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Gender Negotiation Among People in Poly/Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships

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GENDER NEGOTIATION AMONG PEOPLE IN POLY/CONSENSUAL NON-
MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, people are encouraged and even coerced by social forces to behave and interact according to rigid social mores that tend to privilege individuals from a specific gender, racial, and class backgrounds. As many theorists have stated, sexual, gender, and racial minorities navigate their lives experiencing oppression at different levels and at the intersections of different systems of inequality. The marginal social location of these identities often results in people re-defining the social meanings through which they construct their social lives. Although much research has been devoted to investigating the different ways in which people resist the dominant social order, research on polyamory is still highly unexplored. According to the studied population, polyamory is a form of ethical non-monogamy that promotes egalitarian relationships among all parties involved. According to Dr. Mimi Shippers, "poly sexualities offers an opportunity to reorient […] gender and race relations" (2016:4). In this study, I collected data from nine semi-structured interviews that shine light upon how people in polyamorous relationships engage in the reorientation of gender relations. By looking at reported communication strategies between polyamorous individuals, this study found that the social location of marginalized sexual and gender identities fosters a sense of solidarity through which people redefine the meaning in their interactions as they inform people's identity. Nevertheless, these dynamics result in the resistance of some aspects of the dominant social order and the reproduction of others.

Key Words: polyamory, gender, sexuality, community, communication, consensual non-monogamy, patriarchy, social scripts

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond informing an individual's identity, gender is a social institution that operates at different levels of society and includes categories informed by reproductive attributes and sets of practices that assign bodies to specific social locations (Connell 2002, Heasley 2005, Ryle 2015, Schippers 2016). As a social system informed by the patriarchal culture of the United States, gender entails uneven power dynamics that affect members of society (Rich 2010: 204). This self-sustaining social system operates as it consequently guides people to take part in reproducing a binary ideology of femininities and masculinities. These gender-associated qualities are connected to perceptions of sexuality (Heasley 2005:112). Adrienne Rich claims that the norms, interactions, and institutions that dictate the lives and places of people within society, reinforce heterosexuality (Rich 2003). This means that, as the social definitions of feminine and masculine are positioned or interpreted to complement each other, it is socially expected for individuals to interact in a restrictive heterosexual context. Thus, the compliance with and negotiation of these identities tends to have personal as well as societal implications for the other.

To better understand the extent to which gendered and sexual practices can expand and fluctuate as they inform one's identity, it is important to study gender and sexual minorities. As a myriad of identity categories for gender and sexuality have surfaced, scholars are conducting research on the implications of the interactions of sexual and gender minorities with the restrictive gender norms that exist in our contemporary culture (Ryle 2015). Egalitarian social set ups as well as efficient communication are recurrent qualities shared by most gender and sexual minorities (Kleinplatz 2006; Lehmiller and Agnew 2011). However, little to none research accounts for how the common ground of societal marginalization fosters the proper social climate for these egalitarian interactions to occur.

One of the sexual minorities that could help shine light upon these societal incongruencies because of their critical navigation of systems of privilege as well as systems of oppressions is the polyamorous community. Polyamory refers to a type of relationship that allows for two or more non-monogamous individuals to practice commitment and emotional intimacy (Schippers 2016:15). According to Mimi Shippers's book on polyamory and poly queer sexualities, "poly sexualities offer an opportunity to reorient […] gender and race relations" (2016:4). This becomes feasible through dynamics of plurality and separation from the rigid norms that perpetuate racialized patriarchal inequalities. The present study aims to address a gap in the literature concerning the potential of marginalized social locations in concept redefinition and development behind gender and sexuality from the perspective of polyamorous relationships. Furthermore, this research works towards articulating the experiences of people in polyamorous relationships in hopes of developing an account of different ways in which gender relations are reoriented through polysexualities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

What is "Gender"?

As a social institution, gender is practiced through social interactions that are monitored and policed to conform to and represent the gendered expectations that characterize the gender binary (Connell 2002). Those who are assigned to the male sex at birth are indoctrinated and expected to identify, not only as biological males, but, depending on their age, as either boys or men. In the same way, those who are assigned to the female sex at birth are taught to identify as either girls or women (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009:279). Those who comply with this system of identities are considered cisgender (Anderson 2018: 373). On the other hand, transgender people are those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (Anderson 2018: 373). Historically, femininity has been characterized by consistent attempts to satisfy heterosexual men as well as a lack of subjective power (Kalof 2018: 640). In contrast, masculinity is characterized by a configuration of practices that have the effect of subordinating women (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009:279). More specifically, scholars state that women are expected to possess feminine communal qualities, such as being compassionate, kind, and helpful. In contrast, men are expected to be strong, ambitious, and independent, all codified as "masculine" (Clark and Arnold 2017:150). By this understanding, gender categories serve as a source of recognition and identity and claims to pertain to a specific gender group can, then, be considered a dramaturgical task. Thus, interpersonal relationships play a vital part in the process of sustaining and informing one's identity over time (Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning 2017:109). According to sociologist Mimi Schippers, "Because subjectivity is attached to masculinity and objectification to femininity, gender

difference is not just complementary; it is also hierarchical, with greater value and authority attached to the masculine" (2016:38). Gender inequality survives because of the social construction and institutionalization of the relationship between the two categories in the gender binary (2016:39).

