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Playing with Fire: An Ethnographic Look at How Polyamory Functions in the Central Florida Burner Community

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**PLAYING WITH FIRE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK AT HOW
POLYAMORY FUNCTIONS IN THE CENTRAL FLORIDA BURNER
COMMUNITY**

by

MALEIA MIKESELL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Honors in the Major Program in Anthropology
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at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Beatriz Reyes-Foster

Abstract

This thesis asks the question as to whether polyamory functions as a community glue or solvent for the Central Florida Burner Community. It explores the definition of polyamory and how it relates to the Burner counter-culture. This thesis explores what polyamory's effects are on the individual and community levels for those who participate in it. The findings concluded that overall the participants reported a perceived positive impact on both the individual level and on community cohesion in this case. The participants also revealed that the environment Burning Man provides is generally open and welcoming of polyamory.

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Introduction

Polyamory (the practice of having multiple lovers) is highly stigmatized in contemporary American society. The people who engage in polyamory are often marginalized, misunderstood and shamed. This shaming can cause severe emotional and social damage to the individuals. Mononormativity (the society-created assumption, compulsion and pressure to be monogamous) and heteronormativity (the society-created assumption, compulsion and pressure to be heterosexual) are oppressive to sexual liberation, place limits on what is acceptable and often form incorrect conclusions about what is possible in love and relationships. *Homo sapiens* are an extremely adaptive species, especially socially, so the actual restraints on polyamory are more likely to be culturally constructed rather than something biologically impossible. This paper delves into the world of polyamory amongst a subculture who calls themselves *Burners* (a diasporadic counter-culture based on the ten principles of Burning Man) and asks the question “how does polyamory function to either strengthen or weaken community bonds amongst the Central Florida Burner group?” It should be noted that although polyamorous Burners exist, not all Burners are polyamorous and not all Polyamorists are Burners. Also, Polyamorist Burners can belong to a segregated category or camp itself but more often are they dispersed among many different camps at the events. The goals of this paper are to analyze from a functional perspective, how community bonds are affected by this practice. Also, I aim to provide a more accurate picture, a clear exposure and understanding of polyamory. This paper questions assumed and usually unexamined beliefs of American mononormativity.

This paper begins with a look at the literature defining polyamory, its effects on

community and its effects on individuals. Also, it explains what exactly Burners are to contextualize the group being studied. Then, the paper explains the methods of the research, the experiences of the participants and their reported effects on community and themselves. A conclusion wraps up the piece with an answer to the research question.

Literature Review

First and Foremost, defining the term “*polyamory*” can be rather difficult in itself. The word can be used as an umbrella term to describe various non-monogamous practices, sexual orientation and identity, or philosophy (Klesse, 2014, Shannon 2010, Haritaworn, 2006). The practices are diverse but there are two divergent schools of thought on whether or not solely sex-based relationships qualify (Klesse, 2006). Sexual orientation in its traditional understanding can at times be problematic when attempting to understand polyamory, due to issues like fixity over fluidity and rigid gender definitions, but can be operationalized as one’s current sexual preferences. Identity can be operationalized as a sense of self being connected to the culture of polyamory (Klesse, 2006). The philosophy can be independent of all else and a very useful worldview outside the practice as well. Polyamory has been described as a relationship model, a sexual practice, a sexual orientation, and a philosophy.

As a sexual practice, polyamory is most often described by scholars as consensual, communicative, honest, responsible non-monogamies which may be expressed in a variety of styles. It is often described as including romantic, sexual, affectionate and friendly emotions with multiple people simultaneously. “Polyamory differs from swinging with its emphasis on long-

term, emotionally intimate relationships and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them” (Sheff, 2005: 252). So, traditionally it is distinguished from sex-based relationships. The various forms of the more stringent definitions would include *polyfidelity* (multiple people being faithful only to those involved), *open relationships* (where one couple may engage with others under specific boundaries), *hierarchical relationships* (where people have primary partners, secondary partners and so forth), *egalitarian relationships* (where all people involved feel equally close to one another), and *solo polyamory* (where one individual engages in loving relationships as an individual and may or may not commit to any other individuals). The *non-hierarchical relationships* seem to be more rare: “Some attempt to rewrite this convention [of primacy] can be seen in the languages of relationships developed to encompass non-hierarchical polyamory, such as polyamorous people talking of an ‘inner circle’ of close relationships or maintaining equal ‘primary’ relationships with more than one person, for example in triads (three people) and quads (four people)” (Ritchie 2006: 592). Or to put it simply, some people have equally valued or equally significant relationships with all of their partners rather than placing comparative value or significance on each relationship. Other forms that are not listed are expected to exist, given the free-form structure and the wide definition of polyamory.

Limited definitions of polyamory as a sexual orientation occur in the literature. Although some participants report their orientation towards polyamory to be hard-wired, anthropological studies of sex and gender reveals that, like gender, sexual orientation and sexuality are fluid and varied across cultures (Boellstorff 2007, Lafont 2003, Nanda 2000). Liminality can cause a great deal of discomfort for cultures that greatly prefer neat categorization. Anthropologists have

argued that the idea of sexual orientation itself is essentialist (Klesse, 2014). Klesse cautioned against polyamory as a sexual orientation, to prevent framing polyamorists as a minority vulnerable to exclusion such that homosexuality has faced. However, perhaps reframing sexual orientation as a long-term sexual preference and identity marker might better operationalize it. Many of the same processes that occur in LGBT coming-out stories also occur in poly coming-out stories (Klesse, 2014). With this reframing of the term sexual orientation, and identity, it is one more way to define polyamory (Shannon, 2010).

