

Perceiving Polyamory

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Spring 2018

Thesis submitted in completion of Honors Senior Capstone requirements for the DePaul

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Abstract

We have become increasingly aware of different sexualities and orientations in recent years, and have attempted to embrace this ever-growing spectrum. This has opened conversations about what is the definition of love. While we have begun to communicate about different communities there is still extreme prejudice, with expressions of sexuality that are different from the monogamous, heteronormative, cisgendered, and constructed binary relationships. Polyamory is stigmatized without a clear knowledge of what it is and social constructs around it. So, in an exploration of what polyamory is; we reevaluate what it means to be in love in a social, historical, and biological perception.

Three Keywords: Polyamory, Sexuality, Social Justice

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Introduction

Mating and bonding amongst animals and insects is simple in terms of that there are not many changes in ritual and process. We, as human beings, have done something unique in that we shifted from polyamory to socially constructed monogamy. Polyamory refers to bonding with more than one person romantically, and social monogamy refers to how we decide to not multi-bond because of a conscious, non-biological decision. We have not only transitioned to monogamy as a societal standard, but we have stigmatized those who still practice polyamory in the present. This social construct has influenced our treatment towards people within the polyamorous community, and it has influenced how the polyamorous community has had to reconstruct what it means to be in a relationship with multiple partners in modern day society. In addition to the treatment of polyamorous people, we must consider the other intersections of identity that place more pressures on some in the community over others. Some of these intersections include, but are not limited to, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In examining how we judge expressions of love, we have to take a look at the oppressive forces at work that are not only affecting the polyamorous community, but our society in general. Polyamory must be looked at in a biological, historical, and social lens to be able to fully understand how and why the human race loves and understand why society, specifically the polyamorous community in the United States, condemns love that is not white, cisgendered, and heteronormative.

Part 1: Polyamory to Monogamy

Beginning with the emergence of the modern day human, the *Homo sapien*, the mating patterns were polyamorous oriented. During these early days, humans were also nomadic or

otherwise known as hunters and gatherers, and the introduction of agriculture and private property would change the way that mating was done in a few of ways. One being that humans would be allowed to have larger settlements and ownership of property instead of having small groups moving location to location. There was also new issues surrounding lack of sexual protection against STIs amongst hunters and gatherers and therefore a push towards monogamy started to become more prevalent. The second being that wealth and material items were now a factor since family units could accumulate more without having to worry about having it to take it with to wherever the small group would move to. Males wanted to ensure that they could pass on their wealth to their heirs, and thus wanted to be sure the offspring they had was in fact biologically theirs. The only way to do this was to institute monogamy. The last reason that monogamy became the standard was that women could not reproduce quickly, and when they did there normally would only be one child with a long recovery time. Men would not be sure if their genetic material was being passed on, and wanted to be sure that it was their specific genes being passed on to the next generation. This also contributed to construct of strict monogamy (Senthilingam, "*Why did we become monogamous?*"). However while we grew to social monogamous for the security of men, biologically speaking our ability to pair bond never changed.

Speaking on how human mating works in the brain, when we feel attraction we are given a dose of chemicals such as oxytocin, vasopressin, dopamine, etc. These chemicals also allow for human beings to have the capability to pair bond. Pair bond means that someone could become a couple until one of the mates died and the one left behind would have to find a new mate. However, the production of these chemicals in the brain fluctuate from person to person

(Sussman, 235). This gives each individual person a different ability to pair bond to another person, and thus would further demonstrate what is being said in the polyamorous community about feeling like they have always been polyamorous. This also allows for us to understand when people from the community talk about polyamory being a spectrum due to their being a variance in production of the pair bonding chemicals in humans. One human could have an abundance of these chemicals that allow for them to be monogamous, and would make them uncomfortable being polyamorous. While another human could be able to have many meaningful relationships that are legitimate and valid connections to another human being.

