assumptions within the dominant discourse of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy and coupledness. There is now a Yahoo group dedicated to the academic discussion of research concerning polyamory and other modern forms of non-monogamy (Polyamory Researchers Yahoo Group). Current research ranges from critiques of mono-normativity as serving “evolutionary and biological essentialist arguments of ‘natural monogamy’ with statistics on the rarity of pair-bonding amongst animals, and within human cultures,” to the experiences of children in polyamorous families (Barker and Langdridge 2010:751, 761).

Other influences affecting American family structures have included the increasing cultural diversity of the United States population, and the economic upheavals of recent years, which resulted in a shrinking American middle class and broadened income inequality, resulting in more stresses and anxiety among American families pressuring them to find ways to adapt. Probably one of the most notable changes in

American families, and thus in the theoretical study of such families, has been the increasingly successful efforts toward social equality for same-sex dyadic couples. The rise of governmentally legitimated same-sex families demonstrates the growth of heterogeneous family forms in the country over the last half century. Finally, with the high divorce rate and prevalence of single parent families in the United States, “most adults and their children will move in and out of a variety of family structures as they separate and recombine” (Weston 1991:208).

This is where Kath Weston's pioneering book *Families We Choose* comes in. First published in 1991, *Families We Choose* was based on Weston's extensive fieldwork and interviews among the gay and lesbian population of the San Francisco Bay area during the 1980s focusing on how these individual's sexual identity as homosexuals influenced their conceptualization and negotiation of their lived experiences of family. She found that by challenging the assumption that biological and genetic ties automatically conferred kinship and by bringing choice into the realm of kinship, gay men and lesbian women were able to form chosen families which were just as functional and supportive as families rooted in the bio-genetic model. These families were built from close friends, former and active lovers, among others. Viewing recent history, Weston's made a prediction which rings eerily true:

. . . chosen families could be accommodated by simply extending certain “rights” to lesbians and gay men and treating them as members of another minority group. . . . Relatives and judges alike perceive the option of treating gay or lesbian lovers as they would a childless heterosexual couple: as an exceptional relationship in a procreative world. . . . If gay people begin to pursue marriage, joint adoptions, and custody rights to the exclusion of seeking kinship status for some categories of friendship, it

seems likely that gay families will develop in ways largely congruent with socioeconomic and power relations in the larger society (Weston 1991:209).

I would argue that this exactly what we have seen as more and more US states begin to allow same-sex marriage. The institution of family has changed just enough to allow same-sex couples to be slid into the rubric of legitimized family forms if they conform to this ideal form of the American dyadic couple. The spirit and discourse of family has accommodated one of its loudest critical groups just enough to allow it to mostly retain its current problematic form(s). The procreative interpretations of kinship which are deeply embedded in our society make their force felt through pushing the potentially revolutionary aspects of gay and chosen families toward forms which are the least threatening to the overall discourse on how family should be structured.

Thus the radical potential Weston saw in gay and lesbian chosen families seems to have been tamped down to follow rather narrowly legitimated dyadic coupledness patterns that replicate patterns already seen in hetero-normative culture. We are indeed seeing "...gay people begin to pursue marriage, joint adoptions, and custody rights to the exclusion of seeking kinship status for some categories of kinship..." (Weston 1991:210–211). Polyamory, with its incredible variety of familial forms and its extension of choice to multiple individuals negotiating together, offers a way to bring about revolutionary change in how societal institutions deal with families in which , for example, there may be more than one spouse who should be covered under an individual's employment insurance or a child with more than two legal guardians. To borrow the words of Christian Klesse:

Although I cannot explore this issue in full detail here, it is noteworthy that some of my interview partners have also evoked the language of “chosen families” when talking about their polyamorous relationships. Whereas the hegemonic discourse on “chosen families” tends to foster rather normative representations of monogamous gay and lesbian couple relationships that may or may not involve parenting (Weston, 1995), polyamory may have the potential to conjure up more complex images of what “families of choice” may indeed look like (Klesse 2006:570–571).

METHODS

This study relied on qualitative constructivist methodology (Lincoln and Guba 1985:110–111). As the goal was to better understand how polyamorous self-identity influences the conceptualization and symbolic construction of family, the constructivists' emphasis on the study of "how participants construct meanings and actions" was appropriate (Charmaz 1985:313).

Sampling

This project utilized purposeful sampling, with sampling continuously adjusted "as insights and information accumulate and the investigator begins to develop working hypotheses about the situation," and in order to select respondents pertinent to the emerging theory (Lincoln and Guba 1985:201). Random sampling, while an excellent methodological tool for quantitative work, did not fit the needs of this project. Purposeful sampling also allowed for better appreciation of the diversity of the population. Interviewees from the initial wave informed the selection of further sampling.

Respondents were limited to those who self-identified as polyamorous and were at least eighteen years old. An attempt was made to maintain equal representations of men and women. Respondents could be living in any type of relationship arrangement or not in any romantic relationship at the time of the interview. It was assumed that self-

identified polyamorous individuals not currently in a relationship would still be able to make valuable contributions about their polyamorous identity.

The total sample included nine interviewees and ten interviews (one respondent was interviewed twice, the first time as part of a course research project). Six respondents were women; three were men. Their ages ranged from 27 to 44, with three respondents in their late twenties and four in their early-to-mid thirties. Among the women, four self-identified as bisexual or “pansexual,” one as “gender queer,” and one as heterosexual. Among the men, two self-identified as bisexual and one as heterosexual. Three of the respondents had undergraduate degrees, two had some college, three had graduated from high school, and one had some college and a technical IT certification. One respondent self-identified as Latino, one self-identified as Native American/Euro American, and seven self-identified as Caucasian, including Anglo-White and “Eurotrash.” Two interviewees were born outside the United States (Canada and Latin America), but had been living in the U.S. long enough to understand U.S. conceptions of family. Each interviewee chose a pseudonym, which has been used throughout.

Interview Methods

The initial wave of interviewees was recruited through a convenience sampling of my personal contacts with those in the polyamorous communities of Richmond, Virginia and the Baltimore-Washington D.C., Northern Virginia metro area. Many of these contacts, particularly those in Richmond, were long time acquaintances and a few good friends due to my semi-active involvement in the local polyamorous community in the years previous to graduate school. In the Baltimore-D.C. metro area and surrounding

suburbs, I found most of my initial interviewees by contacting the organizers of local polyamorous gatherings and support organizations. In both areas, I contacted both the aforementioned acquaintances/friends and organizers who then volunteered themselves and/or offered to extend interview invitations to those they knew who they thought might be interested. For instance, my interview with Anita directly led to my opportunity to interview Willow and my interviews with Lincoln and Margaret led to my interviews with Moon and Tatiana due to networking among local polyamorists. According to Willow, Moon, Tatiana, and respondents who came after the first wave, extremely positive reviews expressed by my first wave of interviewees made other polyamorists they knew much more amenable to the interview process. Two additional interviews were obtained at a polyamorous weekend seminar camp which gave me permission to attend for the purpose of finding interview subjects.

Most interviews, if possible, took place in the interviewee's home so as to put them at ease as much as possible. Typically, the interview took place in the living room. The only exceptions to this were the interview with Lincoln, which took place in a private corner of a café empty but for the two of us and the wait staff, and the two interviews conducted at the seminar camp, which took place in a private bedroom of the camp lodge with the interviewee and myself sitting on opposite sides of a twin bed.

The interviews were semi-structured in terms of the key questions and themes I had identified. These were the following:

- (1.) How would you describe your current and/or recent relationship status(es)?
- (2.) How did you first discover the concept of polyamory?

(3.) How did you decide polyamory was the relationship style which worked for you?

(4.) Have your experiences with polyamory changed what family means to you, if so, how?

(5.) Have you spoken to anyone in your family of origin concerning your relationship philosophy and/or definition of family? How would you describe your relationship with them?

Other than ensuring that these themes and questions were covered at one point or another, the interviews proceeded more like long, deep conversations than an interrogation. In most cases, this led to interviewees expressed a great deal of comfort with the process; they appeared comfortable talking quite long periods. Additionally, they were considerably excited by the idea of another polyamorous individual, one of their own so to speak, conducting what they saw as vitally necessary research.

At the start of each interview I explained the presence of the camcorder, which I used to record the interviews. The camcorder allowed me to lipread the interviewees while reviewing the interviews at a later date. Despite my fears that such an approach might be inhibitory, after I showed interviewees my cochlear implant and explained the usage of the camera there were no objections among my them. Interviewees showed no reticence in spite of the camera, especially once I explained to them that I would be the only one who would ever see the video files. Typically, this was when I asked them to sign the informed consent forms.

After explaining that the general focus of the thesis was on polyamory and family, to further break the ice, I asked each interviewee to choose a pseudonym. Once they had done so, we dived into one of the questions/themes and conversed back and forth. I allowed interviewees to speak as much as they wanted to on old stories, personal

philosophies, and shared interests as we meandered from one question/theme to another. These questions were not asked verbatim, but rather approached as narrative genres to be explored, with specific plot points which I would draw us back to cover if we had missed them.

My interview with Murphy proved extremely interesting as his hearing impairment is almost as bad as mine. This allowed for a deeper rapport to be built through the occasional sharing of in-jokes and experiences that only the deaf would understand. My interview with Valentine Michael, turned out to be an entirely different challenge due to the fact that my cochlear implant had broken before our scheduled interview. Valentine Michael went out of his way to insure that the interview went smoothly, despite my temporary handicap.

Limitations

Limitations

As a stigmatized and deviant group, polyamorists tend to keep a low profile, leading many of respondents in the initial waves to be among those who feel strongly about their polyamorous identity and thus have less to lose in participating. This is advantageous in that the initial respondents are those who have put a great deal of thought into polyamory as part of their self-identities and correspondingly toward their conceptualization of family. However, there has been the problem of adequately representing those polyamorous individuals who do not often network or interact with other polyamorists for one reason or another, as well as those more private individuals who do not feel comfortable opening their self-identity to the examination of others.

FINDINGS

This thesis derives much of its inspiration from Kath Weston's *Families We Choose: Gays, Lesbians and Kinship* in which Weston describes the reinvention and renegotiation of what family was among the gay men and lesbian women of the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid- to- late 1980s (Weston 1991). While it has been more than two decades since the publication of Weston's book, my investigation of the lived experiences of polyamory has helped me see polyamorous individuals and families as the spiritual cousins of the men and women Weston studied. Polyamorous individuals, and the polyamorous community as a whole, are conducting their own on-going transformation of the very fabric of many of the basic understandings and meanings of “family” in new and novel ways. This chapter will be organized around two major topics: routes to polyamory and conceptualizations of family.

In my description, analysis, and interrogation of these interviews, I have found that my own personal polyamorous self-identity has been highly informative in sensitizing me to much of the experiential subtext and meanings interviewees describe. Hearing their stories, tribulations, and joys, and having the opportunity for greater reflection about my own experience, has been quite moving. It has engendered transformative and reflective processes which I suspect will continue for quite some time. Thus, this analysis is inherently reflexive, which I hope will add greater depth and

understanding to this “interpretive rendering” of the topic of polyamorous families (Morse, Stern, and Corbin 2008:131).

