

Gender, sexuality, and polyamory

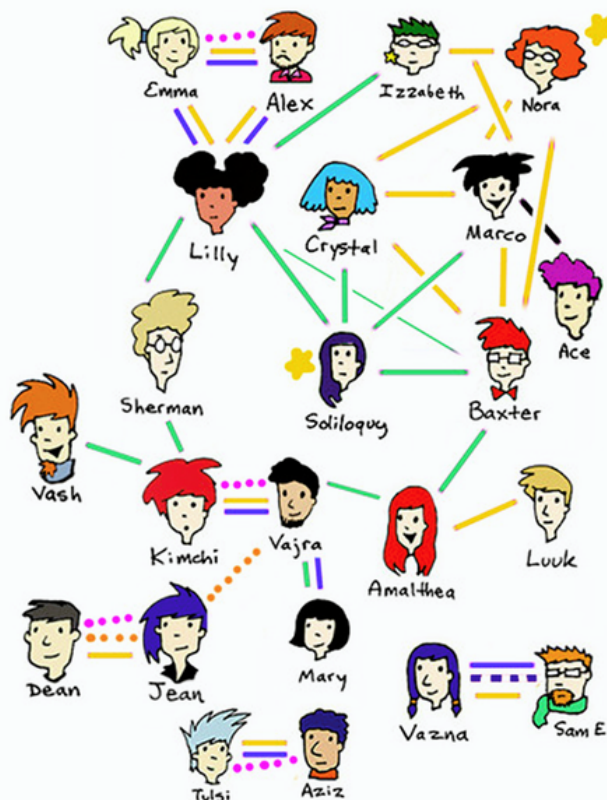
DISSECTING MODERN DAY POLYAMORY

By Brooklyn Jennings

For the past decade or so, polyamory has evolved into something much greater than the classic tropes of swingers and threesomes. More and more people (both couples and individuals) are choosing to push the boundaries of the conventional heteronormative structures of coupledness and relationships. Most interestingly, their reasons for doing so extend far beyond the interests in the bedroom. So why the current explosion of polyamory?

"WE ARE IN A TIME OF QUESTIONING INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES LIKE HEALTH CARE, EDUCATION, AND, YES, MONOGAMY,' SHE SAYS, REFERENCING THE RISE OF A VOCAL, PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL MOVEMENT DEMANDING SWEEPING STRUCTURAL CHANGE" (RUIZ, 2022).

- co-parenting
- current lovers
- monogamous
- solo poly
- former lovers
- asexual romance
- primary partners
- long distance relationship



First, one must begin to look at the sociohistoric systems that have formed the boundaries of traditional sex and gender roles in monogamous relationships.

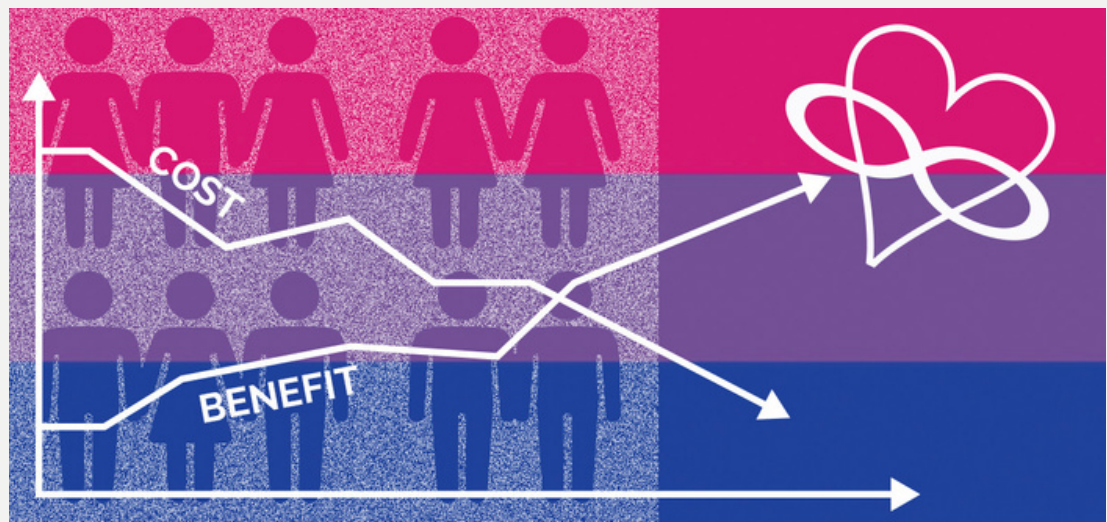
Capitalism, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity have contributed to the widely accepted view of intimate male and female relationships. In no specific order, these ideologies have bred emotional limitations, infidelity, jealousy, and the customary nuclear family model.