Part 2: Assimilation

In validating that polyamory is a legitimate end of a spectrum for human mating, we must take a look at how we, specifically through colonization in America and religion, have condemned the practice of polyamory. Forms of polyamory have survived throughout the years through polygamous marriages that were accepted due to the fact that it was one man and multiple women, but even that would fade as the fathers of daughters would want insurance that their bloodline was being passed on. Also, the oppression of the LGBTQAI+ community along with the oppression of women would not allow for much sexual freedom within these communities. This would only be exasperated even further when in the places that polyamory survived, outside of the stereotypical image of the one man and multiple wives structure, they were indigenous cultures that would be colonized to assimilate to monogamy. Some examples of assimilation would be the assimilation process that Native Americans were forced into during early colonial America. Colonists, especially Christian activists, wanted to institute strict monogamy in order to help “civilize” the indigenous in an attempt to help them become a part of

colonial society. Part of this would be kidnapping indigenous children from their families at a very young age and raising them to be Christian, thus taking away their culture (Porter, 107). This was effective because the colonists did not have to worry about the indigenous people fighting for their culture when it would have already been replaced with the colonial culture. While Polyamory was within many indigenous cultures and religions, and was replaced with Christian monogamy, the indigenous were not the only ones affected by cultural colonization, African cultures that included polyamory would also be erased as they were forced into the slave trade. This was a tactic to also further dehumanize African slaves, since they would be viewed as barbaric and therefore not deserving of respect. Polyamory would come out of the shadows when these communities would begin social justice movements for their causes.

Polyamory did appear in the 1800s amongst the predominantly white upper middle class in the form of the Oneida community and of Mormon Polygamy. The Oneida community was started by John Humphrey Noyes and Harriet Holton in 1848. Both Noyes and Holton came from white, rich, and powerful families that gave them the opportunity to even try to explore polyamory in the Victorian era. The Oneida community was a spiritual community that attempted to emulate the older Christian religion tradition form of polygamous marriage. However, they did not keep to the one man with multiple wives, but instead would have the entire community engage in a polyamorous relationship. They would eventually dissolve this relationship due to legal pressures to be monogamous. Mormon Polygamy would also follow suit in their indoctrination of polygamy and then later disbandment due to legal pressures surrounding them (Anapol, 45). While there are still some communities today who practice polygamy, it is not as widespread in the community as it used to be.

Part 3: Modern American Polyamory

The American sexual revolution, which had been coined by *Time* magazine in 1964 and would later become a casualty of the AIDs epidemic in 1984, would also be the time where polyamory would begin to gain more attention and widespread knowledge, as well as, outspoken activism. Stan Dale would be at the forefront to begin to create a larger community outside of religious doctrine groups that were dependent on how a god would want polyamory to be experienced in the world. He was inspired after having gone to Japan and seeing the family dynamic in the geisha culture. The geisha culture referring to how many wealthy Japanese men would have a wife, and then would go through a ceremony to be bound with a geisha that this man would have courted and had a legitimate connection with. Stan would then go on to be in a marriage with 3 other people in a relationship that is called a quad. This marriage would also lead to other relationships that they then would call their “extended family”. The family would then have reunions every year to keep in touch with each other. He then founded the Human Awareness Institute in 1968 that would accept all spectrums of monogamy and polyamory, refusing to stigmatize anyone on both ends (Anapol, 47). This was important because it would be a way to help bridge the gap between being monogamous and polyamorous. During these formative years programs like this would take religion out of polyamory and deconstruct the idea that polyamory was only forced polygamy.

Polyamory definitely exploded after the internet in the 90s and early 2000s. There was an ability to connect the community in a way that was faster and more globally accessible. People were able to find others like them and were able to bond over shared experiences when it had

previously been a risk to identify as a polyamorous person, or when there was difficulty in naming what a person felt about monogamy. People were able to find support and talk about their struggles in a strict monogamous world. More papers, books, and documentaries were being made and groups were now gathering and having conferences. Sexologists would take notice and being therapy and psychiatry that was geared towards polyamorous people that needed a different type of support. However, there were blind spots to this new exposure and push for the right to be viewed as a legitimate relationship.