While each individual's lived experience is uniquely theirs, as Erving Goffman stated when he coined the term “moral career,” there are patterns which emerge (Goffman 1963:32). After all, these shared points are some of what makes up the social bonding when polyamorous folk encounter one another and, almost inevitably, start comparing their personal narratives, as well as trading and reconstructing symbolic meanings. In the Discussion chapter that concludes this thesis, I will return to Goffman’s theory of moral careers. In the section that follows, I will discuss the various routes to polyamorous self-identification as they emerged from the interviews and my other interactions with project participants.

Origin Stories: Routes to Polyamory

Interviewees described two general phases in the origin of their polyamorous life and self-identity. The first of these involved an openness to at least attempt a form of non-monogamy. The second involved an introduction to polyamory as a specific, if very broad, conceptualization of non-monogamy. These two stages each have their own varied patterns by which polyamorous individuals negotiate and experience that stage.

Openness to Non-Monogamy

The general willingness of participants to engage in polyamory and self-identify as polyamorous drew from a number of routes. One route described by interviewees involved a realization that polyamory was an unchangeable quality they were born with, not a choice. In this case, polyamory was seen as *orientation* rather than *preference* or *life*

style. While all but one of the nine interviewees indicated at least a degree of openness to the idea of responsible non-monogamy early in their lives (typically in the period when they started dating), in four cases participants expressed a feeling of polyamory as an inborn orientation. For these respondents and those like them, polyamory is not just a choice – like a *preference* – but rather a relationship *orientation* (Klesse 2014).

Two participants who identified as innately non-monogamous, Joy and Margaret, reported being unable to maintain any strictly monogamous relationship. Both spoke of repeatedly falling in love with more than one person since beginning romantic relationships. Given the strongly mono-normative discourses in American society, this led to what Goffman would describe as “spoiling” of their personal conceptions of self. The fact that both women were already self-identified bisexuals only exacerbated this situation..

When speaking of her earlier struggles attempting to meet monogamous expectations Joy stated,

I knew I was different. I thought – I thought there was something wrong with me. . . . Because I was deeply in love in a committed relationship, and then I met someone, and fell like a ton of bricks and wanted to be with him. And yet didn't want to lose my previous relationship. In fact, I cheated. I thought I was a bad person.

I thought I was toxic, like my self-esteem was – I was so confused because I thought that I couldn't figure it out. I truly loved this person. I had loved them for four years, and then here was someone else. And I loved them with depth, and emotionally, and physically, mentally. And it – I couldn't understand. The thing that really sunk in for me was that I hated hurting the person I was with. Because he wasn't at all okay with it. He was furious, and crushed, and possessive. And the other person was loving, and willing to be there for me, and willing to be the other – the person on

the side if that's the only way they could be with me. And I felt – I felt like I needed to apologize, but I couldn't figure out why

Margaret's descriptions of the impact of her experiences on her conception of self were quite similar,

So I was doing that, but I didn't have a name for it. I didn't know it was a thing. I just thought, this is a – I thought, maybe this is just who I am. I'm just really slutty, and I'm morally deficient. I was really convinced – at some point, I just looked at myself and said, nope, I'm just not a good person because good people can be monogamous. And I'm just morally deficient. So... I went to college, just kind of accepting this thing about myself, and trying, over and over, to be different, and failing.

As a result of their repeated attempts and failures to live up to the mono-normative expectations of society, both felt as if they were, in Joy's words, “toxic.”

It was not until Margaret and Joy met friends who either knew of polyamory, or were self-identified polyamorists themselves, that they began the process of reevaluating what had become, in their eyes, deeply embedded personal defects. The introduction to polyamory allowed Joy and Margaret to see themselves not as poisonous aberrations, but rather as healthy members of a relatively new sub-cultural group. As Joy put it,

... I couldn't say – what I couldn't do was say “I'm doing something wrong.” Because it didn't feel wrong at all. Because – I was raised that you don't do things with people unless you love them. But nobody told me what to do when you love more than one person at once.

Within the polyamorous community both found personally affirming answers to that question.

While, out of all the participants, Margaret and Joy were the only ones who expressly described the experience of damage to their self-identity due to feeling an

inborn inability to be monogamous, two other respondents actively identified as innately polyamorous. These respondents, Lincoln and Willow, identified as innately polyamorous but did not experience the kind of damage to conceptions of self that Joy and Margaret described. For Lincoln, a portion of this was probably attributable to gendered social privileges and the distinct differences in the expectations placed on men and women. Unlike Joy and Margaret, Lincoln was ambivalent about whether it was correct to call polyamory a relationship *orientation*. This next excerpt is lengthy, but informative about Lincoln's thought process as he worked out how to describe his particular views on the orientation vs. lifestyle question that crops up in many discussions among polyamorous individuals:

I really feel that it's much more of a lifestyle than an orientation probably because I really see orientation as more of, like, a sexual thing, you know. What – what type of people you're really drawn to, you know, whether you're – you're you know, straight, monogamous or straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual – something like that. Pansexual, omnisexual, whatever, I really, kind of, see [pause] . But yeah I see that more as the orientation.

I really see lifestyle really more as, you know, the way that you choose to live your life, you know. Of course, then my wife says that, you know, well, so you're saying that poly is a choice, you know, you are choosing to be poly? And well, I guess, you know, yes and no. I mean, naturally, I feel like I am polyamorous without just, you know, making the decision, but I do kind of have the decision of deciding whether I want to be poly or want to be monogamous. I know I'm talking – talking in circles. I really feel – I really feel [pause]. I see it more as a lifestyle than an orientation, but, I mean, a lot of that really just comes down to semantics and definitions, you know?

One – one thing I do feel is that the – it – it is – especially being as a – I didn't have a lot of poly or non-monogamous influences on my life when I was growing up, you know. As, you know, when I was younger, you know, and up through my teens and this was something that I really kind of came to on my accord from a natural evolution of thought. *I really do feel that it's not like – it's not a – it wasn't a social paradigm that was put*

upon me or that I, you know, that I adopted. It's something that really was part of me, you know, I had these – I had these thoughts and I had these beliefs and I had these ideas.

And then, you know, actually discovered that there were lots and lots of people out there who had the same thing. *So I guess in that way you could definitely see--I could say that it was an orientation because it--it--it evolved naturally in just what I desired. It wasn't something that was put upon me by--by a social expectation.* [Emphasis added]

The italicized portions above are an example of why, ultimately, I included Lincoln with Margaret and Joy in the non-monogamy as innate category. While Lincoln did initially state that he felt polyamory was “more of a lifestyle than an orientation,” part of that distinction was intrinsically linguistic in nature, as he pointed out, and depended upon language molded by dominant heteronormative and mono-normative discourses in American society.

The important distinction with Lincoln was that he felt naturally polyamorous, but also, unlike Joy and Margaret, felt like he could choose to ignore those non-monogamous feelings and choose/force himself to be monogamous if he had absolutely had to be. Willow's descriptions of her experiences were similar to Lincoln's, but she never described her experiences with monogamous relationships as a choice, nor did she report the kind of marring of self-identity experienced by Joy and Margaret. Rather, Willow's main reason for being in monogamous relationships prior to learning about polyamory was her general lack of knowledge concerning forms of non-monogamy – a lack of information attributed to her childhood exposure to the Pentecostal Holiness Church and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Thus, it would be perfectly reasonable to expect that within American society, a certain number of individuals presentation of self

as monogamous may not, in fact, accurately indicate that they would be opposed to a non-monogamous relationship structure, if such were socially open to them.

Still, Willow's experiences with her family of origin also provided her with a context for openness to non-monogamous relationship patterns. Willow's descriptions were some of the most straightforward in this manner, and provided examples of how such experiences with family of origin blended with her identification as innately non-monogamous.

Growing up in this family and my family, I mean, mom was adopted. We were very shunned from the family, especially after grandmother and granddaddy died. Mom was adopted [pause]. We were the black sheep. We were – you know, which was funny considering we were the ones they all came to when anybody needed anything done or help with something. I can recall having aunts and uncles and cousins that were not kin to me.

We would just – you know, they were always there, they were part of the family, and we've always [pause] because I guess where we were shunned so much, we've always opened our arms and been, hey, come on in. You need a place to stay for a while, let's, you know, here, get you something to eat, here, you know, have you a bath, whatever. Just we've been very open that way. And it seemed while my parents and my family are “kind of, uhh,” about it, they – they you know, I can't necessarily talk to them about anything like this. They know about it but they're – you know, with their Christian values.

I'm always been of just [pause]. It was easy for me to open it up to a more poly way of thinking because of, number one, those kind of background and that kind of an upbringing. But, also, because I can distinctly recall thinking when I was younger, how – you know, I had friends and I had cousins or I had boyfriends or what have you that – it's like, okay, I'm really great friends with this person but I can't talk to this person about this but I can talk to this person about it instead. I never could understand how you could expect one person to fulfill every need you had.

Willow's identity as naturally non-monogamous was reinforced by her experiences with the marginalization of her immediate family by her extended

family due to her mother's adoptive status. Their black-sheep status and continued willingness to help out extended bio-legal family in spite of such treatment had a definite impact upon Willow's worldview as she became an adult. Especially in light of the fact that, despite her immediate biological family's history of having offered a couch to extended family in need, they would not accept Willows self-identity as polyamorous and kinky as an adult. In terms of her sense of being naturally non-monogamous (like Joy and Margaret, this was expressed in terms of a relationship orientation rather than a choice) she reported thinking about non-monogamy in a rudimentary way in her, "...early teens, because I can distinctly recall being more than willing to share a boyfriend."

For another interviewee, Moon, experiences with her family of origin were so negative and traumatic that she did not actually consider them family anymore and was obviously uncomfortable going into any detail. These experiences with her family of origin led her to the realization "that just because we shared genetic makeup did not mean that they were automatically important. And so I think poly just kind of became an extension of that. If I can make my own family, then I can make my own romantic family as well." This theme echoed interviews with gay men and lesbian women in *Families We Choose*, whose experiences with their families of origin had been decidedly negative (Weston 1991).

For Murphy, an interviewee who at one point stated “monogamy for me has always struck me as a little bit stupid,” the non-standard conceptualization of family was strongly influenced by his family of origin experiences. As he said:

Polyamory hasn't changed my definition of family. My definition of family has always been somewhat broad because of – well my brother's best friend is considered my other brother. That brother from a different mother was somebody who's been part of the family, essentially, for a long time.

The fact that his family of origin unofficially adopted one of their sons' best friends established a precedent for Murphy in terms of considering the possibility that those not bound by bio-legal connections could, in fact, become family members (a topic to which I will return in the family section of this chapter). This would be an attitude which would serve him well in his polyamorous career.