In recent years, scholars have developed frameworks that debunked the essentialism that links gender to physical attributes as well as their prescribed sets of behavior. For instance, identity and expression are understood as vital parts of gender (Ryle 2015). Gender identity is an internal understanding of oneself that accounts for one's insight of the gender or genders one is, and one is not (Ryle 2015: 110). This means that people can feel masculine or feminine regardless of their biological makeup and, vice versa, this gender identities need not have any influence on how the individual feels about their genitalia. The collective understandings of what is appropriate praises or sanctions the way people choose to express their gender (Ryle 2015). Feminist scholars found that the expected gender expressions in Western culture stem from unequal power relations between men and women that evoke acts of domination and subordination (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Gender in the United States: Patriarchal Implications to the Understanding of Gender

Chrys Ingraham critiques the ways in which people interact in contemporary society by acknowledging that the material conditions of the capitalist patriarchal society dictate how people present themselves and interact with others (1994: 204). Furthermore, in Judith Butler's review of sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, she states, "the social constraints upon gender compliance and deviation are so great that most people feel deeply wounded if they

are told that they are not really manly or womanly, that they have failed to execute their manhood or womanhood properly" (2011: 41). This prescribed set of behaviors results in unequal power relations because individuals who claim masculinity as their gender expression exert dominance over those who claim femininity as theirs and comply through subordination. A study conducted by Jonathan P. Schwartz (2015) suggests that the socialization of men is characterized by personal restriction, devaluation, and violation of others or self among other detrimental qualities that entitle men to a powerful and oppressive agency.

Queer scholars coined the term *heteronormativity* to account for the social forces behind what society deems normal in the arena of sexuality. Heteronormativity encourages heterosexuality as the norm and preferred sexual orientation and is promoted in society through the social institutions of marriage and government, among others. Specifically, heteronormativity is "the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements" (Ingraham 1994:204). According to Chrys Ingraham's research on marriage, the patriarchal forces that structure our society offer "the promise of a reward […] for compliance with the terms of the dominant social order" (2008: 223). Furthermore "most striking in all of these interactions is the degree to which people accept these terms of their social order without ever questioning it" (Ingraham 2008: 222). Social forces encourage heterosexuality as an external goal for individuals to reach and provides a promise of self-actualization and success. This in turn provides the illusion of homogeneous aspirations which translates into common goals.

Gender and Sexuality in the Context of the Patriarchy

There is an undeniable link between gender and heterosexuality in patriarchal societies. Adrienne Rich coined the term *compulsory heterosexuality* to conceptualize the link between heterosexuality and gender identity. Her work explains that "heterosexuality is a structural norm and system of power that creates hierarchies that differentially value, reward, and enfranchise heterosexuals over nonheterosexuals" (As cited in Dean 2014: 136). Similarly, Chrys Ingraham (1994) grounds the relationship between heterosexuality and gender identity with, what they call, heterogender. This term attempts to debunk the premise of heterosexuality as natural and gender as cultural by suggesting that both are socially constructed and open to change. Furthermore, Ingraham connects "institutionalized heterosexuality with the gender division of labor and the patriarchal relations of production" (1994:204).

The social institutions that shape the culture of the United States promote the white heterosexual dyad as the ideal form of romantic relationship. One of the most culturally pervasive and not often questioned institutions, marriage, plays a vital part in the validation and encouragement of white coupling (Ingraham 2008:4). From a very early age, popular culture instills an ideal image of what family looks like to children (under the belief that children should look like their parents along with many other implicit messages) in which manifestations of interracial coupling seems almost unimaginable (Ingraham 2008: 117). This information, as well as any other culturally transmitted messages, shape people's sense of identity. Thus, being defined with or grouped by a specific quality implies that one is different or does not possess other qualities

(Benhabib 1999:297). One could make the claim that racial and sexual minorities operate at the margins of a rigid system potentially allowing for more diversity within their personal interactions.

Even as social institutions continue to evolve and increasingly represent sexual minorities as a diversity achievement claim, the same social institutions police and coerce members of society into choosing a side in the gender binary as well as the proper ascribed sexuality. Because the dominant social order perpetuates the stigmatization and creation of stereotypes, it has the power to magnify within-group similarities as well as between-group differences. The heterosexual majority view homosexual men and women as an inversed version of heterosexuality (Clarke and Arnold 2017:151). This becomes evident when social media portrays lesbians as masculine and gay men as feminine. Not only that, but homosexual couples are expected to be composed of one feminine and one masculine figure in the romantic dyad. In a study conducted by Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano, (2011:339) participants communicated that, although media's inclusion of LGB characters promoted visibility for the queer community and encouraged many to publicly accept their identity, there was also a negative impact because of the "limited and stereotypical representation of GLB individuals in the media, which […] made them feel excluded from society and limited their identity expression." Thus, the gender binary is also imposed, monitored, and policed in the colloquial narratives of the straight, lesbian and gay communities. Sources of common social knowledge have become aware and, to an extent, acknowledge the experience of the transgender community; however, they still enforce social actors to embody either masculinity or femininity and behave "accordingly" in the pursuit of normalcy for empowerment and recognition (Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