Finally, polyamory can also be understood as a philosophy. Along with polyamory comes a set of beliefs, values and reasoning that center on consensus, communication (especially of one's needs to their partners), openness, honesty, accountability, integrity, self-awareness, self-possession, and love over jealousy (Klesse, 2014). The central belief is "the assumption that it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person." (Haritaworn, 2006: 515). It is based in the belief in "people's capacity to share and multiply their love in honest and consensual ways" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004: 165). A commonly reported belief is that love is multiplied when it is shared, unlike a limited material resource, as it is sometimes treated in monogamy. Amongst the literature, it is commonly reported that compersion (the experience of gaining pleasure from seeing someone you love gain pleasure) and joy are compounded and spread, like wildfire. In the Polyamorous/Burner population studied, it was compared by participants to the way the art installations and performances present in community events spur exponential inspiration in others. At the community events, called "Burns" there is a cornucopia of these interactive art installations, performances and theme camps, each one operated by the individuals attending the event rather

than being a production of the event staff. It's common for attendees to be inspired by a piece and then to create something of their own to bring to the next burn. Despite these unlimited sources of inspiration however, the limited resources one does have are time, energy and material goods. The reality that often materializes is impossibility at a perfect distribution of all things and so circles of closeness emerge. Several utopian-aspiring societies, such as Kamala, have had what seem to be very successful experiences in polyamory however (Ray, 2004). Even polyamorists who had mostly difficult or negative experiences with polyamory and who are hesitant at ever practicing it again still retained positive outlooks on the theory behind it. They reported the worldview to have challenged them to look at things in a different and healthier way, to develop skills and to grow as a person. So, this shows that theory can stand on its own independent of practice.

Contrasting and Comparing to Other Forms of Non-Monogamy

Polygamy, whether it is polygyny or polyandry, is different from polyamory in that only one gender is able to have multiple partners while the other gender is not. Polyamory is polygynandrous, so any gender is entitled to the option of multiplicity. Polyamorous societies are the only societies for which evidence of polygynandrony could be found. Polygamy on the other hand, is tied up in total commitment for one gender with no counter-balance for freedom or variety for the other gender. There are debatable yet inherent power structures within polygamy. Economic, social and occupational freedoms are restricted in these systems typically. With polyamory however, typically both parties are free to have multiple partners and power relations vary greatly without correlation to gender (Sheff, 2005). The level of commitment varies between lovestyles and groups. In fact, some feminists hold up polyamory to be a radical

patriarchy-upsetting revolution and anarchists extol it to be an institution-cracking subversive action (Heckert 2010, Noël 2006). Although there is some contradiction since polyamories' highest value is on romanticized love, just expanded (Klesse, 2014). Polyamorous romantic love is very similar to western concepts with the exception that multiple partners are involved and some emphasis is shifted away from possession and jealousy.

Infidelity in an exclusive relationship is the antithesis of polyamory. The aforementioned values on honesty, integrity and consent are in direct opposition to the practices of deception and adultery. Commitment, honesty and consideration are important to non-monogamous (any relationship that is not strictly exclusive between two partners) partners as is seen in McLean's Australian study on non-monogamy with sixty bisexual men and women “they were all committed to ensuring the partners involved were part of an ongoing process of reflection about the relationship. Of course, this was not always easy—and some relationships did not work out—but there was no deception, no malice and certainly no lack of commitment in these relationships” (McLean 2011). In fact, infidelity was very uncommon in her study, with only 2 out of 60 participants being unfaithful in non-monogamous relationships.

The Burner Community

What exactly *is* a Burner? At its broadest definition, “*Burner*” is a term to refer to someone related the annual Burning Man event in some way. According to the official Burning Man website, “Burning Man is a network of people inspired by the values reflected in the Ten Principles and united in the pursuit of a more creative and connected existence in the world. Throughout the year we work to build Black Rock City, home of the largest annual Burning Man

gather, and nurture the distinctive culture emerging from that experience.” But how do the participants who call themselves Burners understand the term?

When looking at the official Burning Man blog, I came across many different definitions for the term “*Burner*.” Some people stated that only those who attended the annual event in Nevada could qualify while others disagreed and said that it is more internal and intangible, such as the individual embracing the principles of Burning Man and living the values in their daily lives. Some people listed criteria for what a Burner typically is and others rejected descriptions as limiting, they instead suggested that to be a Burner means to create your own identity. An online user on the blog named Doug said “Everyone interprets and defines the burning identity differently for themselves- that us the whole point, right?”

Well, what are these ten principles then? The official website defines the principles as guidelines for the community’s ethos and culture as it organically developed rather than a dictate of how people should act. The principles include radical inclusion, gifting, de commodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation and immediacy.

The community I focus on in this thesis is nested within two larger ones; popular American society and the diasporic Burner society. Within popular American society, a subset of Burner society exists and within that subset, the smaller Central Florida Burners, and within that group are the polyamorous Burners of Central Florida. To give an idea about the overall setting this is occurring in, popular American society is based off the mainstream Western ideologies and societal structure still based on patriarchy, Christian-dominated faith, representative democracy, commodification, capitalism, and materialism (Engels 1902, Brown 2014) . There

exists a serious gap between the idealized monogamy model of relationships and the actualized serial monogamy and/or infidelity model, which is widely practiced.

For example, it is a well-known fact that half of all marriages end in divorce and that about a quarter of Americans have engaged in extramarital sex. However, it should be noted that the ending of a relationship doesn't equate its dysfunction or failure. Rather, what is more troubling is the majority of cases where the ex-lovers excommunicate one another and feel as though time spent and memories shared are wasted. The destructive tendencies that often occur with serial monogamy are concerning to participants in the literature, myself, and I would assume anyone interested in the psychological well-being of society as well. "I just knew that serial monogamy was ripping my heart apart with every breakup. There had to be something better" (Deer, 1999).