For Anita and her husband Gabriel, experiences with divorce in their family histories played a significant role in their establishment of a family considered unique even within the polyamorous community. Anita and her husband's marriage evolved over time into a completely platonic friendship relationship. They both live in the same house with Anita's romantic and sexual partner Snow and the family's three children. While Gabriel was the biological father of two of these children and Snow was the biological father of the youngest, they describe this as having no bearing on how each child is treated or identified; they were the children of all three adults in the family. They all considered themselves polyamorous, but Anita and Snow were not seeking out any additional partners, dating or otherwise.

Anita's biological parents were divorced by the time she was a year old. As she put it "it's pretty obvious that they just weren't meant to be together. You know, it would have been a miserable family." Describing her husband's family history she said:

And then there's the opposite of that. Gabriel had a miserable family. His parents, they knew they needed to get divorced. They were waiting till the kids were grown up, that kind of thing, and it wasn't good. I mean, everybody knows it wasn't good. They should have separated. And so we both knew that if we're not happy together [pause]. But I think for him, in my opinion, what I think it was for him is that he knows the kind of family he grew up in. You know, and we – we just – we both knew that if we're not happy together, if things aren't working out, we're not going to force the issue, you know, for whatever. I don't know about Gabriel. But I think for him – in my opinion, what I – what I think it was for him is that he knows the kind of family he grew up in and he saw that the traditional thing didn't work. So why not try something different. For myself, I've always kind of said, "I have always been somewhat abnormal." And my belief system, my personal interests and opinions have always fallen outside of the norm. Why should relationships be any different?

Anita and Gabriel found that they made much better close friends than romantic partners. Given the different ways each of them experienced how negatively divorce could affect a traditionally mono-normatively structured family and its children, and the fact that they got along quite well when not in a romantic relationship, neither wanted to subject their children to what they had experienced as children themselves. Thus, even before finding the polyamorous community, Anita and Gabriel, and eventually Snow, were practicing non-monogamy as a novel and radical solution to the deficiencies of monogamy.

Parental divorce was also important for Margaret, who had experienced a damaged sense of self because of an inability to be monogamous.

But I think that my family of origin is what made me the kind of person who'd be willing to say, screw this, I'm doing it my way. So my parents

are divorced. My mother's a lesbian. She has been with her female partner, who actually I suspect is a transgender person [pause]. And my father remarried a woman with a whole castle of kids. When she left him, he kept those kids. He said, anybody who calls me dad is your sister. Anybody who calls me dad is your brother. That's it, end of story.

As a kid, my mom was gay in the '80s. And my mom was outed in the '80s for being gay. And I got all [pause] I got a lot of shit for that. I got beat up a lot. I got death threats. I got harassed. I had somebody come to my house and try to bash my door in. I had to call the police. It was shit like that constantly. It was a very rough time to be gay, in the '80s. And it was really rough being the only kid of an openly lesbian mom in the '80s, not easy. Definitely sucked. I'm not mad at my mom. Like, *it wasn't my mom's fault. It was our fucking society's fault.*

Margaret's non-traditional family, her bi-sexual orientation, self-perception as unable to be monogamous, and her experiences of social abuse due to her mother's sexual orientation all laid fertile ground for her later wholehearted adoption of her polyamorous self-identity.

The one respondent who did not report openness to non-monogamy relatively early in his life was Valentine Michael Smith, the oldest of my respondents at 44 years old. For him, the influences of his family of origin were rather different than those experienced and reported by other respondents. While born a United States citizen, Valentine grew up in South America in an extremely Catholic Latino family, then returned to the United States for college in the 1980s. Valentine's childhood and adolescence were spent in a society where the mono-normative discourse was perhaps even more powerful than in the United States. Unlike the rest of my interviewees, Valentine felt that his experiences in his family of origin served to reinforce his

commitment to monogamy. Speaking of an affair his father had when Valentine had been in his mid-teens:

I also saw the drastic effect it had on my mom. Because she was raised in a strictly monogamist culture. Everything was a strictly monogamist in theory. And she suffered great shame over the affair.

That kind make me not kind of [pause] it drove me into promise and to be the perfect husband. I was the perfect husband. You know, I will not stray. I will not think of women like sex objects and things like that. And I ended up just [pause] I found it easy to be monogamist.

Valentine held to monogamy until he found that his wife, Shelly, was having an affair with another couple because she felt neglected and unloved due to his attempts to give her space and be the perfect husband his mother had made him promise to be.

I was trying to be perfect husband. Apparently, I failed miserably. I made my loved one feel totally unloved and neglected and rejected. I was like, how did this happen? *This is not how the script is supposed to go. And I'm like, "Ha, it's the fucking script."*

With his remark concerning "the fucking script," Valentine identified hegemonic discourse as having controlled him; he decided he could tell monogamy to "take a flying leap off Aconcagua" (the highest mountain in the Southern Hemisphere). He and Shelly found polyamory a solution to the disastrous consequences of strongly enforced mononormativity. Over several years he rebuilt a relationship with the couple his wife had cheated with and now considers the husband of that dyad to be his brother.

Thus far I have described an openness to non-monogamy following from personal/familial experiences. However, interviewees also described experiences with alternative self-identity and subcultural groups. The following examples by no means

cover the full gamut of sub-cultural crossover. I have restricted myself to those which were perceived to be of great importance to my respondents.

For instance, the community of self-identified polyamorists has been described as including a larger percentage of bisexual individuals than one would find in the general population (Bergstrand, Cox, and Fleckenstein 2012; E. Sheff 2005:172–173). My interviewees reflected this distribution, with seven of the nine interviewees actively identifying as bisexual or “queer” (one male and one female did not identify this way). Bisexuality and polyamory are inherently *mestizaje* social phenomena in that they both problematize and exist on the borders of the neat, clear-cut categories used in everyday social interaction and informed by dominant social discourses (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:31). Polyamory itself is not based in any given sexual orientation; however, it might be particularly attractive to bisexual individuals, since it allows the opportunity to be in relationships with multiple people from across the gender spectrum. “Polyamory brings to the fore the question of what kind of relationships a person may want to engage in, rather than what kind of gender or ‘sexed’ bodies they are responding to” (Klesse 2014:92). In many ways, bisexuality's status as a sexual orientation and the understanding of polyamory as a relationship orientation which focuses on building close, at times emotionally intimate, relationships regardless of sexual attraction complement each other.

Murphy was one of the male interviewees who actively identified as bisexual; his experience was made all the more difficult as a hearing impaired “Anglo” originally

growing up in French Quebec. His interview contained the most explicit description of the perceived links between polyamorous and bisexual self-identities. After making clear that he found aspects of my research problematic, he jokingly stated that he was probably around a 2.75 on the Kinsey Scale, just a little more attracted to women than men. When he described his experiences exploring his bisexuality identity he reported,

One of the other experiences I had with that bar was when I came out as bisexual, a lot of the gay guys were like, “You're really gay. You just don't want to acknowledge it. You're still in the closet.” And that really pissed me off. Because yes, I like women, and yes, I like guys, what's the big fucking deal? But, as you said a lot of society likes things neat and tidy. They want you to choose. Now, one thing I remember them saying, you're eventually going to have to choose one way or the other.

When he described this experience, Murphy was clearly frustrated, exasperated and angered by the attitudes of the gay males he had mentioned. When I asked if he thought that such dualistic thinking might have something to do with the widespread influence of monogamy leading to the assumption that one *has* to make a choice, he replied: “I think that is probably the driving force [pause], the ‘monogamy-as-the–dominant-relationship denominator,’ if you will. Because then it makes sense. Whereas in polyamory it’s more of you can have your cake and eat it, too.” For Murphy, polyamorous ideals and culture allowed him to more thoroughly embrace his bisexual identity without being forced to deny a core part of his self-identity due to a false social dichotomy.

Another common theme that appeared repeatedly, particularly from my more openly bisexual respondents, was bafflement at the strong romantic ideal of some kind of soul_mate who could fulfill all of one's needs. Murphy stated this bafflement rather bluntly: “But, monogamy for me has always struck me as a little bit stupid. Because gosh,

there's seven billion people on the planet. And odds are there isn't going to be one that's going to fulfill every little need that you have and you know every desire, and hope, and dreams, etc.” He and his wife (and only primary partner) embraced the honest and open communication and negotiation which is so highly valued within polyamorous culture and utilized these to cemented an alternate understanding in their relationship,

Like one thing my wife has known about me since we started, is that I like guys. I'm not going to stop liking guys. And every so often I like to go out with guys. But, that doesn't mean that I don't love you. It just means that your bits don't exactly correspond to the bits I need from time to time.

An interest in or commitment to alternative religious philosophies or agnosticism also seemed to yield an openness to polyamory. Many interviewees considered their polyamorous identity at least related to, if not intertwined with, their personal religious philosophies and beliefs. This was not unexpected. given both my experiences within the polyamorous communities of the DC metro area and my hometown of Richmond, Virginia and the reported observations of other researchers observations (Aviram 2010:90). Six of my respondents described themselves as one variety of pagan or another, including a self-professed worshiper of Bacchus and a self-described “Neo-Pagan-Buddhist-Trinitarian-Wiccan” who was raised as a Mormon and still expressed some belief in the Christian religion; the remaining interviewees described themselves as non-believers or agnostics.

All the participants expressed fascinating self-assembled philosophies which they credited, to one degree or another, with leaving them open to the possibility of non-monogamy. One very interesting example was given by Moon, who considered herself a

Mormon pagan. She explained that she appreciated the gendered balance between the male God and what she referred to as “The Heavenly Mother” in the lesser known aspects of Mormonism. Moon cited her eclectic belief system and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints' history of, admittedly very patriarchal, polygamy as some of the major influences upon her willingness to break from monogamous relationship norms.

The one commonality almost every interview participant shared in the case of religion was a narrative from some time when they were younger which concerned a point, or series thereof, where they began asking questions about the religion in which they were being raised and were not satisfied with the answers. In Willow's words:

...learning the history of the Mormon religion and all of that and knowing that there are those that do practice that kind of a lifestyle [polygyny] and stuff, I knew of it, was told it was evil, but even then thought it was weird that it was just the man who could, which I didn't agree with at all.

Which has gotten me in so much trouble. It has, so many times. But I've known of it and I can remember learning about it when I was in the Sunday school at the church and thinking, well, hell that's the way to go, but why can't I have the house.

As for participants who identified as agnostics and/or atheists, Murphy distilled their general shared philosophy rather eloquently,

My stance vis-à-vis, religion, I am, essentially, for all intents and purposes, an atheist. I – however I behave much like an atheist, however I don't spend much time pondering the questions after death and all that jazz because I'm more concerned of the here and now.

And I feel that, rather than being focused on what happens after death, we should be more focused on making things better for people in the here and now. So that you actually have a society that actually cares for one

another, rather than caring about whether or not they're gonna get into heaven or some other bullshit like that.