While those greater systems show little sign of a universal waning, individuals still find themselves wanting some solutions to the shortcomings of the classic monogamous offerings.

It may seem a drastic leap to link dissatisfaction with the systems of power to seeking more dynamic relations. And it is true--openly polyamorous people are generally viewed as taboo and face widespread stigma (Séguin, 2017).

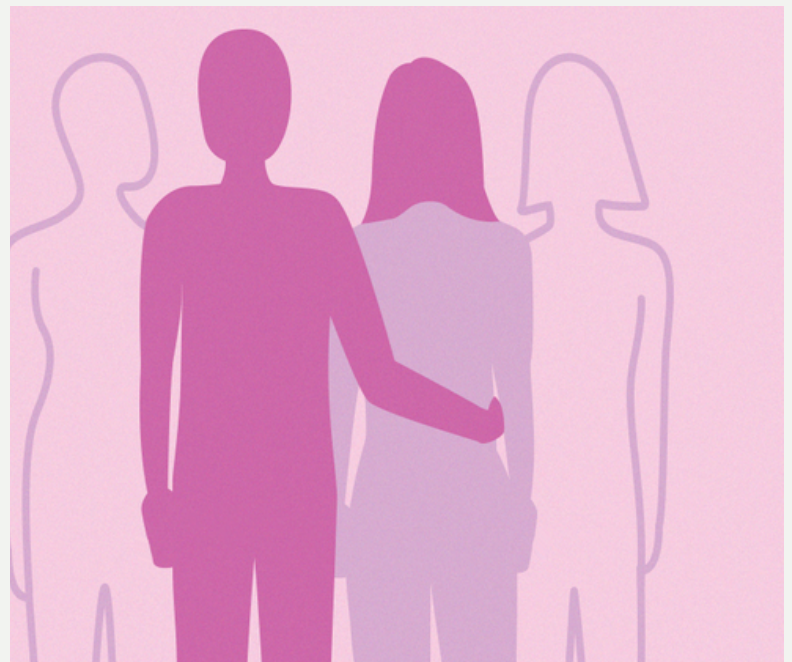
However, the rewards of that taboo have begun to catch up with the risks.

For many people, the simplest place to enter into polyamory is through exploring alternative modes of sexual expression. But this does not mean that polyamory itself is solely confined to clever coitus.



The primary reason being that the strains and paradoxes of monogamy are not merely bound to sexuality.

Only now we can begin to see the chains of connection between social systems and the lateral explanations of how and why polyamory deviates from the dominant culture. In sociology, these are known as the functions of polyamory.



Practical functions of polyamory

IS POLYAMORY PRAGMATIC?

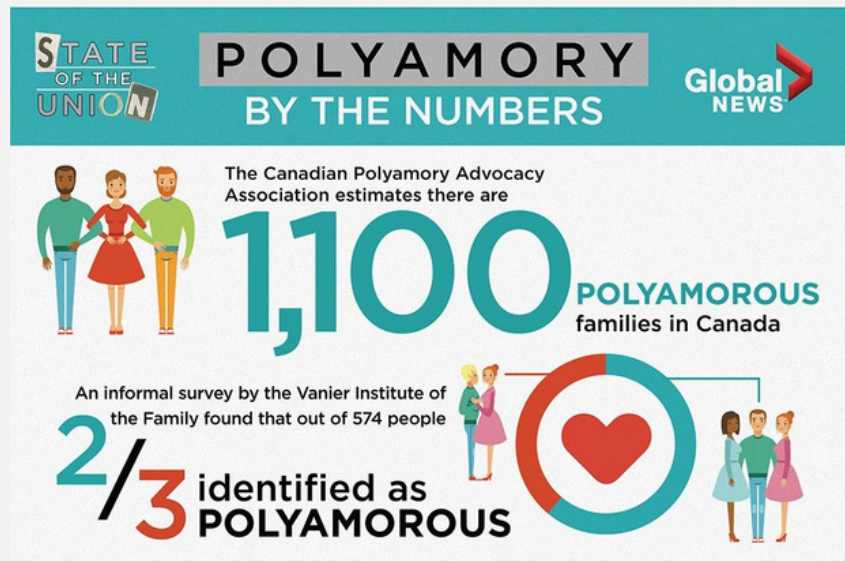
By Brooklyn Jennings

If strict heteronormative monogamy is considered the shining star of a functional society, what happens when the viable execution no longer serves the people in those relationships?