A study conducted on cisgender women partners of transgender men as queer social actors argued that studying cisgender individuals that foster romantic relationships with transgender people "may fruitfully extend sociological knowledge on contemporary sexual identity groups and communities" (Pfeffer 2014:1). Pfeffer explains that for some of her participants, "choosing to self-identify as "queer" also serves as a conscious and intentional social indicator of a political stance that explicitly resists or rejects normativity in order to imagine a different or transformed social landscape" (Pfeffer 2014:3). This queer-labeling phenomenon has found a way to negotiate visibility and presence as an agent outside of the norm who still navigates systems of privileges as well as systems of oppression working towards the acceptance of diversity. It also centers the experiences of gender and sexual minorities in order to understand how their marginal identities contribute to the development of alternative understandings of their social lives.

In Pfeffer's study, cisgender female partners described facing consistent challenges in negotiating their own shifting identities, as well as their partner's, across an array of personal, interpersonal, and social contexts (2014:20). Gender is a flexible and ever-changing identity that finds its stance based on necessity as well as preference. Queer social actors struggle for holistic recognition because the fixed social categories of gender do not account for the complexity that governs their romantic lives. Therefore, it is safe to assume that those who do gender and sexuality outside of social guidelines, constantly negotiate their individual existence through the multiple social levels of privilege and oppression. Cisgender women who date transgender men might seek validation of their relationship within the straight community and in the process, overshadow the queer aspect of their lives. The demand for social validation for queer social agents shines light

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upon the inflexibility of the current gender system that does not allow fluctuating expressions of gender and sexuality.

Forms of Resistance

As people who deviate from the gender norm started to gain recognition, it was necessary to break down the concept of *gender* beyond the heteronormative framework to better account for the individuals who rejected the hegemonic gender binary. Queer theorists gave focus to inequalities as they pertained to gender and sexualities and pointed out that by not reproducing traditional gendered meanings, people put in practice a form of resistance that provides them with different understandings of their identity as well as different ways to self-identify, stretching the boundaries of the norm and legitimizing the rich potential of gender performance (Stacey 2004; Healsey 2005; Schippers 2016).

People have started to expand the different ways their gender can be expressed. Sociologist C. J. Pascoe's book *Dude, You're a Fag* speaks of a research on high schoolers' negotiation of masculinity and found that many teenage boys deviated from the traditional masculine attribute that accounts for women devaluation by expressing their affiliation with religious beliefs or claiming to have a girlfriend. Pascoe writes "the only safe terrain from which to challenge these sexually oriented definitions of masculinity was a relationship" or identifying with the beliefs of Christianity (Pascoe 2011:84). Moreover, scholars and activists believe that cisgender heterosexual men, through behaviors that deviate from hegemonic masculinity, have the power to challenge the dominant social order (Stacey 2004:181). In the book chapter entitled "Crossing the

Borders of Gendered Sexuality: Queer Masculinities of Straight Men," Robert Healsey talks about a group of males that disrupt the common constructions of masculinity. Healsey states:

> Many straight men experience and demonstrate "queer masculinity," defined as ways of being masculine outside heteronormative constructions of masculinity that disrupt, or have the potential to disrupt, traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine. (Healsey 2005 as cited in Ingraham 2005)

The queer straight men that Healsey talks about aim to break down the gender expectations placed on heterosexual men. They wanted to date and have female friends who viewed themselves equal to men and challenge sexism and homophobia, for both social justice motives and a means to have meaningful relationships with other men and women regardless of sexual orientation. Challenging the institutionalized representations of masculinity, queer straight men disrupt compulsory heterosexuality and provide evidence that it is possible to expand their gender expression and, in the process, expand ideas of gender that hold the potential to decouple masculinity from heterosexuality.

Bornstein and Bergman's book, *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, (2010) provides a compilation of essays that talk about the different events or situations people who do not identify as cisgender experience throughout their lives in the negotiation of their gender identity. Gwendolyn Ann Smith, (Leveque 2017) writer, activist, and founder of Transgender Day of Remembrance, expresses in her entry that society polices the transgender and gender non-conforming community on how they choose to express their gender identities and impose the idea of "picking a side" on the gender binary. Ariel Martínez's work focuses on how gender non-conformity is understood by those who embody it:

> Gender non-conformity is a condition of subjective articulation. This approach, then, doesn't suggest an overwhelming proliferation of non-hierarchical categories, but a different way of reading the particular modes of subjectivizing in an arena of constant clashes. Within it gender identity and body get tangled in a constant negotiation process from which the human subject arises, in multiple shapings, under what we may call multiple body agentivity. (2015:10)

Martínez suggests that the recognition gender non-conformity requires "widening the margins of what is human and going further towards the path of equality" (2015:23). Martínez stressed that equality can be reached by understanding gender non-conformity beyond anatomy and the gender binary. Smith provides the premise that the boundaries dividing the different social categories are more translucent and permeable than people think.