To the counter-culture society we are looking at, alternative thinking contrary to the mainstream is already the norm. Having open minds, many would be receptive to ideas like those posed in Ray's article "Love is Born on the Pulse of God's Heart" (2004) which argues that many beliefs society holds are illusions and that by embracing pure love that truth will become clear. The article presents a series of illusions: The illusion that monogamy equates security; the illusion that if one lover falls in love with someone else, that means there is something wrong with the other lover or the relationship; the illusion that it is only possible to love one person at a time; the illusion that loves is out of our control and dependent on the outside and others rather than our own conscious decisions; the illusion that jealousy equates love rather than distrust and low self-esteem; and finally, the illusion that love is a limited resource rather than begetting more love. Many of these beliefs were echoed in my participants' responses. The group we are looking

at is different from the larger Burner group because there is more intimacy and familiarity between the members than with the larger diaspora. They meet up on a more regular basis and often associate outside of the main event of Burning Man. They form deep friendships and relationships that would be much more difficult among distant geographical regions.

Because Burning Man, the main event for Burners, is a massive gathering of over 50,000 people from all over the world, made of diverse people with diverse goals for attending and membership, it is difficult to identify a unifying value system (Rohrmeier 2014). However, the official Burning Man website does feature a guide for the regional groups to practice by. The guiding values of Burning Man are the ten principles, which include *radical inclusion*, *gifting*, *decommodification*, *radical self-reliance*, *radical self-expression*, *communal effort*, *civic responsibility*, *leaving no trace*, *participation* and *immediacy*. Considering that all of the needs and entertainment for a week in the desert (the art installations, performances, food, alcohol, vehicles, and shelter) must be provided by the participants rather than event organizers, some principles begin to make sense: the communal effort to contribute something, the self-reliance of bringing everything you need (nothing can be purchased here, hence the decommodification), the gifting (since nothing can be bought and in an effort to inspire connection and community). The first governing body for participants are themselves, followed by rangers and only in the most extreme of cases do actual officers of the law intervene, so civic responsibility is necessary for an orderly-enough society. Participants must leave no trace if they want to a home to come back to, both legally and on an environmental basis. It reflects responsibility and respect that distinguishes it from conventional festivals. The self-expression, inclusion, participation and immediacy are for the maximized enjoyment of yourself and others. Immediacy means being

present in the now, to be appreciative of this moment in every moment. These explanations come from information I've gathered from individuals and literature as well as my own experiences as a participant-observer.

My own first-hand observational experience over the past four years among Burners showed that Polyamorists are prevalent in Burner culture, even having their own designated theme camp at the main event. This is likely because of the shared values and alternative theories that underlie both subcultures. The two values that were most relevant to the practice of polyamory are identified as being radical self-expression and radical inclusion. The other principles can be applied to the practice and can be contributing factors as to why this environment nurtures the practice of polyamory, although they seemed to be to a lesser degree. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus* is a system of dispositions, tendencies, propensities, or inclinations which are regularly practiced independent of rules (Roth, 2000). Burner society encourages openness, understanding and expression, fostering a habitus that can be seen in the commonly displayed nudity, bizarre costumes and shenanigans. Fire-spinning is also a common practice which symbolizes many things to the participants. In *Playing with Fire*, the medium is described as dynamic, momentary, impermanent, powerful, threatening and dangerous. It can symbolize freedom, release, purification, transformation and even sacredness. It is an element to which we have a visceral connection. Bending a mysterious and powerful thing to one's will can feel like an empowering act to the fire performer. It can feel like emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual cleansing (Kristen 2007).

Polyamory in Relation to Community

Polyamory as it is being defined here, is non-normative to broader American society. Non-monogamy as it is depicted in popular culture is almost always in the form of infidelity (Ritchie 2006). It is debatable as to whether it is non-normative in the world, due to polygyny being permitted in 84% of the 843 known cultures present on earth (Ferrer 2007). It could be argued that the men might be polyamorous, loving multiple wives. However, since marriage practices have much to do with economics and since the women in polygynous cultures are not likely to be permitted to have their own lovers, I would argue that it is not the same thing as the phenomenon described in this thesis. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of cultures permits non-monogamy.

Perhaps one of the reasons that monogamy has been so problematic over the recent years is the high expectations that have been placed on marriage for love. Needs that were once fulfilled by friends and family are now expected to be met by one's romantic partner, "Social scientists have argued that individuals' over-reliance on romantic partners to fulfill their needs can cause relational problems when partners do not live up to these high ideals" (Mitchell 2014). The recorded origin of romantic love as we know it today, is 14th century Europe, and so it should not be taken for granted as a universal (Singer, 2009). Many of the values and beliefs of polyamorous Burners are counter to popular American society. Yet, romantic love is still held highly much as it is in the larger culture (Klesse, 2014). There are also many values and beliefs which may or may not still be in line with the larger society, such as family. For example, with polyamory certain boundaries and distinctions run counter to popular American culture, such as the friend/lover boundaries and the appropriate significance placed on each. "People are

expected to have one ‘lover’ and anyone else should fall into the category of ‘friend’, with strict cultural rules around what behavior is appropriate in a friendship” (Ritchie 2006). However, we are seeing a progressive movement towards allowing non-traditional families to emerge in popular American society, exemplified by events such as the supreme court decision to permit “gay-marriage” in all fifty states and allowing homosexual couples to adopt.

There have been claims in the anthropological literature that polyamory is radical, upsetting the institutionalized systems that oppress women and all people in general. Anarchists, feminists and counter-culture groups have described it as a tool for undoing the structure of society (Shannon 2010, Sheff 2005). “Monogamy was criticized as reflecting the acquisitive, dominating male culture” (Deer 1999). It has been said that jealousy as a natural and negative emotion is a social construct used to reinforce monogamy and patriarchy (Ritchie 2006). And it does have a transformational and powerful force. But I think that it does not necessitate radicalism. It can either be a catalyst for individual and societal change or it can just coexist peacefully as well.

