

Studying the Effects of Polyamorous Relationships in Society

When describing conventional romantic relationships, the term monogamy usually arises due to the implication and comfort of being committed to only one other person. Because of this social and cultural norm, having a polyamorous relationship, or a relationship with multiple partners, may seem like an oddity. However, ever since the sexual revolution of the 1970s, responsible nonmonogamy has been evolving and growing in communities that believe in connections that are more free and consciously chosen (*Polyamory in the 21st Century*, Anapol, 2010). In the aforementioned book, Anapol portrays her researching alternatives to monogamy in a singular novel that explains polyamory in its entirety in hopes that her audiences would realize that conditioned beliefs about sex and commitment could be different from what most people are accustomed to. Although critics have denounced polyamory as inferior to monogamy or unfeasible, it has become an expansive lifestyle that may eventually stand to be as much as an honest lifestyle as monogamy, even with the emotional challenges and issues that general society is averse to. The following five articles and book describe exactly what polyamory encompasses and discusses the effects and controversy around it.

In *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners*, one of the first books written in support of polyamory, Deborah Anapol thoroughly condenses over twenty-five years of experience speaking to tens of thousands of people about their experiences with polyamory. As a founder of the polyamory movement, she has influenced thousands with her book that defines the phenomenon polyamory and how it plays a part in modern society. This book describes polyamory having concurrent emotional relationships with more than one other individual, which naturally makes it the complement of monogamy, especially in matters relating

to sexual fidelity. Even though polyamory focuses on letting love dictate the form that the relationship takes rather than attempt to coerce love into fitting a certain mold determined by law, by society, or by immature personalities, it is still susceptible to occasional jealousy, according to Anapol. She quotes an evolutionary psychologist David Buss by relaying his argument that even though excessive jealousy can be destructive for a marriage or relationship, moderate sexual jealousy signals commitment (*Polyamory in the 21st Century*, Anapol, 2010). However, Anapol proceeds to illustrate a case study of a couple that had grown bored of each other in the bedroom, which led to the wife having an affair with a coworker. When helping the two reconcile through couples' therapy sessions, Anapol realized that the husband was open to the idea of a polyamorous relationship, and was more hurt by the lies than the actual act itself. In this specific case study, the lack of jealousy was the very thing keeping the couple's marriage intact (*Polyamory in the 21st Century*, Anapol, 2010). Even though the husband's level of jealousy was negligible, it did not mean he was not committed to his wife. In contrast, she mentions that Buss reported 13% of "all homicides occur in domestic violence and jealousy is almost always involved in domestic violence". When comparing the case study with the statistics report, Anapol emphasizes that although jealousy may be inevitable, it does not have to be unhealthy. By being completely open and honest concerning attractions to others in a polyamorous relationship, the feelings of jealousy and betrayal won't come linked together. In this case, the husband did not feel jealous but betrayed that his wife would commit such an act behind his back rather than communicate with him. According to this book, many find that polyamory prompts more self-reflection and intense personal growth than monogamy.

Anapol's book confirms the hypothesis that a polyamorous relationship can grow as long as open communication with one's partners is provided, especially when jealousy is involved.

Because many people cannot deal with the intense negative feelings that jealousy may bring, monogamy is a better suited option for them. This antagonistic relationship between polyamory and the social standard monogamy is one of the reasons why polyamory is seen as a controversial ideal; however, it is perfectly viable if one can learn to control his or her jealousy and direct it to positive self-growth rather as a destructive emotion. One limitation to this case study is that the husband came from a family that entertained open marriages, and so he might be more accustomed to the idea of polyamory than an average male. Therefore, in this case study, there isn't a lot of controversy since both parties of the marriage were open to the idea from the beginning. However, this sample could be used to indicate how a normal marriage might transition from monogamy to polyamory. Finally, this book was written with the intent to advocate polyamory as a whole. It is closer to activist literature than an impartial publication.