For example, let's examine the gender performance between neoliberal masculinity and working women. Currently, between women picking up the "second shift", pregnancy penalties, and the costs of paying for childcare, the possible economic advantages (such as nonnuclear parenting or multiple incomes) to more partnerships could be viewed as immediately more functional (Barker & Langdrige, 2010).

If the current state of affairs do not account for those who are most affected-- what solutions are being created in lieu of them?

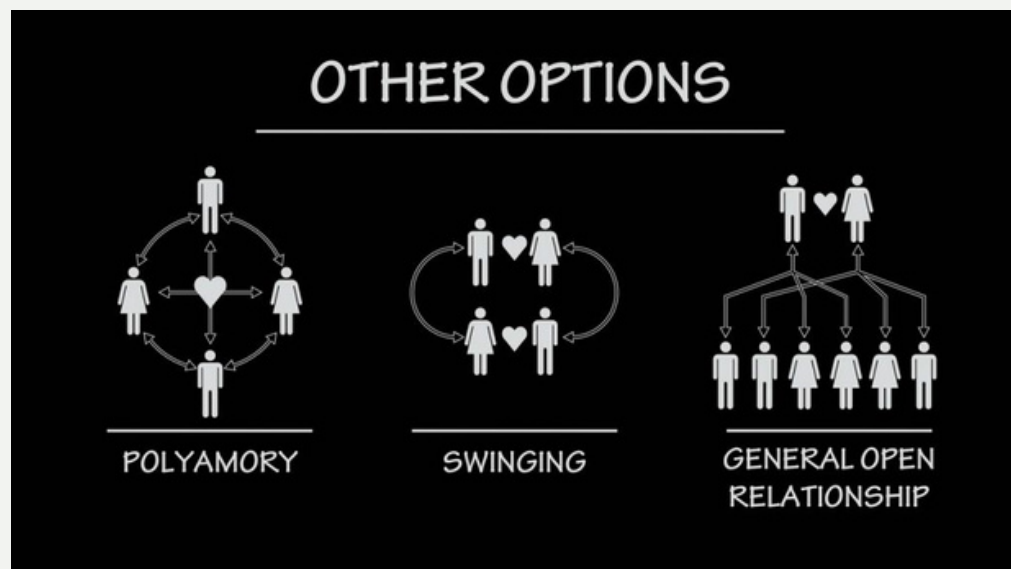
Polyamory is an exploration in answering that question.



BUT WHAT ABOUT SEX?

Similarly, it could be argued that the interest in consensual nonmonogamous sex is also an opposition to the power dynamic of conventional expectations.

"COUNTER TO PERCEPTIONS AND MYTHS, POLY ISN'T STRICTLY ABOUT SEX, NOR IS IT A FORM OF CHEATING, WHICH CONSTITUTES NONCONSENSUAL NONMONOGAMY. RATHER, IT'S RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED. EVERYONE INVOLVED IS PRIVY TO THE ARRANGEMENT"
(THOMPSON 2021)



Essentially, as soon as we start to examine the hierarchy and functions of monogamy, heterosexual desire, and credible gender expectations, we begin to see how sex is wielded as a tool of broad patriarchal power dynamics--even within loving relationships and marriages. This includes the fallible dedication to monogamous fidelity, the contradictions of male/female virginity, construction of the pursuer and the pursued, and the ongoing normalization that exclusivity is equivalent to satisfaction.



But confronting the dominant culture of sex (whether through nonmonogamy or queerness) outrightly is where reality and taboo meet. As Wolkomir (2015) argues, "the idealized script for romantic love valorizes monogamy as the right, natural, and, perhaps, inevitable pattern for intimate relationships". Which may reveal why polyamory often begins within the private bedrooms of sex. Because the nature of sex is already stigmatizing and hyper-discreet, the acts of polyamory can simply be folded into the intimate sheets of rejecting the "ideals" of monogamous relationships. It allows people to initially *softly* dismantle the limitations of the dominant culture without compromising their positions in society.