Within the Burner culture, which could be shortly defined as the diasporic culture that unites all who share the values of Burning Man, the practice of polyamory has found a safe home, where for the most part, it can be practiced with acceptance rather than judgement. The ideals are to be inclusive and expressive and to cooperate as a community. In this thesis, I argue that polyamory benefits the formation of this regional Burner community and that it is supported by the breaking down of boundaries that monogamy sets between people. It would make sense that connecting to people deeply leads to a strong community. “Sexuality outside the field of monogamy well may open us to a different sense of community, intensifying the question of

where one finds enduring ties” (Butler 2004). Also to consider are the relationships that are formed between people who share lovers, termed metamors. “metamour-time’ as her opportunity to bond with her partner’s other partners...referring to the partner of her partner as a ‘metamour’ enabled her to recognize the relationship she had with him as ‘special in its own right’ and therefore stopped her from positioning him as a threat to her” (Ritchie 2006). So, what might have otherwise been strained relationships between individuals in the same community, due to perceived competitive rivalry, are transformed into close and unique relationships. The bonds formed between metamors in the same community increase the larger cohesion and closeness in that community.

Polyamory has several perceived benefits to the community which were reported by participants in the study and the literature. The ideals are to be inclusive and expressive and to cooperate as a community. The argument that polyamory benefits the formation of community is supported by the breaking down of boundaries that monogamy sets between people. It would make sense that connecting to people deeply leads to a strong community. “Sharing lovers, friends, sex, and affection was an integral part of creating an alternative community. I still believe that sex is part of the glue that holds communities together” quoted from a participant in a study conducted by Deer (Deer, 1999). The web of communal interdependence is woven tighter (closer relationships) and with thicker threads (deeper relationships).

However, polyamory does come with community challenges too. When one portion of the web is blown, the reverberations are felt throughout. When something negative does happen, it affects more people more strongly. Jealousy, like all other emotions, is normal and rarely if ever absent from the human experience, no matter how much compersion and love one may

consciously decide to feel. There are often problems with members not expressing this emotion honestly because of the values on positivity and empathy. The community benefit or suffering from the practice is highly dependent on the individuals practicing it. Polyamory has been described as very challenging and “definitely not for everyone” by both the participants in the literature and in this study. Yet, the fact that having other acceptable options present leads to much questioning and growth, even for those who end up disagreeing with it.

Polyamory in Relation to Individuals

In this section, I flesh out the experienced benefits of polyamorous relationships. The combination of negative and positive experiences in polyamory are ubiquitous to those who participate in it (Ray 2004). It is not easy to change the compulsory reactions we have been brought up to have, but it can be done with conscious effort, and if the experiences reinforce this, the fear tends to disappear. But why put oneself through this change? For the sake of growth; socially, personally, and spiritually (Ray, 2004). Growth in the area of one's social skills and social life can be seen in quantitatively and qualitatively increased communication.

Communication is reported as being more open and honest. Things are received with more understanding. The unspoken assumptions of boundaries and needs in monogamous relationships are impossible to be taken-for-granted in polyamory because they are inherently different.

Empathy is also a vital social skill that is often mentioned as improving. Kindness and thoughtfulness towards others is also expected to get a work-out. Compersion is not necessarily sexual and can be related to the terms agape (love for humankind) and Mudita (pure joy unadulterated by self-interest). Compersion can be very useful even for exclusive relationships.

“many exclusive and non-exclusive monogamous couples may find that having happiness for their partner’s extradyadic relationships, necessitates the ability to understand and empathize with their partner's needs of intimacy. This ability to understand, empathize, and feel happy for their partner's exploration of intimate others, may actually bolster the intimacy and satisfaction within the dyad.” (Amur 2014)

“He can share his joy with me, and he is very grateful for my openness and understanding. We become closer” (Ray 1999). Using indices of relationship well-being, Morrison concluded that those in his study with polyamorous relationships tended to have greater levels of intimacy than their monogamous peers (Morrison 2013).

Personal growth can be seen in the way that people regulate their emotions and reactions, in increased self-awareness, and in critical thought about their choices. Individuals face questions such as “why did that trigger me to feel jealous? Am I insecure about this?” In the process of confronting these emotions and fears, individuals get to know themselves better. They can also develop new understandings of their emotions and have given them original language such as the term “wibbly” to describe a feeling of insecurity and wanting for reassurance but without the connotations of possessiveness like is present in jealousy (Ritchie 2006). In the process of asking “what works for us?” partners think critically about things that were once compulsory and they can create models that are a custom fit for their lives. Significantly, individuals are empowered to make decisions in their emotional reactions. “I have developed the ability to love consciously... By not making someone else responsible for my love, I can love my partner when he is in a bad mood, or when he lies to me” (Ray 2004). The ability to create a new language to express how they feel and frame it, adds to the empowerment, “Inventing a word for this positive

reaction to a situation challenges the traditional understanding of jealousy outlined previously, and can potentially enable those in the polyamorous communities to rethink their experiences and emotions” (Ritchie 2006).

Spiritually, some individuals claim that polyamory helps them to transcend the kind of worldly personal love that is common. “What has been a great inspiration to me is learning how it is possible to use our partnership as a method to develop into loving spiritual beings, instead of using the partnership only to satisfy personal, emotional and sexual needs”(Ray 2004). Although, this kind of tantric transcendence can be practiced in monogamous relationships as well. In the tantric practice, it is not merely just physical bodies and persons unifying, it is also formless souls and divine energies intertwining. This kind of love transcends gender, orientation and identity. It seems that perhaps polyamory allows for this transcendence in a more literal way, with many opportunities to practice letting go of egotism, letting go of fears, letting go of attachment, in place of blissful unconditional love. The universal love can be practiced with all people unconditionally because it does not rely on form, only soul, it doesn't rely on something external, rather it relies on God's heart, which is internal. Something greater than the individual but which comes from within. Spirituality, especially universalism such as this, can be a unifying force that holds communities together in energetic as well as physical forms.