The Radical Potential of Marginalized Social Locations

As the negotiation of identities emerges in this type of scholarship, it is vital to understand the mechanisms of meaning development at play. Gwendolyn Ann Smith states, "the notion of classifying things and then claiming that only this or that is a *proper* version of some being is a distinctly human construct" (Bornstein and Bergman 2010:30). As humans, social interaction is one of the primary routes through which we develop meaning and understandings that, then form part of our common knowledge and account for our diverse existence in society.

Given that gender and sexual minorities have been previously associated with efficient communication strategies (Kleinplatz 2006), an acknowledgement of these strategies as they pertain to the development of social understandings might suggest that the key to challenging hierarchical identity categories lies primarily in the sense of solidarity that is fostered by their marginalized social location. Limited research on marginalized sexualities suggest that individuals

in marginalized sexual communities tend to engage in non-normative sexual and dating practices more so than individuals who comply with the dominant social order (Kleinplatz 2006; Lehmiller and Agnew 2011). Furthermore, these findings would suggest that, since there is no social scripts that account for their sexual interactions, new common understandings are required; therefore, culturally produced, and different from the rigid societal norms that account for the larger normative social scripts.

Polyamory

According to Elizabeth Sheff, "In the shifting gendered and sexual social landscape of the early twenty-first century, multiple-partner relationships remain eroticized and undertheorized" (2005:252). Not until recent years have gender scholars given importance to polyamory as a factor of social science research. In order to expand the literature on consensual non-monogamy, researchers have conducted studies examining public awareness and perception, as well as the practice of consensual non-monogamies. Many people tend to misconceive consensual non-monogamies as an excuse to be sexually immoral (Hutzler, Giuliano, Herselman, and Johnson 2016:70). With this in mind, the attempts of social institutions to coerce people into dyadic relationships might explain the prevalence of power inequalities and the lack in articulation of different routes. A challenge to this social script can be found in gay coupling. Judith Stacey's research on gay men cruising states, "gay cruising does facilitate more democratic forms of intimate social (as well as sexual) intercourse across more social boundaries (including, race, age,

class, religion," etc. (2004:193). As a sexual minority, polyamory could also account for this form of societal challenge.

Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning's (2017) work on romantic compromises and polyamory, develops a comprehensive analysis of the internal dynamics practiced within consensual non-monogamy. The researchers articulate that, although complexity governs people's relationships, romantic ideology has been formulated to impose a simplistic and one-dimensional practice that restrains individuals from complex attitudes and behavior (2017:101). According to a number of scholars, polyamory is a form of consensual non-monogamy where one individual is open to exploring emotional intimacy and love with several partners simultaneously (Sheff 2005; Schippers 2016; Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning 2017). Polyamorous relationships appear to lessen or even stop partners from becoming distant from other people, a common phenomenon within monogamy, thus providing people with an array of interpersonal connections and a wider social network than they would not otherwise experience (Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning 2017:108). These relationships foster the discovery of new desires for different gender partners or new sexual behaviors. This seems to be achieved through the prioritization of plurality as a communication strategy and complexity which fosters an egalitarian view towards the individuals' different partners. Moreover, because subcultural norms within poly reinforce egalitarianism among gender differences (Schippers 2016:17) one could conceive that the intimacy shared through polyamorous relationships is more likely to foster the acknowledgement and validation of all parties involved.

In the book *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities* Mimi Schippers argues that "turning away from the monogamous couple through poly sexualities offers

an opportunity to reorient not just relationships, but also gender and race relations" (2016:4). According to Schippers, "Monogamy as a hegemonic feature of sexual intimacy and relationships closes off the dyad as a unified and singular unit that both reflects and sustains the idea that the gender binary is natural and desirable" (2016:40). Parting from the premise that power relations within heteronormative relationships could be transformed through non-monogamy, Mimi Schippers offers a framework that contributes to the formation of what they call, polyqueer sexualities. Polyqueer sexualities are "sexual and relationship intimacies that include more than two people and that, through plurality, open up possibilities to *undo* race and gender hierarchies in ways that would not otherwise arise within the context of monogamy" (Schippers 2016:25).

The present study aims to address a gap in the literature concerning the potential of marginalized social locations in meaning-making practices of those involved in polyamorous relationships and communities. Furthermore, this research attempts to look at the various ways that these people negotiate the understanding of their identity, the expression of such, and the patterns of interactions with several different partners as these interactions inform their identity. Through online, as well as in-person, interviews, this study makes use of a qualitative methodology approach that will provide the information needed to expand the existing scholarship on resisting gender norms and its relationship to polyamorous relationships through communication strategies.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

For this research, I formulated a flyer to seek people over the age of 18 to participate in an interview concerning their lives as people who engage in ethical and consensual non-monogamies, specifically polyamory. The flyer was distributed in a social meetup group named "Orlando Polyamory" as well as a Facebook group named "PolyConscious South Florida". I then collected data from the sample through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for Interview Schedule) from thirty minutes to an hour length. My sample consisted of 9 people (3 men, 5 women, and 1 gender non-binary), 18 years of age and older from different class, age, and career backgrounds who practice or have previously practiced polyamory. Two people were in their late 20s, two were in their late 30s, three in their 40s, and one each in their 50s and 60s. The sample was mainly composed of people who identified as cisgender (in their respective choice of words). All participants had college degrees ranging from associate's to master's.