The last notable sub-cultural crossover was with geek culture. My discussions with interviewees were replete with mutual references to science-fiction, fantasy, and gaming in general. The use of such shared shorthand made the interview process much more comfortable for both myself and the interviewees, significantly improved communication in some cases and helped establish a level of camaraderie and trust in my role as researcher that I do not believe would have been present else wise. One would be hard pressed to attend any gathering of polyamorists and not overhear at least one discussion of related to geek culture.

Hadar Aviram noted that, “Perhaps the most important cultural artifact in polyamory is Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). For many others, scifi-fantasy/fandom was an important and indirect invitation to explore other relationship possibilities, and as an opportunity to meet like-minded people” (Aviram 2010). For instance, Lincoln, in his earlier comments, included “omnisexual” among his list of sexual orientations. When I mentioned the word’s origin describing the *Doctor Who* character, Captain Jack Harkness, Lincoln laughed, stating, “Yeah, Jack Harness, that's right. He's my hero, man.” Murphy drew his choice of pseudonym from that of the name of the character who was turned into the titular *Robocop*. I lost track of how many times respondents mentioned getting ready to go to a science fiction/fantasy convention, or an event related to the Society for Creative Anachronism. Anita's house was bedecked with several full hardback series of fantasy literature, as well as various *Star Trek* and

Star Wars related decorations. This makes sense in that one of genre fiction's primary traits is building alternate worlds and repeatedly asking the socially dangerous question, “What if?” and challenging those who consume such media to ask the same question.

Valentine Smith was likely the most strongly influenced by science fiction, especially in terms of planting the seeds for his later vehement rejection of monogamy. Indeed, his chosen pseudonym was the name of the main character in Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

...it's like the book was kind of seminal for me because he presented ideas I kind of held. But, I held in the back of my mind just as crazy things that just may be weird. And he presents them in a way that makes perfect sense. And he validated my understanding that, you know, there doesn't have to be marriage. It doesn't have to be a limit as to how many people you address with the term love [pause]. And seeing the ideas I hold treated as, you know, important enough to change society. Seeing them as the key to changing society. I mean challenge how society was built. And the possibility of working to change society as for a better model.

For Valentine, geek culture, science fiction, and the works of Robert A. Heinlein in particular served as catalysts for his personal growth and profound shifts in his view of social reality and the human condition.

The experiences and ideas described in interviewees’ origin stories indicate one striking similarity: each described themselves as a misfit in their own way and to their own degree. Margaret's mother was an “old guard lesbian.” Murphy was an outsider simply on the merit of needing hearing aids to function in speaking society. Valentine Smith, talking about his time in a military high school, struck this note this poignantly, or

in the shared colloquialism of the polyamorous and geek communities, “right in the feels.”

Well, this was in seventh grade. I was very shy, unsure of myself. Tiniest little kid. I was the second smallest in my entire class of over a hundred. That's how I went in. And in this place of stern discipline, I found that I'm a total non-conformist. And I found myself rebelling against everything. And I found myself in a lot of trouble. And those were my angry years. And, you know, I learned that, you know, it might not be a great idea to go in to the military. Because, you know, I learned that I can't trust intrinsically anybody who's above me. Authority figures. I have problems with authority figures. Because I learned that in many cases I knew more than them. And I was just about a teenager. But, that's where I learned not everything I'm told is true.

The bad times of today are the good times of tomorrow. And I formed some very good friendships. And I learned a lot about myself then. I learned that, you know, what I don't have to take somebody's word. *Because I somehow learned to think for myself. And in my anger I found that I have a voice. And in my indifference to authority, I found that I became a leader of the nonconformist and the misfits. I became one of the misfits.* [Emphasis added]

Coming to Poly

In the second general phase in my respondents' routes to polyamory, they described being introduced to polyamory as a specific, if very broad, ideological conceptualization of non-monogamy. As already elucidated, each respondent was primed in one way or another, and to varying degrees, to be receptive to non-monogamous relationship structures. Typically participants reported being first introduced to polyamory through one of three major avenues, finding the term on the internet (OKCupid.com being the one website mentioned specifically), being introduced by an already polyamorous dating partner, and/or through friends who either knew of the polyamorous community or were polyamorous themselves.

Moon, one of these was finding the term on the internet, said “I don't even remember how we came across the website, but there was a website that we came to.”

Talking about her and her legal husband’s first introduction to the term, Anita said,

We opened up our marriage as a way of seeing if we could "make it work" after a separation. I think we started seeing the term poly first through OKC. We were looking for online dating, but everything geared towards couples was very sex oriented, which we didn't want. I came across OKC and we decided to start dating separately, and we started seeing people who used the term Poly.

Other interviewees, such as Murphy, reported being introduced by an already polyamorous dating partner.

Polyamory first appeared on the scene for me when I was dating a girl in my second year at the university. She was polyamorous through and through. And that was one of the – if I dated her I had to get accustomed to that.

The third major avenue of introduction was through friends who either knew of the polyamorous community or were polyamorous themselves but not dating the interviewee. For example, while living around the Chesapeake Bay, Tatiana was introduced to ethical non-monogamy through a friend who was in an open marriage before moving to Richmond where she was introduced to polyamory as a specific form of ethical non-monogamy,

But that's when I was kind of first introduced to it and I was really open minded and, you know, I kind of put it on the back burner for a while and then I moved up here and was kind of reintroduced to it. And actually went to a group called Greater Richmond Polyamory in support of my friends and learned a little bit more about it and started, you know, turning, kind of, going, you know, this might not be such a bad idea. We should try this. And I didn't, you know, that was back in – not this past November, but the November before when I, you know, I've been here for maybe, like, six months.

Like, I hadn't really thought about it, you know, I was just kind of tossing it around and sort of going to this group and kind of hanging out and Munches and Parties and all that kind of stuff with these people and getting to know them. And it was actually New Year's Eve when I met Wes and Tiffany and we, kind of, haven't been separated since. So – and it's been about a year and a half now. So things are going pretty good.

My interview participants universally reported that these introductions almost inevitably led to further research regardless of whether they felt non-monogamy to be an inborn trait. Joy's description of her experience when asked how she found polyamory as a concept and community is relevant for the full spectrum of respondents:

Blind luck. I think a friend said, “Oh, you know, maybe you are polyamorous?” And I was like, “Hmm?” And I knew my Latin. I was like many loves, right. And I googled it and the first thing that came up on the internet was the list called how to fuck up. And I read it. And I said oh, crud, I have done number six, you know, four, eight. I was like oh, oh, yes, this is -- these are all the things that I did that ruined my relationships.

But apparently, there is a right way to do it that doesn't ruin your relationships. And I found out that of course, there were people who could fall in love, and be in love with more than one person at once. And then of course, you could fall in love with your best friend or best friends, or a group. And it was okay.

Polyamorous Conceptualizations and Practices of Family

The first half of this chapter described interviewees' various paths to a polyamorist self-identity; in this section I will look at how polyamorous self-identity and experience affected interviewees' conceptions of who they considered *family*. Additionally, I will cover some general categories/types of polyamorous families, even though the sheer variety of familial and relationally negotiated set-ups makes identification of any set of categories problematic. While such negotiations are, to a large degree, informed by the ideas and concepts that make up the general ideology of polyamory as a specific non-monogamy, they are also heavily influenced by the myriad

of complex and different intersectional forces and positions associated with each individual. These factors can include, but are definitely not limited to, the personal histories of members of the family, the degree of individuals' self-reflexivity and awareness of hegemonic discourses' influences (many of which are largely unconsciously encoded understandings for the average person, the privileging of dyadic containment discussed earlier, for example), sub-cultural backgrounds, past relationship experiences, level of education, and whether it was their turn to walk the dog that morning.

Many researchers have identified the generalized patterns commonly used as shorthand in polyamorous discourse such as polyfidelity (a closed non-monogamous group including any number of individuals), hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical relationships structures, and other linguistic and conceptual items from the polyamorous cultural toolbox (Anapol 2012; Aviram 2010; Barker 2005; Ritchie and Barker 2007; E. Sheff 2005; Sheff 2006). What is important here is the realization that these discursive and structural possibilities are highly modified and personalized by individuals on a case-by-case basis. Each individual and group's negotiated understandings, definitions, uses, and combination of items they chose to pull from the polyamorous cultural toolbox will vary in different ways, some subtle and some radically. This is the case even before one considers how such tools interface and hybridize with other aspects of polyamorists' self-identities.

Therefore, an analysis of family formations based on any strict thematic categorization is not suitable or appropriate in this case. Rather, here I will examine and

interrogate polyamorists' lived experiences of family as they describe it, so as to capture as much of the diversity and definitional messiness as possible. The point here is to examine how my respondents reported feeling and experiencing family as polyamorists, as opposed to how their experience would be expressed within the generalized polyamorous discourse.

How Do You Define Family?

Among my respondents there is one thing that each mentioned when asked how they define family: the caveat that polyamorous families are different for everyone. While this is true, such differences are variations on themes which arise as each family group negotiates a social landscape for which their maps are sketchy outlines at best. Respondents varied in terms of how close they are with their blood kin, ranging from those with relatively close relationships with biologically related kin, to those, such as Moon, who do not consider blood relatives to be “family” per se. An important point to keep in mind is that conceptualization of family is not simply about who you include as family. Who is excluded from your family and why can be equally important. Respondents uniformly reported they accorded at least the same or more emotional value and importance to their chosen families than their bio-legal kin. Hereafter, unless specifically noted, any usage of the word family will refer to chosen family.

There are two general patterns in the interview data in terms of how participants defined a polyamorous family. The first is what I refer to as “chosen *household* family,” which includes several individuals mutually considered family who cohabit; it is analogous to the monogamous “nuclear family.” The second grouping I have called an

“extended chosen family.” In this case, individuals considered as “family” others who were not part of the particular household and may not be held in familial status by all members of the polyamorous household. For example, Anita and Willow each have a non-biologically related individual who they refer to as their “sister” with no reservations. Anita even went so far as to reserve a special position for her chosen sister in the borderlands between chosen household and chosen extended family (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010).

A common misconception concerning polyamory is that it is all about sex. Contrary to this portrayal, in my interviews I found that while multiple sexual relationships do occur, the ideological emphasis is not on multiple sex partners such as you would find among swingers. Rather, the expressed focus is on establishing multiple deep emotional connections. Thus, when speaking of polyamorous family, both extended and household, many of these chosen familial connections either involve no sexual relationship at all or no longer have a sexual component. As Moon stated: “. . . you have personal romantic relationships with people that you consider family, and you also have other family that you're not romantic with.” Interview participants commonly bemoaned the English language's restrictive selection of words to describe emotionally intimate relationships.

Chosen Household Families

The consensus among my interviewees was that their basic definition of family centered around emotional attachments which included a keen awareness of the

emotional and mental support they derived from and contributed to their partners and chosen family. More specific traits came into play when the individual was a member of a non-dyadic polyamorous household and/or if there were children in the household family This discussion concerns how and why people “do” polyamorous families, as well as how such families are defined by those emotionally and relationally involved.