Similarly to all social justice movements in the 90s and early 2000s, intersectionality was being greatly ignored by the masses in the polyamory community. The mainstream media view of polyamory was and generally still is the upper middle class white cisgendered couple that opens up their relationship, to generally another white cisgendered woman. Even this view of polyamory becomes very heteronormative and a way to package polyamory to the unforgiving monogamist crowd. The LGBTQAI+ and minority communities were being pushed aside, and the people who are poly-single were going unacknowledged. Poly-single is a person who can be dating many people at the same time without being in a poly-fidel relationship or being in an open relationship. This also opened up a struggle between those were not a part of a primary couple. It made it seem like a primary couple was simply shopping for someone to sexually experiment on. This is an issue that is presented in the polyamorous community, but it does not define it. There are definitely groupings that are all equal partnerships, or exist outside of having a primary couple to dictate the rules and regulations to the relationship that can inform what the connection can be. This heteronormative and mononormative view is unfortunately taken in the polyamory community and can isolate those who identify as non-monogamous, but do not fit this

image. Also, many people of color and people who are a part of LGBTQAI+ community are then “othered” by the one of the intersections that they identify with. They are not always accepted in the spaces provided for those who identify as polyamorous due to their other identities, and to mention the classism and ableism that plagues not only our country, but the community as well. Yet as polyamory has been pushed into the 2010’s, the minority communities within are taking more leadership roles in the push to normalize polyamorous relationships for all who identify with the community.

Modern day polyamory has taken a new form in the digital age, and has created new terms to encapsulate a larger definition of how people love. A few terms that have been introduced are vees, triads, quads, moresomes, intimate network, and more that are being acknowledged every day. A vee is when a one person in a couple has another relationship outside of the primary relationship. A triad is when there is equal partnership between all consenting adults. A quad is with 4 equal partners in a grouping. A moresome is 5 or more poly-fidel grouping, and an intimate network is when there are several relationships all coexisting with each other. Poly-fidel means that no one in the group goes outside of the group. There can also be an arrangement where one person is allowed to be polyamorous while the other stays monogamous. This does not always work out, but there are many cases where the couple is completely secure and approving of their status as what is called a poly-mono relationship (Sheff, 12-16). Polyamorous is purposefully defined as the philosophy or state of being in love or romantically involved with more than one consenting adult at the same time. The biggest emphasis being on consenting adults.

Part 4: Stigmatization

Consenting is used quite often when discussing polyamory. This is an important word to describe these relationships because once consent or deception occurs it is no longer a part of polyamory. Polyamory is open about what it is and when one adult does not want to participate it becomes something else entirely. It must be agreed upon with every party involved, so that everyone can have a healthy and beneficial relationship. The idea of a person who cheats all the time on an unsuspecting partner is not a part of polyamory since it is no longer multi-love, but one sided love. When adding the word consenting, you can deconstruct the stigmatization that follows polyamorous and the negative images that follow it. The other part of the word being adult is used, not saying that teenagers cannot experiment with healthy polyamory, but once it goes from adult to minor, again, it changes the dynamic of the relationship. The change in the relationship no longer being polyamorous, but statutory rape.

In the conversation of privilege and oppression as it relates to polyamory, there is the need to acknowledge the oppression within the community, but also the oppression outside of the community. Many families are forced to choose a primary couple for insurance, and to be able to have a say in the care of its members in case something is to go wrong medically. Sometimes there is a primary couple that simply opens up their relationship, but many times there are 3 or more equal partners that can be denied the validation of their relationship. Outside of having to choose who could possibly be the last person that one of the members sees before death, custody battles are frequent in the community.

This can be due to a set of grandparents or past lover who feels that a polyamorous relationship will be damaging to the child. This would therefore insinuate that the child would be getting hurt by these co-parents. In reality, these parents are normal parents who just so happen to have more help than a conventional monogamous couple has (Sheff, 135). However, due to the misconceptions about polyamory because of the unfortunate cases of cults using the idea of polyamory to abuse its followers, many judges will not rule in favor of the people in a polyamorous relationships. We go back to the key term consenting when defining polyamory for this reason. These clear cases of rape and molestation instantly negate that these are legitimate polyamorous communities. The moment that consent is taken away, so is the amorous part of polyamory. The image of a dirty old man preying on women definitely happens, but it is not polyamory. When looking at polyamory, the other view of it is a person who simply cannot commit, and due to this phobia identifies as polyamorous to become legitimate “player”, and can escape the concept of cheating.