The interviews were transcribed into text with an initial section of demographics to better access the information. I evaluated the data making use of Glaserian Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser 1965). The data went through the different stages of coding. The initial coding served to differentiate accounts of behavior, social negotiations and identity. From that point, themes regarding investment in identity and investment in sexual and intimate practices began to emerge. The final coding stage resulted in five major themes: (1) Polyamory as an identity, (2) Paths to polyamory, (3) Sexual practices, gendered interactions, and self-growth, (4) Emotion management in polyamorous relationships, and (5) Race, class, religion, and polyamory. These themes, then embody the five subsections in the findings and discussion of this thesis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Polyamorous sexualities and relationships remain highly undertheorized. Within the limited literature on the subject, some researchers had suggested there was a potential in polyamory to reorient people's gender and race relations. The present study found that its potential to promote egalitarian relationships as well as social interactions relied heavily on efficient communication, a quality observed in many other marginalized gender and sexual minorities. Furthermore, research suggests that these communication strategies are located at the margins of the dominant social order because the lack of a long-standing social script requires those in this social location to negotiate and redefine the social ideas and rules they live by.

<u>Polyamory as a Discovered Identity</u>

As previously discussed in the literature review, polyamory is a form of ethical non-monogamy that involves several intimate and/or romantic partnerships. This relationship style does not follow the traditional script of monogamous marriage. According to Chrys Ingraham's research on marriage, the patriarchal forces that structure our society offers "the promise of a reward […] for compliance with the terms of the dominant social order" (2008: 223). Furthermore "most striking in all of these interactions is the degree to which people accept these terms of their social order without ever questioning it (Ingraham 2008: 222). Social forces have posed an external goal for individuals to reach and provides a promise of self-actualization and success. Individuals who follow the dominant social order and join for romantic purposes share this goal and their focus is to obtain it. In the midst of this dynamic, people might not find the need to question their actions because the very engagement in this pattern offers a sense of success. The lack of inquisitive

discourse unfolds a culture of silence that can limit an individual's capacity of personal growth in directions that deviate from the norm. Becca is a 28-year-old, senior library technical assistant who identified as a white, middle-classed, bisexual, cis gendered woman. Becca reflected on how normative scripts limit personal growth as, "the reason we didn't [explore different sexual practices until we became polyamorous] was because you were kind of raised in this monogamous way to not grow your sexual relationship, to kind of get used to each other."

Throughout the nine interviews conducted, two general components discussed to be part of what is understood by the word *polyamory*. The first component is consent and awareness from all parties involved. All of the participants were very intentional in expressing that honesty and communication were vital in making sure their multiple relationships functioned successfully. The second component is the capacity to love more than one person. Daisy is a 48-year-old accountant with a Bachelor of Science that identified as a middle-classed, pansexual female. She worded this love potential as such:

> There is no quantifiable way to quantify it. You can't. You just have more of it. And to love one person, doesn't mean you stop loving another person. […] It's the idea that you can love more than one person because you have that relationship with that person. In doing so, the secondary person or an additional person does not take away from the first person at all. It's just separate. – Daisy

Daisy has been in a relationship with one male for three years and one "comet". She described a comet to be a relationship based on college football that is just as intimate and satisfying as her other relationship but is only active during football season. In other words, a comet is someone who enters another person's romantic life on standard intervals. Most participants described their experience learning about polyamory as finding a term that validates a

constant feeling they had throughout their lives and relationships. This coincides with research findings that suggest discovering polyamory as, in fact, a way to self-identify (Schippers 2016).

Most of the sample (6 out of 9) reported embracing polyamory by opening up their marriages. Throughout each anecdote the participants suggested finding and understanding the definition of polyamory as part of their own identity. Many reflected on how liberating the experience of finding the concept was to their lives and ultimately sought to find a community that tackled these topics more centrally. Dog Lover is a 53-year-old gender non-binary pansexual with a Master of Business Administration applying for disability. This middle-classed Eastern-European, person described their experience discovering the meaning of polyamory as such:

> … They pointed me to, what was then one of the better resources about polyamory that were out there, and I looked at them like "where has this been all my life?" it wasn't like someone had to explain it to me and sell me on it. It was like, how didn't I know about this sooner. That I wouldn't even try monogamy if I had known that this was something people did ethically and responsibly. And that is when I realized it wasn't so much "oh I guess I'll try this" it was like "this is who I've been. I finally now understand there is a community, a label and a way to go about it. -Dog Lover

Dog Lover is married to their partner with which they have shared ten years of marriage. Their partner also has another relationship with another woman. Many also reported doing research on the concept of polyamory before pursuing it as well as moving from the other forms of ethical non-monogamies to polyamory seeking more intimate and romantic connections beyond just sexual ones. Understanding that communication plays one of the strongest roles in how people find out about polyamorous dynamics and negotiate these experiences as they inform their sense of identity is key to deconstructing the different ways gender relations are renegotiated and defined.