Polyamory is not without its challenges, but those challenges are most often seen in the light of growing pains that were necessary and not regretted. “It was found that, for those in open relationships, issues such as jealousy, setting boundaries and communicating needs to partners often arose, but despite this, participants worked hard to overcome these difficulties through honesty and communication (McLean 2011). Lasting impressions of polyamory typically end in

positivity despite the difficulties experienced. Overall, the perceived benefits of community cohesion and individual growth seem to outweigh the challenges and adversities faced by those who choose to have polyamory in their lives.

Methods

My first exposure to the group began in November of 2010, at my first biannual regional event which was named *Afterburn*. It was my 18th birthday and I was finally old enough to go to a festival (although that hadn't stopped me years prior from celebrating anywhere I could get into)! I was invited without much notice and so I did not have a chance to read up on the event. I hadn't realized that this was actually associated with the annual Burning Man event until I went into the coffee camp, picked up a book, and started recognizing the pictures I saw online years ago, to the event I always said I would make it to. I was ill-prepared and actually brought clothes that were a toned-down hippie theme rather than my usual delightfully absurd attire I would have worn at raves (or that I had worn to high school when I felt the urge). I almost felt out of place for not being the one who looked out of place for once. Yet I felt an instant connection with these people, my people, the ones who *wanted* and *dared to be* to be different, like I had.

Despite missing out on getting to rock my bizarre outfits, I met a few individuals who sparked my interest and we became friends. One of those friends became a boyfriend who took me on all sorts of adventures installing art pieces (more specifically tension fabric art decorations) at festivals, raves and clubs across the country. We occasionally went to Burns but we never made it a priority since he was capital-oriented due to his line of work. I made it known to my boyfriend at the time that I was bisexual and would be accepting of and would like to have an open relationship including other women in a sex-based way, although it took us about a year to actually put it into practice and it never happened to occur with other Burners or at the events.

About six months into our relationship I met a Burner who explained to me for the first time the concept of polyamory. I reacted in a very skeptical and critical way to it. Polyamory centered on relationships rather than sex was mostly forgotten for a while. Two years in, my boyfriend and I had a painful break up and I sought more company with the people who I identified with most: Burners.

In 2012, I became a regular at the regional bi-annual events (Preheat and Afterburn), the weekly gatherings (Twisted Tuesdays at Red Lion Pub) and even the daily gatherings on the lawn in front of the UCF Bookstore (the unofficial Objects in Motion Club). I was invited by a Burner one day to come bring my props, to practice, and allow myself to be taught by the fire spinners on Campus between classes. I accepted and very slowly, with much practice and pain, learned how to spin fire, which is a sort of right of passage in a way for this community. Spinning fire and making these friends make me feel a sense of belonging and confidence. I attracted my tribe, who was not afraid to be different, to think differently, and to live differently; a right I fought for throughout life. Over the next two years, my friendships with Burners in Central Florida became closer, and polyamory kept being brought up. I began to see friends who were polyamorous all the time and to me, these were very admirable people; kind, passionate, intelligent, motivated, skilled. From my etic perspective, I thought their relationships looked very healthy, dynamic, fun and interesting. I had a few loving non-exclusive relationships but none of them developed to be long-term relationships or polyamorous, so I cannot offer a full emic perspective. Although I did start to change the way I thought about the world, so my mind and my identity changed to be polyamorous at heart. I offered a temporary home to a fellow Burner friend and he was very supportive and encouraging of polyamory. My discussions with him on

polyamory theory, how it made me realize cultural mindsets I never challenged before, it was the final piece that inspired me to choose it for a topic of anthropological investigation.

In 2014 formal, IRB-approved research began, with semi-structured interviews having been conducted with 15 participants, several of those interviews were transcribed and then highlighted for the most recurring emerging themes such as communication, openness, honesty, connection, cooperation, constructiveness, positivity, acceptance, belonging, nurturing, empowerment, freedom, relief, growth, transformation, and transference. In the transcribed interviews, reappearing words and sentences that were significant to community and individual experiences were marked and then condensed to these themes. There were three male, one transgender and eleven female participants. The gender imbalance here is recognized and would have been done differently given fewer time constraints.

Findings

Introduction

The research conducted includes participant-observation and semi-structured interviews with Burners who practice polyamory in Central Florida. What was concluded through this research is that polyamory had a perceived overall positive effect on community cohesiveness and on individuals as well. It should be kept in mind however, that this data is based on subjective experiences rather than objective measures and a causal relationship cannot be concluded, despite the participants attributing the effects to polyamory. Sometimes despite negative experiences, participants reported a favorable perspective on polyamory. However,

participants mostly reported positive experiences and many development benefits from their experiences with polyamory, typically framing experiences as learning opportunities.

Definitions and Distinctions

Definitions can be somewhat limiting, they draw a line around what a word is or is not and perhaps the rigidity of it is not representative of the reality which is actually more fluid. What polyamory means to each individual studied varied as did the criteria that would include or exclude a relationship from the definition. It was most often described by participants as the ability to love multiple people simultaneously or as a relationship structure that includes multiple romantic relationships. It was distinguished as being an ethical consent-based non-monogamy in contrast to cheating, which is non-consensual and unethical. The base of the relationship was said to be communication and love rather than ownership. Often, the freedom to have needs met extradyadically without hurting one another and without shame was included.