However, without much conjecture, the efficacy of that "internal" model of polyamory begins to quickly break down. The rise and fall of "swinger" culture and polygamy reflect how the private renunciation of heteronormative sexual and marital relations are not enough. Though it undeniably meets some corporeal needs, individuals are often seeking more avenues of social function to be met. As a result, people endeavor to establish more socially practical, and uniquely tailored, functions within polyamory--ethical nonmonogamy, consensual open relationships, delineation between sexual and romantic partnerships (Noël 2006; Sheff, 2020).



Who is actually polyamorous?

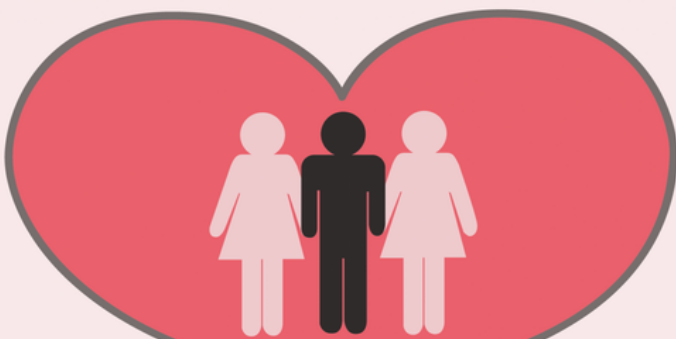
DEMOGRAPHICS AND CONTROVERSIES

By Brooklyn Jennings

Not surprisingly, as with many academic and/or co-opted social movements, the literature and education pertinent to polyamory lacks a proportionately diverse audience. Often the resources are crafted to suit a homogenous following--largely an educated white population that tend to "offer a short-sighted, isolationist alternative that serve to further solidify privileges for a few rather than realize an improved reality for many" (Noël, 2006). If polyamory is a mechanism for sex and gender mobility, then a lack of consideration for intersectional identities undermines the efficacy of this ideology.

"IF A GIVEN PERSON IDENTIFIES WITH THE TERM 'POLYAMOROUS', CHANCES ARE THAT SHE OR HE IS A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES, RAISED IN A MIDDLE-CLASS HOUSEHOLD BY ANOMINALLY CHRISTIAN FAMILY WITH MODERATE-TO-POOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS, WHERE FOLKS WERE LOVING AND SUPPORTIVE BUT NOT GREAT AT SHOWING HOW THEY FEEL" (RAVENSROFT, 2004).

Non-white races and lower socioeconomic class are among the most notable factors underrepresented in current polyamory statistics. However, of the people who presently openly identify as polyamorous, there is an abundance of evidence suggesting inclusive gender diversity (Noël, 2006; Noelle et al., 2022; Rubin et al., 2014). Whether this indicates that the realm of polyamory is perpetually condemned to exclusivity is unclear but it does point toward positive prospects under the larger category of gender. The comprehensive conversation of polyamory would not be complete without noting that variety of gender and sexuality is a positive contribution to the current constructions of nonmonogamy--albeit not the absolute factors.



JR 2021

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barker, M., & Langdridge, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Understanding non-monogamies*. Taylor & Francis Group.
-I used this article to pull multiple examples of the reasons that people choose polyamory (the less sexualized and more nuanced reasons). These examples allowed me to highlight bigger social issues that tied back to larger systems of power that could potentially be the impetus for people to go against monogamy and be vulnerable to the social rejection that could ensue from the social taboo of nonmonogamy.

Noël, M. J. (2006). Progressive Polyamory: Considering Issues of Diversity. *Sexualities*, 9(5), 602–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706070003>.

-I used this article to further explore the accessibility of the education and real-life practice and application of polyamory. In some parts of my project, I used it to provide some technical definitions of different types of polyamorous relationships. In other parts, I used the specialized research of the author to criticize the limited intersectional perspective on polyamory.

Noelle M. St. Vil, Laina Y. Bay-Cheng, Hannah G. Ginn, Ziqiang Chen. (2022) Perceptions of monogamy, nonconsensual nonmonogamy and consensual nonmonogamy at the intersections of race and gender. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 24(1). 109-124. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1080/00224499.2018.1474333>.