Chosen *household* families include three or more adults who cohabit as a family unit (as opposed to cohabitation in a housemate style situation) and may include children. One of the most basic differences that I found between chosen *household* families and chosen *extended* families was their emphasis on living with others on a long term basis. For Anita,

I think family really becomes more for, like, who would I be willing to live with and, like [pause] really make a part of my life, not just, you know -- 'cause -- 'cause I've moved so much, and I have a hard time really making good close friendships and keeping those [pause] especially once I end up moving, that most of the people that I've met and even have been really, really close to, you know, that's no longer there. It's drifted away. And [pause] but *family, even when we're separated, that doesn't really go away* [emphasis added]. And I think that's kind of what kept Gabriel and I together for so long. It's that there was, I guess, a sense of family between the two of us, even when we were separated. We still felt a connection and wanted to keep in touch. . . .

Anita's legal husband, Gabriel, had been in the U.S. military, deployed away from home for long stretches. Now, even after their separation, followed by the decision to live together and shift to a purely platonic relationship and the subsequent addition of Snow as Anita's primary romantic and sexual partner, Gabriel is still Anita's family. He is an active and enthusiastic member of the household. In fact, both Anita and Willow (who is currently in a dyadic household environment) described a point when they and their

original monogamous spouses found that they made better platonic friends/family than romantic partners.

Of course, living together is not unique to polyamorous families. It is a basic, if not always fulfilled, requirement in monogamous families as well. However, in polyamorous household families living together is more complex as there is less room for miscommunication. Honest communication is an ideal highly stressed in polyamorous culture at large and was mentioned often in the interviews when respondents were recounting narratives concerning the success or failure of their relationships, both extended and household, but, once again, with much less margin for error in chosen household situations. Margaret's comments speak to this:

I think one of the reasons that polyamory does require more communication is because there are more people to communicate about. There are more people involved, you know.

. . . I think, again, that [honest communication] is difficult for everybody. But I guess because we are talking about jealousy, and sexual desire, and breaking taboos, maybe polyamorous people have a little more practice.

Given that polyamorous relationships are negotiated largely, as in Margaret's earlier words, "without a script," it is essential for members of chosen households to communicate to their household family members an accurate understanding of their needs, wants, and other aspects of their subjective reality. As such, a high degree of self-reflexivity is a notable aid for successfully negotiating and maintaining polyamorous relationships, as is a willingness and ability to aid partners who have difficulty with aspects of self-reflexivity, for instance individuals with Asperger's Syndrome or

borderline personality disorder. Lincoln's description of his household's particular approach is indicative of some of the novel ways in which polyamorous families establish structures to facilitate such communication.

. . . The initial responsibility falls on the person feeling the emotion. It is their responsibility to express that they're having that emotion. If they're being passive-aggressive or they're trying to hide it, it's not their [pause] then it is their fault if their partners can't. . . .

It honestly doesn't even matter if you can't identify it [the emotion]. If you are feeling a negative emotion, it is your responsibility to tell your partners in all trust and honesty that you are having a negative response. Because like I said, your partners can't read your brain. You may think that you're expressing it in a non-verbal way, but unless you sit down and take your partners (inaudible) emotion about it--

Go to a neutral place, if that helps. My wife and I, we go to hookah. We call it our Switzerland [emphasis added]. It's neutral territory, Switzerland. It's our neutral territory. We go there. There's, you know, there's no hierarchy, there's no DS [dominant/submissive] relationship, there's no, you know, whatever. It's all neutral. If there's anything that's been bothering us that's been building up, then we can talk about it. And, you know, so a lot of times we'll just go and smoke and eat and not talk about a thing, you know? Or there's an issue, and we'll get through it real quick, and it's not a big deal. Sometimes we both think everything's cool, and then in talking we find out, oh, there's this thing that's been really bothering us. And we talk about it, and we'll work it out. But it's the responsibility of the person having the emotion to express it, because otherwise you can't get it fixed. From there it is the responsibility of everyone involved to be honest, open, and respectful of everybody's thoughts, feelings and responses

Interviewees also expressed a need for loyalty and trust in addition to practices of honest, open communication. Both Tatiana and Moon, members of the same triad household, strongly emphasized this, especially in light of emotional abuse they experienced among their respective families of origin. In fact, this shared experience of

dysfunctional families of origin may contribute to their familial bonds with each other.

Take the following exchange with Moon,

Definitely trust and loyalty [are necessary to consider someone as family]. Somebody has to exhibit that I am able to trust them completely, which is why my family typically does not include my blood relatives.

I am really, like, trust is kind of my number one with everything, and so you definitely have to [pause] I have to be able to accept a very high level of trust from you to consider you as part of my family. [Family are] the people that care about each other enough to have each other's welfare at heart. The idea that I would go without something to help you have something. I would give of myself in whatever way that I can to lift you up.

Tatiana echoed the need for trust and noted that her experience in her polyamorous household has definitely changed her views and valuations of family.

Yeah, it used to be that, you know, blood is thicker than water, like, you don't let your family down. It doesn't matter how hard they are on you. It doesn't matter how much they beat you up or abuse you; your family is always going to be there for you. And recently, kind of through an exploration of self, I learned that that was not necessarily the case. That family are people who look out for your best interests even when you can't. And people whose best interests you look out for as well. It's that give and take relationship, you know. It's not somebody who's trying to purposefully damage you or even unintentionally damage you. And yeah that happens in relationships, but it's not necessarily as malicious as a lot of families can be, as malicious as, I'm sure, mine certainly was.

For Tatiana, a mixture of self-exploration and experience with her polyamorous household family led her to a wider understanding of family which she finds more conducive to her mental and emotional awareness and wellbeing. For Tatiana, her household family,

...it's what works for me, you know. It, like, I love sharing a household with Moon where we can just sit here and, you know, like, we clean the craft room together or we put together dinner together. And we may not necessarily be in an intimate relationship like Florin and I are, but we're still partners of a household.

The expressed need for honest, open communication among household family partners – even beyond sexual intimacy – is emphasized in terms of this “watching each other's backs” attitude. Tatiana specifically mentions that such communication is not always the most pleasant experience, but definitely something she has learned is necessary and part of what makes someone family for her.

Well, and the thing is that, like, for instance for me I need someone who's going to stand up to me and tell me when I'm wrong. I hate it, but I know I need it, you know. And, again, it all comes down to that, like, self-awareness, like, knowing, like, sometimes you need your ass kicked, you know. Sometimes you just need to be left alone and it, you know, it's somebody who's willing to do those things for you and that you're willing to do for them, you know, those... the... because it's the hard times and the hard moments that really, I think, define a good relationship. It's those moments where you go oh fuck, this sucks, you know, but you're willing to push through it.

Among my interviewees, four were members of actively polyamorous chosen household families; there were a total of three such households in my interviews (Moon and Tatiana were members of the same household), all with children.

In addition to honest communication, members of chosen household families expressed a requirement for at least a moderate level of financial integration, stressing the importance of financial integration in raising the children of polyamorous households. Just as in monogamous relationships, even partially merging one's financial stake with the larger household is seen as a major sign of commitment to the household family. This

is especially the case once children are involved and carries great weight in who is and is not considered a parent. Margaret for example:

I think, yeah, being a mother was kind of my next step in my figuring out what poly really means and what being a family really means and who gets to be in the family and what defines family. And, yeah, children do add a whole new level. Actually, you want to know what was a big factor for me in who defines who's what in this family, is money. Money is actually a big differentiator. Like, people who are in my family in the immediate sense, people who are parents [pause].

One of the things about being a parent that makes you a parent is you contribute financially to my children. One of the big differences between a boyfriend, even a long-term, very serious boyfriend, like Rico, who's been in and out of my life five years now and Briar, who's been in my life for less time, but has a different role with my children is I am financially 100 percent merged with Briar, whereas Rico's finances are his finances. If I needed help or something, he would help me. But it's his money. It's not my money to spend.

This pattern of financial involvement as a key qualifier for parental status in chosen household families and was expressed in every interview in which households included children.

Children of Active Polyamorous Household Families

In all three chosen family households one of the most important expressed criteria for admittance to household family status was the partner in question's relationship with and investment in the children of the family. If a partner did not have emotional connection with the children, then it was likely they would be shifted from household to extended family status. Margaret's household had experienced just such a process with the introduction of Briar, who would eventually become one of Margaret's husbands, at a time when the family had two very young children.

So I think when we decided that Briar was going to be Daddy Briar...that that was going to be his title in this, there was a lot of talk. It was about a couple of things. It was about me and Scotty becoming aware of Briar's relationship with the children [pause] that it was not necessarily defined by his relationship with us. It was defined by his relationship with our children so that we understood that, if for some reason he and I broke up with Briar, he was going to still stay a father.

I think it was a decision I made before he even talked to me about it because I observed how much he loved my children and how much it was obvious to me that he would die for them.

That's how I know you're a parent, boom, you know. Would you change your life for them, change everything about yourself for them to be a better person for them, to meet their needs, to take care of them? Would you die for them? And I observed that.

Here we can see that polyamory is not just about romantic or friendship relationships, it can, at the most basic, come down to being open to the myriad of emotional ties and bonds one can experience and create outside dominant discourses concerning emotional relationships and their conduct. Here, Margaret freely admits that even if her relationship with Briar did not work out in the long term, he would still be one of the children's fathers. Moon similarly expressed that if a partner did not get along with the households children, that, in and of itself, warranted her terminating, or at least greatly scaling back the scope of their relationship.

Below, Margaret describes the relief Scotty experience after an accident at work that permanently affected his ability to use one of his hands.

It was pretty scary. And it was. Scotty said later on that it was very good, it was good for him to know that his kids would still have two parents, that there would still be a father, that there would still be [pause]. You know what I mean? Like, his kids would still have parents.

There is a compelling logic to polyamorous households' approach towards childrearing. As Margaret is fond of saying, "More parents, fewer children." Which is typically followed by some variation of "it takes a village to raise a child." There are more caregivers for each child, something that is especially important due to the current economic need for most families to have dual incomes.

Parental stability was not the only benefit parents perceived. Three of the four interviewees who had children were fully open about their polyamorous identities and relations with those children. For these parents, polyamory lead to an emphatic approach to teaching values concerning gender, sexuality, and other social values which, in most monogamous families are either learned through socialization or in accord with dominant discourses. For example, one of Moon, Tatiana, and Florin's male children's favorite color is pink and he loves My Little Pony. Rather than being told such media is not meant for boys, this is celebrated. Moon states that,

Our kids are very lucking that they've grown up around it [polyamory]. I feel like they're learning things about communication. They're learning things about cooperation. I mean, I think there's a lot outside of the, you know, romantic involvement aspects of poly relationships that are very beneficial to the children.

And it also gives them a lot of adults that they know that they can trust. It gives them a lot of different -- people they can go to.

In what follows Margaret details the values she believes her children are taught by virtue of living in a polyamorous household:

So another thing I've noticed is that I think that poly children get taught some different values. And I'm not saying that mainstream children don't

get raised with some of these values. But I think being in a polyamorous family really reinforces certain values over others.