Polyamory is defined as more than a just a practice, but extending into a person's identity and as a sexual orientation, was not uncommon in the participants studied. One participant articulates how being polyamorous is an essential part of their identity "polyamory is such a very core, deep feeling of expression of love that won't just go away because you're tied into a relationship." A sense of belonging, reunification and discovery with a life-long unconsciously but intuitively known orientation was reported. These participants reported compulsory monogamy (monogamy due to *habitus* and hegemony rather than choice) to be the largest block in the way of polyamory earlier in their lives

In some of the literature, polyamory was distinguished from solely sex-based relationships, but the participants interviewed did not make such a distinction. Much more

common when defining polyamory was to include categories such as swinger and open relationships as equally valid. It is my reasoning that this widely-held conceptualization is due to the accepting philosophy of Burner culture, which emphasizes inclusion as one of its ten principles. Also, there is almost always a theme-camp called Shameless Sexytime Soiree at the regional events which is a recognized appropriate venue for such activities, centering on sexually based encounters. So, I do not think that the participants here feel the pressure to distinguish themselves from these categories, which other polyamorous groups might face. Polyamorous groups in mainstream society might be struggling for popular acceptance through reaffirming their values to be parallel to popular values; fidelity, romantic love, and sometimes family. The line between love-based and sex-based relationships was insignificant to the participants; rather, there was an emphasis on acceptance and inclusion. The participants went on to describe how people involved should be treated; with caring, nurturing and respect.

Experiences

There were a large variety of experiences reported, but there were none that were entirely positive or negative. The specifics were highly diverse but the underlying themes showed up again and again. Challenge, growth, remorselessness and inclusivity were several of these themes. Most often, the participants framed these experiences as learning experiences they were grateful for, that bettered themselves as individuals and strengthened them in a variety of ways. They reported that the worldview has challenged them to look at things in a different and healthier way, to develop skills and to grow as a person. So according to the participants' perception, exposure to polyamory in theory, regardless of negative practical experiences, had a

perceived positive effect on participants. A few times the negative experiences were framed as damaging rather than just learning experiences. As one participant stated, “If the sum of my experiences with polyamory aren’t just dominated by the one, longer term relationship that I had, then I would say that my experiences with the community is overwhelmingly positive. I think that it pushes people to grow and be healthier individuals than they would be otherwise. I would say that the relationship that I’m thinking of was overwhelmingly negative and damaging for me. But it was a huge learning experience and it doesn’t preclude me from being in one again.”

Nevertheless, all of the participants reported an overall positive view of polyamory and that they would be open to it in the future, some stating this only conditionally, given the right circumstances. All participants said that they did not regret having tried polyamory. None of the participants condemned it or had entirely negative experiences with it. Most participants reported that polyamory strengthens community bonds in this group because it fostered quantitatively more and qualitatively deeper connections between members, and because social skills learned were transferred to other relationships in the community. One participant explained it like this *“talking about things, learning that way of communication with a partner can be transferred to a community.”* and she compared it to the fire props that the community is famous for being skilled in wielding during performances, which I thought was a clever and relevant analogy, *“...so, it’s like props, you transfer everything.”* Playing with fire is similar to polyamory in that most people outside the counter-culture have an automatic aversion to it without stopping to understand why, and that it can be safe and have so much payoff. There are real risks to it, especially diving in without any experience, but learning through lots of safe practice and having the dedication to keep trying past challenging spots and plateaus, causes the individual to grow

and master it with ease over time. From my experiences as a participant-observer especially, I see the characteristic Burner as reveling in a good challenge because they want to push boundaries and accomplish things that are truly amazing; an indomitable spirit.

Participants who had mostly difficult or negative experiences with polyamory and who are hesitant at ever practicing them again still retained positive outlooks on the theory behind it. They reported the worldview to have challenged them to look at things in a different and healthier way, to develop skills and to grow as a person. So, it is to be seen that theory can stand on its own independent of practice. For example, the same participant who reported the experiences as “damaging” concluded with this statement *"So, in theory, if it's taken as an approach to life, everything, it changes the landscape of everything."*

Conceptually, the *default world's* (the mainstream popular culture and society within which Burners find themselves nested within and which they must return to after events end) societal norms such as slut-shaming, body-shaming, love-guiling (the internal guilt one feels for having romantic loving feelings outside the dyad), heteronormativity, mononormativity, male superiority, and exclusion were transformed into sex-positivity, body-positivity, love-positivity, acceptance, equality and inclusion. The participants' cultures of origin are questioned, rejected and usually a differing conceptualization of the world is created in its place to accommodate this new information. These conceptions of shame were metamorphed into empowerment, pride, and self-love.

Perceived Benefits to Individuals

In fact, many benefits were reported by the participants, such as personal/emotional, social and spiritual growth. Rather unequivocally, one participant said “you can’t engage in

polyamorous situations without experiencing development, potentially in a variety of ways.” As far as personal/emotional growth goes, we focused on the internal development of the person; self-awareness, emotional management, behavior regulation, accountability, identity, a blossoming of the true self. Social growth included reduced social anxiety, higher self-esteem, increased communication skills, strengthened interpersonal skills and the growth of the community itself outside the individual (quantitatively more and qualitatively deeper bonds). Spiritually, only a few participants reported a significant change. Most often, spirituality was reported as not having relevance. Most participants distinguished spirituality from religion regardless of the effect polyamory had or didn’t have upon it.

On a personal level, participants reported a change in values, better emotional management, and increased self-awareness. As participants found their traditional worldview challenged, cognitive dissonance urged them to either assimilate or accommodate the new information. One participant illustrated her shift in this way

“I would relate it to living in a desert my whole life and then jumping in a cold pool, in the sense of I thought the world looked one way and then, I found the ocean basically, and by the way, I’m a fish and this is where I belong. And so, that transition wasn’t easy, it was finding something that I never done before and something that I was completely terrified of because my model of thinking told me that this is how you’re supposed to be and I had to say, I’m not going to be like that, I’m going to try something that terrifies me, and it (pause) but it was finally like, it felt

right in the sense that it felt right to me, to be where I belong, like that kind of community and that kind of feeling just felt right.”