-This article was as empirical evidence to directly support the ideas and research that polyamory is more gender and sexual diverse (by nature compared to heterosexual relationships). Specifically, this resource provides a comparison between monogamous and non-monogamous relationship power dynamics. I used it for that exact purpose in conjunction with other sources.

Ravenscroft, A. D. (2004) *Polyamory: Roadmaps for the Clueless and Hopeful*. Santa Fe, NM: Fenris Brothers.

-I used a quote from this source to be very explicit in explaining who is most likely to identify as polyamorous and how it could very well be a rather narrow demographic. The narrowness illuminates why it is important to be cognitively aware that polyamory is not simply an option that is equally afforded to all people (at this point in time).

Rubin, J. D., Moors, A. C., Matsick, J. L., Ziegler, A., & Conley, T. D. (2014). On the margins: Considering diversity among consensually non-monogamous relationships. [Special Issue on Polyamory]. *Journal für Psychologie*, 22(1), 19-37. https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology_articles/133/

- I used this article to paraphrase some of the key findings from research done to compare the demographics of polyamorous-identifying people in comparison to monogamous-identifying people. From this article, I used the qualitative data from the authors research to succinctly provide a quantitative perspective to illuminate a limitation/controversy within the discourse of polyamory.

Ruiz, M. (2022, April 5). Is Monogamy Over? Inside Love's Sharing Economy. *Vogue*. <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-rise-of-consensual-non-monogamy>

-This article covers a current, and rhetorical, perspective of polyamory. I used a quote from one of the interviewees to highlight the ways people can think about polyamory on a more foundational and social level. This quote also powerfully delivers how people are considering polyamory in the everyday context (as in not removed from the broader issues of society).

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY (CONT.)

Séguin, L. J. (2019). The good, the bad, and the ugly: Lay attitudes and perceptions of polyamory. *Sexualities*, 22(4), 669–690.

<https://doi.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/1363460717713382>

-This article discussed some of the contemporary stereotypes and misconceptions of polyamory. In my project I used it to provide an alternative refutation of hasty generalizations and stereotypes of why people are polyamorous. I also used it as a clarifying sources and to better tie politics of gender and sexuality power dynamics in social systems to heteronormative expectations in society.

Sheff, E. (2020). Polyamory Is Deviant - But Not for the Reasons You May Think. *Deviant Behavior*, 41(7), 882–892. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1737353>

-I used this source to give context about how the general public (and dominant culture) stigmatizes polyamory. I also used it to support that sex is only one of several reasons people choose polyamory and that even under the umbrella of polyamory, there is nuance in the forms and configurations of polyamory. I showed that these varies models still challenge the status quo and that polyamory has pragmatic functions outside of sex.

Thompson, R. (2022, November 11). Polyamorous relationships under severe strain during the pandemic. Medium. <https://medium.com/@rikitiki/polyamorous-relationships-under-severe-strain-during-the-pandemic-e56d09617cdc>

-I used a quote from this blog post to emphasize that human connection is a major tenet of polyamory and that there are still very real stereotypes that exist to perpetuate and “other” polyamory people. That same quote was used to pull the readers into wondering what their own misconceptions might be and whether they believe that there is more to polyamory than their assumptions.

Wolkomir, M. (2015). One But Not the Only: Reconfiguring Intimacy in Multiple Partner Relationships. *Qualitative Sociology*, 38(4), 417–438. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-015-9312-5>.

-I used a quote from this article to provide useful context for why the heterosexual/monogamous narrative is so powerful and what is at stake when people choose to go against the dominant culture. The argument from this source also leads into a personal proposal about why polyamory could so often begin as a sexual construct and then lead to more complex relationships.

IMAGE CREDITS

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“I’m with them!” <https://www.wweek.com/culture/2017/05/05/this-is-what-its-actually-like-to-be-in-a-polyamorous-family/>

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<https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/polyamory-polygamous-sexual-relationship-group-love-people-sleep-in-bed-gm1072931180-287151057>

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<https://affirmativecouch.com/tag/continuing-education/>

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<https://fashionmagazine.com/flare/polyamorous-relationship-marriage/>

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“Throuples”
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“Love Multiplied”
<https://theconcordian.com/2014/02/polyamory-love-multiplied-is-love-shared/>