Once again, the person that uses polyamory to justify cheating is a very real type of person. However, like all stereotypes, this idea does not encompass all that is polyamory. A better term for this person may be poly-sexual, which the ability to have sexual relations with many people at once without commitment (Sheff, 4). However, deciding to be monogamous means that we are taking consent out of the equation thus making it no longer a polyamorous relationship. This image then perpetuates that a person is indecisive and unwilling to do the work to commit to be monogamous. When you look at polyamorous relationships, there is a lot of work that comes with maintaining and upkeeping having multiple relationships. Communication becomes a key component of polyamorous relationships, and it forces a person to really connect

with each person in a different way without placing a value on it. In a truly fidelitous monogamous relationship, you need to put forth a lot of energy in working with accepting every aspect of a another person no matter what. In a polyamorous relationship, you find what is beneficial for each other to learn from and enjoy that part of them while not limiting the possibility to do that with someone else at the same time. This is not to say that a polyamorous relationship is not forced to reckon with another person's flaws, but they are not forced to have an all or nothing relationship with this person. A lot of the times that is why monogamous relationships don't work is because it has to be an all or nothing type of mentality when it comes to dealing with people's shortcomings. Therefore a different type of work is required in a polyamorous relationship, it is not better or worse, simply different. The energy in the relationship and the effort put forth is just placed elsewhere. This is not to say that issues like jealousy does not affect polyamorous groupings, however, this is why communication is key. This concept of jealousy is hard to grasp of how it could not affect some people in the polyamorous grouping for those who are monogamous. It is also questioned how two people could not bond more than anyone else involved.

Jealousy is a big reason why people feel that polyamory could never be for them. The idea of jealousy has been argued to be evolution because of the exact reason that monogamy was instituted, for reassurance that progeny was indeed biologically the man's. If this were to be true, then that would mean that jealousy could not be overcome. Jealousy generally stems from insecurity of not being enough, and this can manifest in a couple of ways (Easton and Hardy, 106). One being that you are not enough for one person, so they are going outside of the relationship to obtain something you don't have. The second being the fear that if the person gets

something outside of the relationship, then they will leave you for the other person. This perpetuates the idea that one relationship can possibly be better than another. If you are to look at other relationships that we have like friendships or familial relationships, while there are occasions where you value one relationship over another, in general you can have multiple friends and family members and love them differently, but not more or less than another. It leads us to ask the question why we cannot also do this when intimacy is involved. Why can't we cherish each relationship and not put a value on it. In the book *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, & Other Adventures*, it speaks on how we view sex and relationships as a competition. One of the writer's talks about a specific instance with the other writer's, Dossie, daughter in which her daughter inquires about the competitive nature of sex when she says "Dossie's daughter, when young, once asked her, "If there were an Olympics of sex would you win a gold medal?" We say thank the Goddess there is no Olympics of sex, because sexual achievement is not measurable...We want to live in a world where each person's sexuality is valued for its own sake, not for how it measures up to any standard beyond our own pleasure." (Easton and Hardy, 105). It is interesting to see how even at a young age, competition is influencing how a child has relationships, especially since it is obvious this was not a homegrown ideology. It is a reflection of the society we live in, and how children pick up on how we treat each other.

Conclusion

Polyamory is a spectrum that should be experimented with to see where someone lies on it. The only way that we can do this as a society is to destigmatize loving more than one person at the same time. Outside of having a more positive personal look on how it is possible to love

more than one person, or to simply just love one person, we take away the prejudice that happens outside of and within the community. The way two or more people consentingly love should not be up for debate. Also, having to understand that there is no right way to be in a relationship. In doing so, we also must recognize the other intersections that are being discriminated against in the polyamorous community and in America in general. The other intersections being ability, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, etc. No issue can be looked with only one lens because it can “other” people who feel they do not fit every criteria in more than one community. We must simultaneously deconstruct taboos with the polyamorous community since most of these stigmatizations have to do with the oppression of LGBTQAI+, women, people of color, and people who can identify with more than one of these groups of people.

Documentary Link

<https://app.box.com/s/x7zowp6wu3gjhts1htlr0vq0j8n1vfwe>

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