Sexual Practices, Gendered Interactions, and Self Growth

Through their intimate practices, the polyamorous community reinforces active, intentional, and constant communication. In turn, their communicative negotiations foster (a) an expansion of common understandings of gender as well as sexuality and (b) a sense of solidarity which serves as a common social ground that gives every member a sense of agency and validation. Two of the questions in the interview schedule were geared towards personal enjoyment and growth in the areas of gender and sexuality. The different assets discussed that benefitted the participants' lives ranged from a sense of community and support to body positivity and sexual agency. Without abandoning gender identities, these positive aspects of personal growth found in the polyamorous community seemed to foster the expansion of acceptable practices traditional identity categories could account for.

Elisabeth Sheff's research on masculinities and polyamory, suggested that men in polyamorous relationships tend to resist hegemonic attitudes to a greater extent than they comply with them (2006: 621). This finding was consistent with my own research as accounts of men's sexual practices provided more expansive sexual and gender scripts than traditional masculinity could account for. In a society where heterosexual men are the subject that take ownership over their objectified other (Butler 2011), polyamorous men engage in alternative sexual practices that prioritize women subjectivity. Furthermore, these alternative sexual practices tend to deviate from traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity (Sheff 2006).

Participants reported engaging in an array of different sexual and erotic practices that sought pleasure and satisfaction regardless of the practices' adherence to traditional gender/sexual

scripts. However, the participants were very intentional in separating those practices from their notions of gender identity. Rick is a 43-year-old engineering project manager who identified as a heterosexual man, middle-classed, and Caucasian. He is polyamorous-ly available; however, only has one current partner. He reflected on the discrepancy between identity and practices as such, "more so, gendered practices as it relates to specific things that are associated with one gender or the other. Not so much talking about identity." Rick understood that his gender identity as it pertained to individual aspects of his life was cisgender; however, he was able to acknowledge how the enactment of certain attributes that traditionally pertained to one gender or the other in a binary system were not strictly bound to a person's gender identity. Doc is a 49-year-old network engineer who identified as a heterosexual cis-male, middle-class, and white. He has been married to his wife for twenty-seven years and has been dating his girlfriend for three.

Along the same lines as Rick, Doc stated that the alternative interactions were altering, "Not gender roles, but relationship roles, yes."

Tensions between gender identity and practices arose as participants engaged in expanding the notions tied to identity categories. Although there was a strong commitment to cisgender identities, participants found creative ways to account for diverse presentations of gender embodiment under the understanding that gender practices do not always reflect gender identity. Furthermore, in contrast with hegemonic conventions the sample did not report engaging in nor receiving gender policing. One of the instances where this becomes evident is in Amy's, a 29-year-old private math tutor who identified as a white, pansexual cisgender woman, account of some social gatherings within the polyamorous community:

> I guess like gendered roles have also been deconstructed the more I learn about the poly community. I don't really hear anyone saying "oh, that's for guys. What are you doing?" More often than not, I hear people making fun of gender roles. We have gender-bender parties. A couple of years ago, it was great fun. All the guys dressed as girls and all the girls dressed as guys. […] Gender expression is more of a toy than a rigid construct that we need to follow to be socially accepted. As more people questioned how are we supposed to do this and do it right? It became a little more problematic because it came to be, is gender this toy that we can play with? Yes, that does challenge the idea that it's a binary construct, but it also makes it this thing that's more real at the same time.

There seems to be an intentional acceptance of fluctuating portrayals of gender identity; however, when asked to elaborate on personal understandings of identity participants were also very intentional in their descriptions of gender identity. This was evident in "I've always been 'the girl'" or "I've always been a male. I've always acted that way." rhetoric that permeates through the interviewees' depiction of their own identity.

Regarding sexuality, most women in the sample reported having more agency over their sexual lives after engaging in polyamorous relationships. As previous research has suggested (Sheff 2005), the females in my sample heavily reported a sense of sexual subjectivity and power over their bodies that they had not before engaging in polyamorous relationships. Amy is currently living with her partner of 3 years, a cisgender man, and has been dating a gender non-binary partner for one year. Through her relationships, Amy articulated developing a sense of authenticity by being true to her needs and desires in a sexual context:

> Living authentically is like being in tune with one's own desires and able to pursue them without aggressively stepping on another's desires, stepping on them like I'm more important than you but also without placing their desires over your own. I also try to be more vocal about my opinions. -Amy

Along this section of my data, there is an overarching intention to keep real to one's desires as well as the desires of those involved taking into consideration the personal boundaries of everyone involved. In this sense, polyamorous relationships have deviated from heteronormative ideas of gender that often objectify women's bodies by actively pursuing personal exchanges that reinforce equality and respect between women and men.