Polyamorous kids definitely learn about sharing. I think poly families just, through complexity of emotions, require an intense amount of good communication skills, good emotional communication skills, high levels of empathy.

I think kids who grow up in poly families are taught from a very, very early age how to take [pause] how to talk about feelings, how to deal with feelings, and how to negotiate emotions between multiple parties. And how to be considerate of other people's feelings and think about other people's feelings.

Kids in poly families also... I've noticed a lot of overlap with us in, like, sex positivity. So our kids get a very sex positive education. I know we.[pause]. Sex is not a taboo subject around them. And so, with questions about sexuality and reproductivity, just, as they come up, we answer them. It's not a taboo subject. So since it's not a taboo subject, it's just a part of his general learning about the world.

So we have taught them a few things that mainstream parents don't about gender because one of my partners is transgender, my children are being raised that, you know, some people have penises, and some people have vaginas. And some people are boys, and some people are girls. And whether you're a boy or a girl is about your personal choice, that that's how you see yourself.

So I think also, because of that, we really strongly push consent. Consent is a big deal. For the kids. Yeah. Like, the reason we don't spank our children is because they own their bodies. And people don't have the right to touch you against your will.

Thus, Margaret, Scotty and Briar are reflexive concerning how they are socializing their children; they are specifically raising them with the values and mores they think will serve the children emotionally and psychologically as they grow up. For example, their approach involves exposing their children to the idea that gender is a spectrum and not biologically determined, something most sociology students have difficulty grasping until at least graduate level classes. Margaret's previous statement

concerning consent carries a very high valuation given that consent is a primary and key element in the cultural toolboxes of both the polyamorous and kink sub-cultures.

So I do think that they definitely get raised with some different values. We definitely have different ideas about jealousy and possessiveness in a poly family [pause]. I'm raising siblings, and sometimes they get jealous of each other. And that's feelings that they have to be self-aware of and identify. But that doesn't make bad behavior okay between the two of them. So why should [pause] why is it suddenly that, as adults, we're allowed to behave that way with our adult partners? Like, we would never tolerate that behavior in children. If children acted jealous and possessive and aggressive about their parents or against their sibling...

Extended Chosen Family

When it comes to polyamorous extended chosen family, the patterns can diversify quite a bit. My first interview with Margaret provided an excellent example of how she, her household partners, and their children benefited from both polyamorous household structures and from the adults chosen extended families and romantic partners, categories which are not mutually exclusive. Upon my mention of the hackneyed “Think of the children!” appeal, her reply was emotionally charged and one could sense the outrage and conviction behind her words.

The whole think of the children thing. And what strikes me as most offensive about this idea that is that I think my child has greatly benefited from having a polyamorous family. *My child has two daddies, in a society where most children are lucky if they have one.*

And my child has more loving adults around them than many other children would. Because again, I have my lovers, and Scotty has had his on and off lovers, and it is funny, *I can't tell you how many of the woman that my husband's' have slept with, when their sexual relationships with my husband ends I'm more upset about it than my husband is and I stay in touch with this woman and she stays a member of the extended family.*

I can tell you my best friend right now, my current best friend in the whole world is one of Lincoln's old lovers that I met because she was sleeping with Lincoln and she stopped sleeping with Lincoln and we became best friends in the world, and now she is a member of the extended family. So I think polyamory is extremely beneficial.

When I asked Murphy, one of my two bisexual male interviewees, if polyamory had changed his definition of family, he issued a definitive "no" because he felt that he already had an expanded view of who could be considered family because of his family's informal adoption of Dennis, Murphy's brother's best friend, as a brother/son and his parent's willingness to adopt his legal sister. However, as I note earlier, family in all senses is just as much about who is excluded from consideration as included:

Now, there are members of my blood family who I do not consider to be family because of – their relationship with the rest of us (inaudible), you know what I mean? Like, there's one fellow who I'm not going to name [Murphy describes him as a child molester] he's dead now. The other side of the family still kept him around, just on the account of his blood status, but in so far as I was concerned, he's nothing to me.

Here, Murphy treated the decision as to who is family as a highly individual one, for example, the decision of his biological relations to keep "him around, just on the account of his blood status." Shortly thereafter, he talked about a cousin who others in his family disapproved of, but who Murphy considered one of the most supportive members of his family particularly in terms of "my hearing loss and dealing with problems in school, and particularly bullying." Murphy's current polyamorous orientation can be seen as logical extension of not only his various stigmatized statuses, such as his hearing impairment, linguistic minority status and sexual orientation, but also of his family of origin's approach to family structures.

Generally, these polyamorous interviewees showed a much greater willingness to allow the emotional bonds they had with close friends to transcend the conventions of what is deemed appropriate between friends. Many of my respondents found that their relationships, their connections with friends, platonic, romantic and in-between (and here again we find ourselves falling into possibly false and problematic dualisms which skirt the borderlands so often labeled “Here Be Dragons”), did not fit any societal script, discourse or narrative. They found their emotional connections to be *mestizaje*, that is, messy, not fitting into any particular established discursive pigeonhole (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:31). Thus, instead of having one best friend you've known all your life who is *like* family to you, a story reverberating throughout American narratives, polyamorists found themselves once again, largely writing their own scripts. The English language can be woefully inadequate to give accurate descriptions of the multitudinous unique connections created between individuals. Therefore, it is difficult here to ascribe any particular specific familial label to many of the chosen extended family members my respondents spoke of. Polyamorists seem to be more aware of these borderlands tendencies, perhaps because they are already drawing outside the lines with their societal crayons as they build their own romantic and familial relationships (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:31).

Tribe: Beyond Polyamorous Household and Extended Families

In addition to chosen household family and chosen extended family, in the polyamorous community I have noticed an increasingly widespread usage of the concept

of tribe. This term occurred numerous times in the interviews; I have also heard, and been personally referred to as, tribe while in polyamorous company. In general, this idea of tribe automatically includes chosen household family but typically is much more often used to refer to a heterogeneous community mix of chosen extended family and other individuals who do not fall naturally into either category.

Before finding the polyamorous community, during the phase of her self-perception where she saw herself as “toxic” to any relationship, Joy stated,

So I tried not to be with people. But I was very lonely. I would [pause] I formed groups of friends, tight groups of friends, and I would tell people I was making a tribe. It is like this is my *tribe*, *these are my people*.

Joy: And I would still get the same intense feelings of familial love but with a... but with a physical component, like having.

Interviewer: Like Agape and Eros

Joy: Yeah. Finding your species. Here is your tribe. Here are the people that make you happy.

Notice that for Joy, tribe shares one of the basic requirements for polyamorous chosen family: that these are the people who make you happy. This group, her “tribe,” allowed her to sustain at least some form of positive self-image while she was still attempting to live by mono/hetero-normative hegemonic and discursive demands.

For Margaret, part of building her extended families occurred through her partner's relationships and the other relationships that those metamores had intertwined and built. After speaking of her chosen household family and its reflexive structuration, “The people who are my spouses,” she continued:

And then there's, I guess what I would call, what we call the extended family. And so this is the lovers, the metamours, the best friends, people who, in a tribal society or in a more traditional society, would be like the grandparents, the cousins, the uncles, those people who have connections to me but aren't as directly connected to me as, like, my spouse and people living under my roof directly. I guess you could say my immediate family, and then there's, like, my extended family, which I guess is my tribe.

..we became so focused on the nuclear family that we lost touch with our extended families and lost our interconnectivity with that. So now, instead, we're kind of forming new extended families through our sexual relationships. Like, I am dating Goliath, and Goliath is dating Moon. And Moon's married to Florin, and they're dating all these other people. So we have this whole...

We need a big chart. *But what it means is I'm connected to them.* And I'm invested in them because we share partners.

So, you know, I know that if, you know, shit hit the fan and I really needed, you know, Florin to come over and help me move. And he would come be here. And I -- and Goliath would be here, too. And there'd be lots of people who would come out and help me, you know.

Margaret does not draw a distinct categorical line between extended chosen family and her community tribe, which is not limited simply to polyamorous individuals. Tribe members may also be drawn from other subcultures the polyamorist identifies with, such as monogamous and polyamorous individuals in the kink community, those of alternative sexualities and orientations and their allies, close “friends” in the geek/fandom culture who they see only at fan conventions, etc. Overall, the tribal concept has thus far, proved to be an excellent adaptation as one can see in Margaret's description of what would happen if “...the shit hit the fan” for any person considered tribe. In a polyamorous context, tribe may be defined as a group of supportive people who understand the lifestyle and orientation, the polyamorous projects of rewriting of societal narrative, those

who share in the happiness and hardships of polyamorous life and provide support when needed.

DISCUSSION

Polyamory and Stigma

Erving Goffman is easily one of the most influential American theorists in the sociological tradition. As a distinct approach to the analysis of deviance, Goffman's work on stigma is eminently applicable to the polyamorous community in that stigma, and the management thereof, deals with the heuristic¹ processes by which social norms are evaluated, established and enforced contextually. The framework Goffman establishes in *Stigma* is not about deviance in the traditional sense, but rather frames things in terms of social expectations and interactions, looking at how these impact peoples' conceptions and presentations of themselves (Goffman 1963). In *Stigma*, Goffman proposes a breakdown of identity into three types: social, personal and ego identities.

"Social identity" refers to the stories about self and others that are generated among strangers in a social context. Social identity is made up of the assumptions made by strangers concerning each others' appropriate social categories and attributes, attributes which are both personal and structural in nature, concomitant to each category. Such assumptions or anticipations are made in order to allow strangers a grounds from which to predict others behavior.

¹ The definition of heuristic used here is to describe mental shortcuts and guesses used, often subconsciously, to lower the cognitive difficulty of decision making.

According to Goffman, “We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands,” that is, into expectations that take on a moral or righteous feel (Goffman 1963:2). We typically do not become aware of the specific nature of such demands concerning the stranger or of the fact that we have made these demands “...until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled” (Goffman 1963:2). Thus, social identity is actually broken up into two subtypes. The first is a “virtual social identity,” that is, a social identity made up of the righteously presented demands we (typically) subconsciously make concerning the character and identity of people we do not know or know well upon engaging in interaction with them. The second subtype is the person’s “actual social identity,” which is comprised of “the category and attributes he could in fact be proved to possess...” (Goffman 1963:2). Thus, virtual social identities are the stories we assume are applicable to strangers based on their cover art and what genre section of the social bookstore one finds them in. Actual social identities are the stories one would find when one actually opens and skims the text to establish whether the cover art is at all an accurate reflection of the book itself and if the book/stranger is even on the shelf of the correct genre/social category.

Here is the point at which stigma comes into play, as an attribute or attributes, with highly varying degrees of social visibility, noticed in interaction with someone we do not know, and is “incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual a person should be” (Goffman 1963:3). Specifically, this incongruity is one that marks them and their actual social identity as not just different from the range of social

categories ascribed to them in their virtual social identity, but also as indicating that they belong to a less desirable or acceptable category of individuals in the eyes of the observer. Goffman notes that stigmas are relationally dynamic. Categorical attributes are not discrediting in and of themselves, but rather become discreditable via the interplay between expected/virtual identity and actual identity. The severity and risk of stigma is dependent upon the interaction of observer and the observed. When a stigmatic categorical downgrade occurs, according to Goffman, the person is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 1963:3). They are discredited.