Emotionally, people processed and interpreted feelings and thoughts differently than prior to being exposed to polyamory. A common example being that instead of equating jealousy with love, they began to see it as a fear of losing a possession and were better able to cope with it in a way that was constructive to the relationship and within themselves. One of the participants expressed this on the topic of jealousy in polyamory *“I think the reason I was secure with doing that was because I wasn’t losing him. And I think that’s what poly does, it takes away that fear of loss.”* They reported a greater ability to express love and compassion fully, not just towards others but internally as well. For those who had good experiences with polyamory, they reported feeling more calm, comfortable and secure. Most participants reported feeling much more free in comparison to monogamy, although some mentioned that for those who desire monogamy, they think that person could feel just as free in a monogamous relationship.

Although some participants were against monogamy as their own personal preference, none of the participants condemned monogamy itself, showing a huge propensity for tolerance. Most participants made a point to mention that monogamy is an equally valid relationship model, and is best suited to some people. A few participants mentioned that they did not see polyamory as being a relationship model that could supplant monogamy as the normative relationship model in this society, nor that it should. *“Polyamory is not for everybody”* was quoted by several participants. The participants seemed to be very aware of the benefits of diversity, expressed in a celebratory way. For example, the analogy about the blind men touching different parts of an

elephant was referenced to explain that so much more is gained when you have input from different perspectives. Attitudes of radical expression and inclusion have been said to make a safer environment for this diversity and authenticity. In a pluralistic multicultural society such as America (Or Burning Man), I would assess tolerant attitudes to be advantageous for adaptation purposes, a sign of a well-adjusted individual.

Furthermore socially, participants reported gains in comfort, authenticity, honesty, respect, appreciation, openness, deep connection, cooperation, mutual nurturing and ethical development amongst their interactions and relationships. Ethical development in relation to others comes in when analyzing specific and general situations. There are no ready-made rules for these kinds of relationships, because each one is so unique, so dependent on situation and individuals, and because within developed western society this kind of polyamory is somewhat early in its development stage. For monogamy, within western society for centuries, there have been clear rules laid out in religious texts, laws and social surrounding. Granted, it's true that those sources have contradictions, yet it still seems to be clearer than the "rules" for polyamory. Polyamory does have some guidelines set out in books, blogs and the like, but they encourage independent thought and customization. Going off of my experiences of listening to the narratives of polyamorous Burners, and according to Burners themselves, the process of analyzing what is truly ethical or unethical, while taking into consideration multiple peoples' feelings and desires, seemed to be a mental exercise that prepares people to handle social situations in ways that monogamy doesn't usually challenge people to do. Participants said that the main reason they felt it was easier to be honest, open, authentic, comfortable and secure is because they no longer feared losing their partner. As it was explained to me, before polyamory,

any competitor could be the potential destroyer of life as they knew it, because the competitor posed a threat to displace them in their lover's heart. But now, with polyamory, a new love does not mean discarding of the prior one, they can coexist peacefully without threat to each other. Partners reported appreciating, respecting and connecting deeper with one another because of this security. With this appreciation comes the desire to cooperate, support, encourage and give to one another.

Communication was heavily emphasized as being the number one skill developed through practicing polyamory and the most important factor in healthy relationships regardless of monogamous or poly. Most participants reported that polyamory necessitates more communication and so it is usually better than in monogamous relationships, where most boundaries and needs are typically assumed. Some participants said that communication in polyamory is difficult, so beginners might have worse communication to start with. They acknowledged that if the individuals are poor communicators to start with, engaging in polyamory is not going to turn them into better ones without practice, but with practice they could end up better communicators.

Spiritually, responses to the question of whether or not it was impacted by polyamory varied from "yes" to "in a way" to "not really". One participant claimed that through polyamory, he felt more in tune with others and the world around them, which is how he defined spirituality. He said it eloquently "I find that my spiritual guidance comes from wanting to express love and wanting to see people for who they are and wanting to be passionate with them... I feel much more in tune with my surroundings and my community and um, because I'm really paying attention, polyamory forces me to be very in tune with my partners' emotions, spiritual and social

needs.” For those who had an in-between answer, some of the examples included the way it changed their worldview. The elephant analogy previously mentioned was compared to religion and a way for expressing the opening of her mind to other’s perspectives as being equally valid “pieces of the same puzzle.” Most participants made a point to distinguish religion from spirituality, sometimes with religion being described as believing in Gods and scripture while spirituality has diverse meanings which are individually defined.

Perceived Benefits to Community

Boundaries that would typically be assumed and rigid become more negotiable and flexible in this polyamorous Burner community. Usually, in a community where everyone who is coupled is exclusive, it is understood that it would be a breach of social etiquette to flirt with someone who has a partner or to flirt with anyone who is not your partner. Even just wanting to give more platonic attention to another person rather than your partner for a brief period of time could cause an issue. But polyamory, especially within Burner culture, opens people up more so that they are more trusting and less fearful of these interactions. More openness appeared to result in more interconnectedness and stronger bonds. One participant said “I think it strengthens ties because I think that it facilitates connections between people that otherwise may not happen if they were attempting to participate in traditional monogamous relationships where they felt like certain boundaries couldn’t be crossed. I think that it fosters an environment where people can collaborate together even on very simple things or things where people don’t think about connecting relationships at all, like art projects, where because of an increased openness in communication people feel like they go connect with others without having to worry about their partners being jealous.” It is just having the freedom to let any kind

of connection develop naturally without the fear of loss. It is believed that some things in life are exponential; you don't always have to lose something in order to gain something.