Emotion Management in Polyamorous Relationships

The dominant social order tends to facilitate specific power dynamics between gendered bodies and identities which would predispose social actors to uneven power relations. One of the ways in which the participants in this sample attempted to counteract uneven power relations was discussing and establishing rules in the best interests of all parties involved. This was best accounted for by the participants who began their relationships in a monogamous partnership and later opened their marriage to explore polyamory. Doc explained how rules are set in place to protect the feelings of everyone as such:

> As we tell people a lot at the [Orlando Polyamory] groups, when the couples come into it, which is most of the time, they start with 150 rules, you will do this and won't do that, and within a couple of years you're down to don't get sent to jail and don't come home covered in blood. It's not necessarily that drastic but you learn. We set up rules because there are things we can't handle. Like my jealousy seeing my women with other men. And something I've only recently in the past four to five months have gotten better at handling. -Doc

Doc self-identified as the person who does much of the emotional management in his polyamorous relationship; moreover, the management relied heavily on him learning to work rationally through emotions and deal with them in a way that was fair to his partners. Doc's statement reveals a sense of ownership over "his women" which suggests an uneven power

dynamic within Doc's relationship set up; however, the relationship seemed to achieve egalitarian interactions when Doc expressed his emotions in order to work through them with his partners allowing the partners agency and subjectivity over their actions.

Tensions between identity and practices arise when the participants articulated their lived experiences. Some of these complexities emerge from the structural layout of the polyamorous relationships. One of the questions asked to the participants was specifically geared towards emotional labor management. Traditional gender norms usually assign emotional labor as a feminine attribute (Sheff 2006). In turn, men are expected to lack sensitivity which could account for the pervasiveness of oppressive gender practices. The participants seemed to also deviate from that norm in that emotional labor was not primarily the women's job. Much complexity emerged when mapping out the relationship structures of the participants and the structural set up would suggest that emotional labor was usually the job of the participants with several partners as opposed to those who had one partner who was in relationships with several people. Moreover, if more than one partner had several partners, emotional management could be part of a collaborative effort between those at the center of the romantic network.

Emotional labor could be seen through intentional scheduling of time spending with different partners and negotiating ways to deal with negative emotions that could rise. In some instances, that structural location was filed by a man in the relationship. This phenomenon accounts for men's capacity to engage in emotional affairs which deviates from traditional assumptions of masculine attributes.

Race, Class, Religion, and Polyamory

For most participants, the main source of heterogeneity in their dating practices were found in social class and age. When asking the participants if they had dated people from different demographic backgrounds, not much heterogeneity was reported in the arena of race. Although some participants reported having relationships or sexual interactions with individuals from a different racial background, most of their intimate bonds were formed within same-race relations. Nevertheless, most participants expressed a desire for better access to the possibility of interracial dating. Becca has been married to her husband for several years, is currently dating another person, and has a boyfriend as well. She similarly to other participants, observed possible barrier to this possibility:

> There is a problem with the Orlando polyamory community. It's very white washed. And you'll see that problem across the country really and you'll see articles out there, specifically about diversity in polyamory communities where it tends to be a lot of white women and a lot of white couples. – Becca

In terms of religion, most participants reportedly acknowledged that the polyamorous community was not very religious. Furthermore, those participants who reported previously devoting a high level of importance to religion recognized how their engagement in polyamory required to renegotiate their understandings of relationships and sexual agency.

Marginal Social Locations, Solidarity, and the Renegotiation of Social Mores

Although polyamorous relationships are one of the alternative socio-romantic interactions that have radically challenged gender relations, an acknowledgement of their communication strategies and their social location might suggest that the key to challenging hierarchical identity

categories lies primarily in the solidarity fostered through marginalized societal positions. The intimate and personal nature of categorical identities dispositions marginalized social actors to solidarize with each other in a way that tends to deconstruct prejudice boundaries. Once these boundaries are set aside, the task at hand becomes to critically debunk in unison the normative social scripts that fail to account for and discriminate against the lived experiences of these marginalized social actors.

Marginalized identities share the similar social status of deviating from traditional social scripts. The solidarity that grows from this phenomenon facilitates the production of new social scripts that cultivates subjectivity and validation to gender and sexual minorities. This social climate and location foster the development of critically unique communication content, strategies, and outcomes that radically challenge the dominant social order. Furthermore, in this social location people reconstitute societal rules to account for their lived experiences. As more information emerges on marginal identities, research must develop a theoretical framework that accounts for how marginal social locations hold specific social interactions that, by prioritizing personal-societal validation, fosters the perfect social climate for egalitarian social interactions to occur. In turn, this social climate has the potential to dismantle the self-sustaining systems of oppression that limit our gender and racial relations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Given the complexity that forms polyamorous relationships and identities, a larger research sample would better account for the implications that relationship structures might have on emotional management and power dynamics. My sample population suggested that hinged polyamorous relationships, relationships where one person has two separate partners, might experience different emotional management patterns than those found in a triangular polyamorous relationship, relationships where all three individuals are romantically or intimately involved. This has implications for what is considered egalitarian interactions within relationships and the power dynamics the different relationship structures facilitate.