Coming back to Goffman’s threefold breakdown of identity –social, personal, and ego identities – “personal identity” is the self which is perceived by those who are close to us and who know us well (Goffman 1963:57). While they may not know the book of stories one tells about oneself, they have a rather more than decent understanding of what the narrative contains and the general style of the writing. While a clever individual might be able to alter their presentation of self along a broad range when interacting with a stranger or acquaintance, such a range of performance of self is narrowed to a large degree when interacting with a lifelong best friend. In terms of stigma, personal identity involves the management of who knows what about one’s self in order to avoid stigma. For instance, many of my interviewees mentioned biologically-related family members to whom they would not reveal their polyamorous selves due to the stigma they believe would arise from such a revelation.

The last of the trio is the “ego identity.” The ego identity differs from social and personal identity in that ego identity is the “subjective, reflexive” and dynamically changing set of stories that an individual tells about themselves and to which they are emotionally attached and invested. This is the level of the self-identity held by the person about themselves (Goffman 1963:106). What is particularly interesting in Goffman’s approach is that he establishes that the ego identity, an individual’s image of themselves, is constructed from the same social “materials from which others first construct a social and personal identification” of them (Goffman 1963:106).

While Goffman uses the metaphor of the theatre to describe individuals’ performances in social situations, the metaphorical underpinning of my analysis is more that of narrative. Other humans are not the only ones observing and judging one’s performances, the actors themselves are also their own spectators. Their performances can take the form of stories they are telling themselves about themselves; these can be used on both conscious and sub-conscious levels to spur action in general as well as in impression and stigma management.

There are few norms concerning other’s social identities in American society more prone to be automatically assumed than that an individual one encounters in a social setting is, was, will be, or wants to be involved in a dyadic relationship. Thus, polyamorists, due to their possibly stigmatizing identity, are in possession of a largely invisible stigma in terms of their everyday social identity. One cannot just look at a polyamorous individual and somehow detect the polyamory rays emanating from them. Even if they are in public with more than one significant other and expressing romantic

gestures towards both, observation of such activity is more likely to engender some confusion on the part of an observer than an accurate guess as to the precise nature of their potentially stigmatizing status. It is typically only by the disclosure of information concerning the individual's polyamorous status or information gleaned through interaction, as the nature of their social identity progresses from virtual to actual, that polyamorous stigma could/would become apparent. As such, polyamorists find themselves in the position of assuming that their differentness "is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them," a position Goffman describes as the "discreditable" (Goffman 1963:4).

One must remember though, that one cannot address the ongoing construction of the self without addressing that the possessors of these stories, these selves, have agency. People *do* things; they act upon the outside world. Their sense of self influences and informs these acts by providing context and the success or failure of such actions, in turn, reflexively influence subsequent self-construction. In her book *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools*, Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli analyses bisexual and polyamorous students/families via the frames of *mestizaje*/borderlands theory. When exploring the theoretical discussion of borderland agency and the existence of bisexuals and polyamorists as existing in borderlands between socially ascribed categories, she incorporates and expands upon many elements of Goffman's approaches. Noting that "according to *mestizaje* theory, living in the borderlands itself is agency, a challenge to the contrived fixity, orderliness, and homogeneity of various groups and communities," Pallotta-Chiarolli points out that "living on the borders requires stigma management, a

form of agency pertinent to mestizaje person” (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010:60). This emphasis on the idea that the various strategies involved in stigma management represent forms of agency and action in and of themselves, as well as Pallota-Chiarolli’s point that passing as “normal” can be just as subversive as openly disclosing stigma and border identities, speak directly to the agentic dimensions of stigma.

Polyamory and Moral Career

One way to unpack the content of my interviews with polyamorists is to approach their statements as narratives about morality which are used in the constructions of their identity, that is, their understanding of who they are and their own sense of self/selves. Much of Goffman’s work focused on the dimension of “moral career” found in individual’s stories and performances. Stigmatized individuals, a category every person qualifies for at one point or another, “tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in conception of self—a similar ‘moral career’ that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of personal adjustments” (Goffman 1963:32). One can easily see the narrative framework being used by Goffman in his examinations of identity in *Stigma* (1963). However, it is of interest to note his linguistic choices in framing these stigma stories. He calls them *moral* careers.

What exactly was Goffman trying to say by operationalizing the longitudinal² construction of personal identity as *moral*? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the adjectival form of the word “moral” as “...considered as good or bad; of or relating to the

² This choice of wording is deliberate due to the ongoing temporal and reflexive nature of identity construction. It is an ongoing self-reflexive process, not a static state. Any temporally singular examination of an individual’s personal self-conception can only be a snapshot or draft of a system which changes to one degree or another in response to outside and internalized stimuli.

distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to the actions, desires, or character of responsible human beings; ethical” (2015). Goffman describes the overall story and processes of stigmatization as having a distinctly *moral* character (Goffman 1963), that is that the careers of stigmatized individuals involve progressive stages of being seen as, or seeing themselves as, good or evil individuals. The constituent stages of these careers can represent progress towards or away from this state of being a good person in their own eyes, and to varying degrees, the eyes of those around them.

For my interview subjects, the stories of their movement towards a polyamorous self-identity were ultimately part of their stories of coming to find themselves as moral people. For example, as mentioned earlier, both Margaret and Joy spoke of how their self-conceptions became tainted as they repeatedly found themselves failing to live up to the monogamous expectations of how they should have felt and acted in their romantic relationships. They both found themselves falling in love with more than one person at a time and “cheating” on their monogamous partners at least once. These stories represent steps in their moral careers away from seeing themselves as moral. They then also described how their introduction to the concept of polyamory allowed them to begin rehabilitating their concept of their own self-worth. They were able, in their own perspectives, to transform the attributes which had been judged, in terms of mononormative and heteronormative identity standards as indicative of their own moral defectiveness, into a set from which they could derive happiness and self-respect.

Their introduction to and subsequent embrace of polyamorous identity allowed Margaret and Joy to see themselves as different from the Others against whose standards

they had been measuring themselves and, in retrospect, to “arrive at a new understanding of what is important and worth seeking in life” (Goffman 1963:39). Along with the fact that the polyamorous community (especially in the light of the advent of the internet) tends to provide a strong sense of in-group support and of belonging to a new “we,” this shift allowed Margaret and Joy, as newly self-identified polyamorists, to reevaluate their past perceived failures, coming to see them not as moral failures but rather as the damaging attempts to force a naturally polyamorous person (as they both now see themselves) into a squarely monogamous mold.

Using Goffman’s tri-part identity formulation, we all have social lives that we strive to construct as moral, thus providing ourselves with an ego identity of a good and decent person, worthy of love, valuation, and respect. This is particularly noticeable in the case of Margaret, Joy and two other interviewees (Lincoln and Willow) whose moral careers were constructed in such a way as to claim for themselves an *innate* polyamorous identity.

For polyamorists, social, personal, and ego identities can come together through local and regional polyamory groups and events, such as the ones in which I found interviewees. Like most other stigmatized groups, polyamorists socialize with each other to create social networks. As polyamorists become more and more self-identified as such, their ties to their local and online polyamorous communities tend to grow stronger and their participation in polyamory and poly-related activities tends to intensify. By socializing with other polyamorous individuals, they are able to ease the strain of living a double life by creating an environment where they can socialize with other polyamorous

people, where disclosure of their selves as polyamorous can be open, and where they need not fear for negative social consequences in their everyday lives.

Interaction among such geographical and online communities allows individuals such as my interviewees to gain fluency in polyamorous norms and practices, access to dating partners and possible friends, as well as support in the development of their conception of their selves as polyamorous. This increasing inclusion of other polyamorous individuals in interviewees' close and general social networks serves to reduce the strain of information management through the gradual inclusion of other polyamorists in their everyday lives. Additionally, such group affiliation and integration is an example of the performance of agency on the part of stigmatized individuals, as they go about the selection and management of the social audience (at least the portions over which they have some control) within which, their personal and social identities are constructed. Consistent with this, the previously discussed conception of "tribe" and extended poly families allow for the mutual social and personal support of other polyamorous individuals.

An aspect of polyamorists' quest to construct moral identities and careers can be seen in their framing of polyamory as being centered upon love and their construction of a community that accepts that individuals can have more than one emotionally committed relationship concurrently. This emphasis on love is common in a good deal of polyamorous literature and other subcultural discourse, and it was true for all of my interviewees. Their focus on love helped distinguish swingers from polyamorists, a distinction that blurs if the two groups are viewed in strictly behavioral terms as those

possibly involved with multiple sexual partners. Even given Western society's propensity for such physical-behavior based social definitions, most polyamorists flatly distance themselves and their polyamorous identity from the idea that "it's all about the sex" and swinging in general. While some swingers can have emotional attachments to friends and partners established through swinging, the typical goal is not to build a relationship. The ideologies and the cultures of polyamory and swinging possess distinct emphases, foci, and attributes which set them apart as distinctive identity groups.

Much of this distancing may stem from the wish to deny mainstream monogamous culture wedges through which it could discredit the polyamorous community as a collection of physical pleasure seeking hedonists, reducing them to an identity solely based upon generalized physical behaviors, and thus damaging polyamorists' claim to moral ground. (Polyamory neatly sidesteps the question of polygamy by focusing on relationships and not matrimony.) Focusing only on the topic of multiple partners, that is, focusing mainly on what polyamorists "do"³ is contrary to polyamorists own narratives, which offer holistic understandings including elements of agency, identity (group and self), sub-culture, and ideology. Online polyamory activist and writer Pepper Mint (his real name) argues that such reductionist attempts to define polyamory are a continuation of the discursification of sexuality described by Michel Foucault. The discursification of sex, Foucault argued, left us "with a legacy of a diagnostic approach to matters of sexuality and relationships, one that favors behavioral

³ This should not be taken as an assertion that all polyamorists have multiple sex partners. To state such is to ignore self-identified polyamorists who see themselves as having multiple relationships but who have one sexual partner, or none at all. A pertinent example can be drawn specifically from self-identified polyamorists who are also asexual.

criteria over thoughts or feelings, because behavior can be properly diagnosed by an outside authority” (Mint 2008). The dominant culture’s definition and perception of polyamory represent key parts of the material available to polyamorists in the construction of their ego identities.

Claims for morality can be made in other ways as well. For instance, a commitment to honest communication in relationships was often cited as a key attribute of polyamorists by my interviewees. This is not to say that all of them are spectacular communicators, as many of the, often painful, past experiences they relayed to me demonstrated. Still, the claim often made was that, while they do not always succeed in ideal communication practices, polyamorous individuals are typically more cognizant of the need for (and the development of) good relationship communication than are those in mainstream culture. Additionally, those of my interview subjects who lived in active polyamorous household families tended to stress the positive influences and environment that such household families provide for their children as described in the previous section. This should not be surprising given that polyamorists’ household families are probably the most visible target for attempts at the discrediting of polyamorous identity.