A commonly reported belief is that love is multiplied when it is shared, unlike a limited material resource, as it is sometimes treated in monogamy. Participants report compersion (the experience of gaining pleasure from seeing someone you love gain pleasure) and joy being compounded and spread like wildfire. It is comparable to the way the art installations and performances present in community events spur exponential inspiration in others. Watching your loved one's face light up, eyes filled with elation, has a deep emotional grip on you, like a sculpture that sparks a flame of inspiration in you. It is an experience that moves you through empathically connecting to something going on outside yourself. The more kindness and generosity I see happening in the world, the more I am inspired to be kind and generous to others. It seems that love, like smiles, can be contagious.

These relationships were often happening between members of the Central Florida Burner community and even when they weren't, participants claimed that the skills they learned in these relationships could be used in other social interactions, such as with other community members, roommates or family members. One member said "...learning that way of communication with a partner can be transferred to a community. So if you have a problem with someone, if something is bothering you, if you want to tell someone how they make you feel, like happy or sad or anything, you automatically, like whether you are trying to or not, you're going to transfer that. Like, so, it's like props, you transfer everything." By props she means the objects Burners use to do fire performances, such as hula-hoops, staffs, fans and poi which are equipped with fire wicks which are dipped into Coleman's campfire fuel, lit on fire and then

various tricks are performed with them. The muscle memory, skill and tricks that are learned with one prop can often be transferred to another prop, making it easier to learn.

When approaching other community members in particular, knowing that they likely shared similar values prompted the person to be comfortable to be themselves. Participants reported feeling an instant connection with people when they tell them they're polyamorous or Burners. The community is perceived as a safe place for polyamory and it gives an opportunity for more interconnectedness through metamors (your partner's partners) "in that community, it's more accepted, you're more interconnected, you create bonds with a few different individuals and that leads to being connected to a lot more of the community because you're still going to be friends with their friends."

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First of all, this thesis is most limited by its lack of objective measure for change without which a definitive causal claim on change in community cohesion and benefit due to polyamory cannot be made. If such a measure could be utilized, the effects could still be given differing values depending on who is interpreting them, such as a benefit or a drawback. Really, this study focuses on the perceptions and subjective experiences of the participants more than it can answer the question of whether there was actual objective change in these areas. If such a definitive answer is to be sought in the future perhaps utilizing the relationship closeness scale and other indices of well-being could be recorded and analyzed.

To expand on this research, forming an archetypal narrative from the patterns of all those whom were interviewed in this study, as was suggested by my mentor Dr. Beatriz Reyes-Foster, would be an intriguing venture I would like to pursue one day. I think it could help anthropology better understand what motivates those who seek these sorts of alternative lifestyles.

Ethnography itself has its own inherent value in that it preserves for us a temporary culture that could be forever lost in time, and this one is particularly important due to its unique nature. It creates its own words with their own respective cognitive meanings which could possibly be helpful to all of society. Visual ethnographies in particular would be extremely useful (not to mention interesting and entertaining) in understanding this culture, due to the highly artistic visual expressions omnipresent in the Burning Man community.

Conclusion

Through participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, it was determined that polyamory did not solely strengthen or solely weaken anthropological notions of community cohesiveness in the Central Florida Burner group. Rather, it was reported to be a mixture of the two and most importantly, highly dependent on the individuals involved; their behaviors, attitudes, and conceptualizations of what it means to be poly. Weighing all of the reported experiences, however, leads me to the conclusion that polyamory both as a practice and a theory has more perceived positive effects and facilitates stronger communal bonds than negative ones in this particular place and time. Although, objective measures were not taken so a causation cannot be verified at this time and it should be understood that these are subjective experiences rather than quantifiable data. The participants reported likely causes of this effect to be transference of what they learned in the polyamorous relationship to community relationships and other relationships. The participants reported that with polyamory, they saw an increase in interactions with other Central Florida Burners, an increase in social skills exercise (practiced both extradyadically and dyadically within the context of a polyamorous relationship), individual growth, mindfulness and reanalyzing of compulsory habits and thoughts, increased self-awareness, increased thoughtfulness to others, and reconceptualizing of societally programmed beliefs.

The theory and practice of polyamory, in its myriad of forms, according to participants' subjective experiences and through participant-observation of the researcher, seems to strengthen community bonds and to have many perceived benefits for those engaged in polyamory, in the Central Florida Burner group. Not all of the experiences of the participants were positive, but

weighing the bad with the good, the participants retained a positive opinion of the practice and reported that they saw positive effects on the Central Florida Burn community they are a part of due to polyamory. Participants saw improvements in their personal/emotional, social and sometimes spiritual selves, as well as in the community.

Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Perceptions on Polyamory Questionnaire

1. What does the word Polyamory mean to you? How would you define it?
2. Do you perceive polyamory to be acceptable in theory?
3. Do you perceive polyamory to be an acceptable practice?
4. Have you ever had any first-hand experiences with polyamory? Have you ever been in a polyamorous relationship?
5. Have you ever been witness to a polyamorous relationship?
6. Overall, how would you describe your experiences with polyamory? Overall, were those experiences positive or negative?
7. Would you ever engage in a polyamorous relationship?
8. What role do you think polyamory plays in a community typically? In what ways does the practice function?
9. Would you say that you think polyamory as a generalization, strengthens or weakens community ties?
10. Do you think that there is more or less peace and harmony when a community practices polyamory?
11. Do you think that those who engage in polyamory typically experience development of any kind (personal, emotional, social, spiritual, etc.) from the practice? Have you experienced any such development?
12. Do you think that polyamorous relationships typically have better or worse communication in comparison to non-polyamorous ones?
13. On a scale from 1-10, how would you rate feelings of freedom in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
14. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of stability in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
15. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of security in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
16. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of closeness in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
17. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of independence in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
18. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of community in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship? Would you say that you feel more involved in a community when you are part of polyamory in the community?
19. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of comradery in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?

20. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of overall satisfaction in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
21. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of attachment in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?
22. On a Scale from 1-10 how would you rate feelings of connectedness in a polyamorous relationship? In a non-polyamorous relationship?

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