Although a more diverse sample could have provided important insights into the cultural implications to polyamorous relationships and vice versa, the sample did not provide enough diversity to develop such analysis. An acknowledgement of the limitations that emerge from the usage of the language in the polyamorous community might suggest that there are other groups of people living with multiple partners through a consensual agreement that might not use the language used by a specific demographic (white American).

This research had access to the ethnographic input of only one gender non-conforming participant which did not provide enough data to reflect on the larger population. Future research should focus on investigating the implications intersecting identities could have on relationship as well as identity negotiation in polyamory and among polyamorous individuals. Lastly, future research should explore how experiencing marginalization from different social locations fosters a sense of solidarity. Moreover, explore how these social locations provide a common ground

where prejudice between intergroup members reduces and in turn, people's interactive patterns are redefined.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Michael Armato** and Co-PI: **Vanessa Rijo**

Date: **October 04, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 10/04/2018 the IRB approved the following human participant research until 10/03/2019 inclusive:

Type of Review:	UCF Initial Review Submission Form
	Expedited Review
Project Title:	Gender Negotiation Among People inPoly/Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships
Investigator:	Michael Armato
IRB Number:	SBE-18-14333
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at https://iris.research.ucf.edu .

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 10/03/2019, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, including signed consent forms if applicable, must be retained and secured per protocol for a minimum of five years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained and secured per protocol. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Gillian Morien on 10/04/2018 04:49:36 PM EDT

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Pseudonym (Pronouns): _____   Signed IRB Form? _____

Date: _____   Permission to Record? _____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I'm interested in your experiences as a person who practices consensual non-monogamy (what some refer to as poly). Even though I've devoted a great amount of time to become more eloquent with this topic, I still might not have the proper language to address some things; therefore, please feel free to stop me at any time and correct me if you think I misunderstanding anything or use incorrect language.. Anything you say will be kept confidential and neither your identity nor demographic characteristics will be shared in any future presentations or publications. You are free to skip questions if you feel uncomfortable, and you may stop the interview at any time. I am going to record the interview so that I can focus more on our conversation; however, I may take some notes as we go along.

BACKGROUND

I will start by asking a few demographic questions if that is okay?

1. What is your age?
2. What is your current job or career?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. What social class do you consider yourself?
5. What is your racial and ethnic identity or background?
6. What is your sexual orientation?
7. What is your gender identity?

   If participant identifies as a member of the TGNC community, ask to expand/elaborate on their identity

8. What pronouns do you prefer?

GENDER AND RACE
Now, let's talk about how gender and sexuality as well as race relate to your relationships

9. Does your racial or ethnic background play a part in your poly relationships?

10. Does your gender identity play a part in your relationships?

 If it does, ask to expand/elaborate on how it does

11. Some poly people express different gender presentations when they spend time with different partners, have you ever had that experience?

 If so, ask to expand/elaborate on that experience

12. Have your erotic or romantic practices changed being in ***poly relationships***?

 ***Modify the word depending on the language used by the participant.*

CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMY
Next are some questions about your overall experience with having more than one partner or being with someone that does or has had.

13. What is your current relationship status?

14. People have many different understandings or definitions of ***poly relationships***. How would you describe ***poly relationships*** ?
 ***Modify the word depending on the language used by the participant.*

15. How did you first get involved with a ***poly relationship***?

16. What have you enjoyed about being in ***poly relationships***?

Next, I would like to ask particularly about your previous and/or contemporary poly relationships.

17. Can you describe what draws you to poly relationships?
    *Probe

18. How would you describe your relationship with each of your partners?

    (Probe) If emotions are used to answer the question, ask to expand/elaborate on those as they pertain to a specific partner

19. Have you ever lived with one or more partners when you were polyamorous? Could you describe that experience? What did you like most about it? What was most challenging?

20. What kinds of rules or boundaries have you negotiated with your partners? How did you address those issues?

21. Have you ever had poly partners who were from a different social class, racial background, age, or religion?

    If so, would you tell me about the experience? (probe for tensions and solutions in negotiations)

22. How often do you spend time with each of your partners?

COMMUNITY
My next questions are about community engagement

23. How do you find people to date as a person that engages in ***poly relationships***?

24. Are there poly networks? Have you reached out to any?

25. Do you feel accepted within the LGBT+ community?

26. Do you feel accepted within the straight community?

27. Do you experience any challenges navigating society as a ***poly person***?

FINAL COMMENTS

28. Is there anything else that you feel I did not ask and could be of importance to the research?

> *Encourage the participant to reach out if anything else comes to mind after the interview*

29. Are there any questions you want to ask me?

30. If I come up with new questions or something is unclear, do you mind if I contact you?

** Thank you for sharing your experiences and thoughts with me. I will just need to get some of your background information if that is alright.**

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