The shoring up of the moral status of polyamorous families can be seen as an effort to valorize their practices and positions. As my interviews indicate, polyamorists sometimes present themselves and their families as superior to cultural monogamists. This stance is common among stigmatized groups and represents a mechanism by which they can protect their status as moral individuals when their stigma is called out and judged by others; it can be seen as part of the social evolution of a stigmatized group

which finds itself at odds with hegemonic discourses and dominant culture. Members of such groups can often become experts in the aspects of hegemonic discourse which are problematic for their stigmatized identities and come to take a pride in such perceived expertise.

Unlike the four interviewees who claimed polyamory as an innate (and therefore moral) identity, for another interviewee, Valentine Michael, coming to polyamory was described as part of a process of questioning and then transcending his socialized moral upbringing. As mentioned earlier, Valentine saw himself as not so much walking towards his current polyamorous identity, as crashing into it when faced with the conflict between his high value on monogamy and his wife's adultery. Through what he described as a long process of negotiation, talking to those involved, and reflexive processing, he forgave his wife, but also identified his commitment to monogamy as a contributory factor in the breakdown of their monogamous relationship. As Goffman noted, an individual's ego identity is constructed by that individual "out of the same materials from which others first construct a social and personal identification of him, but he exercises important liberties in regard to what he fashions" (Goffman 1963:106). Thus, in order to make what he saw as forward progress in his moral career after learning that his wife had been cheating, Valentine reevaluated and reinvented much of the cultural criteria of morality which he had learned through socialization. It was as if he had found that the building material and construction standards with which he had been supplied were not suitable for the environment in which he now found himself.

If we construct our conceptions of self, our ego identities, from the same materials used by others to construct our social and personal identities, where did Valentine find construction materials more appropriate for the environment in which he found himself and to which he wished to adapt? My interviewees typically pulled material from both polyamorous ethical frameworks and from the subcultures that overlap with the polyamorous population such as science fiction / geek fandoms, alternative religious beliefs and philosophies, and the kink community. For instance, Margaret theorized about a connection between monotheist allegiance to one deity and compulsory monogamy's stress that one can only have one allegiance in terms of romantic relationships, thus weaving together alternative religious views and polyamory.

Of all the subcultures that overlap with the polyamorous population, science fiction and fantasy-genre fandom have the largest convergence. This is hardly surprising since the science fiction/fantasy genre is intrinsically based upon the question of "what if?" Science fiction plays with sociological questions as much as it plays with those of technology. Of all my interviewees, Valentine most strongly found comfort and hope in science fiction. For example, he credited Roberts A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* with significantly contributing to his feeling that his country of origin no longer felt like his home when he returned after graduating from college in the U.S. His exposure to science fiction opened his mind to possibilities beyond those of his Catholic upbringing, paving the way for the manner in which he dealt with the failure of his monogamous marriage. Thus, polyamory's sub-cultural overlaps provide polyamorists access to materials with which to construct their ego identities other than those to be found in

mainstream society. The idealistic and utopian predispositions which run through many alternative religions as well as science fiction and fantasy fandom provide rich sources of alternative material for identity formation among stigmatized groups.

FINAL REMARKS

In later correspondence with Margaret, she and I established a metaphor around the idea that polyamorous relationships, and even more so, polyamorous household families are negotiated without much aid from discursive scripts. Negotiating any relationship in society is akin to reading a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, making your choice from options A through D and moving on. These options are highly influenced by mono-normative, hetero-normative, patriarchal and other hegemonic social discourses. However, in polyamorous families, extended and household, at the “choose your fate” portion at the end of the page, polyamorists can have options A-C with options D-F left as fill in the blank choices. Margaret emphasized that the “fill in the blank” options requires polyamorists to think much more about possible ramifications as they write their own adventures, breaking from the bindings of the book and the restrictive narrative that is part of its very nature. This metaphor served as inspiration as I examined and discussed identity construction among polyamorous individuals.

There was one interesting anomaly in the demographic data which I feel should be mentioned due to its sheer unexpectedness, though it, unfortunately does not fall within the scope of this project. Due to previous research, in terms of socioeconomic class, I went into this project expecting to find my interview respondents, their communities and the friends I made in such communities to be highly middle class with

well-paying jobs and correspondingly high socioeconomic class (Hammers and Sheff 2011:203). Instead, the data indicates only three middle class respondents. Valentine (the oldest respondent, possibly indicating a generational shift) and Willow, who is in a platonic marriage with a government employee, are solidly middle-middle class are two of the middle class respondents. All other respondents other than Anita are working class. Anita and her family qualify as middle class, but like the six working class respondents, and unlike Valentine and Willow solidly fall into the precariat (Standing 2011:7–13). Three respondents have undergraduate degrees, three have high school diplomas and two have only some college credits.

The classic explanations for the middle class and above being willing to bear more stigma, such as polyamorous identification, is that they have the resources to defend against those who would attack them due to that stigma. Needless to say, I was surprised at how my participant observations and interviews so strongly contradict previous research in terms of socioeconomic status. This may have something to do with the fact that almost all academic research on polyamory has been conducted on West Coast of the United States, particularly the San Francisco Bay Area (Hammers and Sheff 2011; Elisabeth Sheff 2005).

I took time to reach out to organizers in the Richmond, DC, Baltimore, and West Virginia areas and they all indicated noticing an “uptick” in the number of working class and poor families who were joining the polyamorous communities. In Moon's terms,

polyamory allows families to escape the “two income trap.” Margaret was more expressive, stating that,

It used to be, once upon a time, this was a society where you needed one income to raise a family. So a monogamous hetero-normative nuclear family or whatnot made economic sense. But these days it takes two incomes.

I think that some of that's a change in our economy. So polyamorous families are much more stable when disaster strikes financially. But because there's three people, you know, it's a more stable system. If one person has something catastrophic happen, there's two other people to help pick up the slack until things get better.

So it's a lot of the parenting is pretty much just Briar and I, and so our kids, between Briar and I, still get the benefit of two incomes 'cause he and I have, you know, income and then the benefit of having a stay-at-home parent. Because between him and I, they still have a stay-at-home parent.

So I think my children have definitely benefited from this in terms of financial stability, absolutely. I wouldn't say we're doing great, but — we're doing better than we would have without each other, I think.

Given that the polyamorous culture and ideology now exist, and in light of the 2008 economic crash, the egregious trends in wealth and income inequality since, and the less than ideal “recovery” from said crash, it is entirely possible that we have reached a tipping point where the financial, support and other benefits offered by polyamorous households outweigh the possible community stigma and the chance of government discrimination against polyamorous families receiving public assistance. Margaret states that there are very few negatives to the practice of having a higher ratio of more parents per child, and in fact could represent incredibly effective childrearing strategies as the American middle class shrinks into the working and poor classes. She suggests that another possible reason for this trend of more working class polyamorous families is the

spread of college educated individuals in traditionally working class jobs. Highly educated individuals are “spreading socially liberal ideas which used to be stuck in middle class and upper class families”. Echoing Marx and Engels’ ideas concerning the economy as the basis of societal structures, one particular conversation Margaret and I had about this topic ended with her observation that family structures are dictated by economic conditions. Perhaps, the economy has gotten so imbalanced that monogamous families just do not appear as feasible to many people as they have previously. As much as I would like to have followed up on this possible shift, it sadly falls outside the purview of this thesis. However, it indicates a definite angle which should be examined in future research.

As I've worked on this thesis, I've come to realize that, for polyamorists, polyamory is not any one thing. They can see polyamory as a relationship orientation, an approach to dating, a family-oriented relationship philosophy, a family-structure orientation, an ideology, a radical rejection of much of mono-normative culture (in ideally self-reflexive individuals), and a general framework for building novel solutions to what polyamorists see as destructive and problematic aspects of monogamy. For my interviewees, at its basic, polyamory is not about love, or family, or sex, or anything simple at all. For them it can be a radical and revolutionarily subjective way of seeing the emotional inter-connectivity of human beings. For the polyamorist, polyamory, when one consciously and reflexively leaves behind all the preconceived, socially, and discursively created and blessed labels, is about connection. One polyamorist I met described it

thusly: "Being open to such connections, facing your fear, letting it pass over and through you, and exploring what families and wonders you can create with others."

APPENDIX A — INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Conceptualization of Family and Identity Among Polyamorous Individuals

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to study How is the experience of 'family' constructed within the context of polyamory (whether in relationship approach or as an identity)? Specifically, how are the various roles of the family, and who may occupy them, negotiated/defined?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to consent to an in depth interview ranging from 1-3 hours covering the respondents experiences as self-identified polyamorous individuals, especially in how these experiences touch upon their conceptualization of family as described above. All interviews will be audio and/or video recorded.

RISKS

There are no more than minimal risks to participants. Some participants may uncomfortable answering some questions due to possibly traumatic events in their history. No participant will be required to answer any questions with which they feel uncomfortable. All possible measures will be taken to ensure the complete confidentiality of interview recordings.

BENEFITS.

This will help further the social understanding of the polyamorous community, but there are no benefits to the individual participants for taking part in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. Participants will be allowed to pick their own pseudonym or one will be assigned to them. There will be no record kept connecting the participant's real names to said pseudonyms. The pseudonym will be used in all publications. The video and audio recordings will be encrypted and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office with a copy kept in similar conditions in the principle investigator's office on George Mason Universities Fairfax Campus. The consent forms will be stored separately (to ensure that no correlation between the consent forms and recordings could be made) from the recordings under similar secure conditions to those of the recordings.

There is one exception to confidentiality. It is our legal responsibility to report situations of suspected child abuse or neglect to appropriate authorities. Although we are not

seeking this type of information in this study nor will you be asked questions about these issues we will disclose them as required under the law if discovered.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. If you wish, once the thesis is completed you may request a copy.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted Lester L. (Roy) Roberts IV as a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University. He may be reached at 804-512-2959 or bionicgeek@gmail.com for questions or to report a research-related problem. The research is being conducted under the supervision of Professor Karen Rosenblum who may be reached at 703-993-1450 or krosenbl@gmu.edu. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

Name

Date of Signature

Version date:

APPENDIX B — DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

The nine interview participants ranged in age from 27 to 44 years of age when interviewed, with a median age of 34. The sample was rather evenly split between working class individuals and those in the middle class. Additionally, the educational levels were spread out with three respondents with high school diplomas, two with some undergraduate education and technical certifications, and four with undergraduate degrees. Four interviewees lived in polyamorous chosen households, each of which had at least two children in the family. Only one respondent not in a polyamorous household situation had a child. One respondent self-identified as Latino, one self-identified as Native American/Euro American, and seven self-identified as Caucasian, including Anglo-White and “Eurotrash.”

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BIOGRAPHY

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