Monogamy, or the model of the core family, has been molded by the cultural ideals that itself is wrapped up with romantic love. In "Notions of Love in Polyamory – Elements in a Discourse on Multiple Loving" written by Christian Klesse, he conducted forty-four interviews with people who had experiences with non-monogamous relationships. His discourse, which was inspired by Deborah Anapol's aforementioned book, focuses on the conception of love in polyamory and whether or not it can challenge the dominant cultural arrangement monogamy, which places value in its exclusivity. According to Klesse's work, polyamory is an attractive notion for people outside of neo-pagan communities due to it being an alternative option to monogamy since the 1960s, when different forms of activism, such as the socialist and feminist movement, came about. The rise of poly love appeared to be a part of the continuous struggle around sexual and cultural dominance, which monogamy has always won. Klesse's interview partners implies that even though eroticism can be integral in love, there exists polyamorous

relationships where sexual involvement does not exist. In fact, casual sex is controversial in many polyamorous communities (“Notions of Love”, Klesse, 2011). In Klesse’s study, he references back to Anapol’s book *Polyamory in the 21st Century* by quoting one of her major concepts that love, eroticism, and spirituality merge to bring about true polyamory. This concept connects to Klesse’s implication that in polyamory sex and love are tied together but sex is not a defining feature in it, making love, rather than sex, the dominant feature of polyamorous relationships.

Because polyamory’s foundation is ultimately promiscuous in that one can have multiple partners at a time, it can be misunderstood and criticized as undermining the cultural regime of obligatory monogamy. One limitation to Klesse’s work is that his study only included gay male and bisexual participants. There are sexual orientations that are not covered in his paper, which could skew the data if he added in research from straight interview partners. Moreover, he only included interviews from people that mostly resided in London, England. Thus, the extent of Klesse’s research can only be relevant to just that area.

In Klesse’s introduction, he mentions that the major bulk of published literature on polyamory is written by authors who are close to, if not active members of, polyamorous communities. Because of this overwhelming consistency, one might find it necessary to include research from a non-polyamorous author, such as Olga Khazan, who wrote “Multiple Lovers, Without Jealousy”. In her study, she analyzes polyamorous relationships and the possible complications that may come with this type of love. Khazan focuses on jealousy as the lynchpin that connects monogamous and polyamorous relationships as she examines a 2005 study that analyzed 69 polyamorous families and discovered that there were intense feelings of angst amongst fights for access over a mutual husband. Khazan quotes an evolutionary psychologist

named Todd K. Shackelford who reveals that jealousy is a biologically predisposition for men to ensure that they did not raise offspring that did not carry their own genes, meaning that it is completely natural in monogamous relationships and sometimes in polyamory. According to Khazan, “what’s not healthy is the way some monogamous people manipulate their partners’ jealousy and devotion”, even going as far as to say that polyamorous people are much more inclined to resolve their conflicts by reevaluating their relationship before lashing out. They treat jealousy as less of an emotion but more as loss and may renegotiate their relationships a lot more than monogamous people do because of this natural emotion.

Khazan lays out polyamory as more than a free utopia devoid of troubles and issues by exposing certain emotional negatives and implied negative effects on children. She reveals that certain marriage experts don’t agree on polyamorous relationships while rearing children due to the fact that children thrive in stable environments with stable caregivers. Quoting a sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, “when kids are exposed to a revolving carousel of spouses, the experience of instability and transition can be traumatic” (“Multiple Lovers”, Khazan, 2014), implying that although polyamory is an expression of free will and love, it may not be ideal for long-term situations concerning caring for offspring. One limitation to this study is that Khazan fails to include any case studies of polyamorous relationships actually harming the development of any children.

In “The Distinctiveness of Polyamory”, Luke Brunning delves deeper into the criticism and discrimination that people in polyamorous relationships face, yet ultimately defends it as a viable arrangement of love. He states that in order for critics to process it acceptable, activists and theorists have to emphasize the similarities between monogamous and polyamorous love, but this conceals how distinctive it is from the more dominant intimacy. The four major critiques

that Brunning focuses on are the thought that polyamory objectifies or treats people as disposable commodities, the indication of immaturity due to improper attachment to multiple partners, the implication that dividing resources and attention between multiple people is unethical, and the risk of an unstable future with polyamory. Brunning states that polyamory is different and complex; it destabilizes the traditional markings of monogamous life and each and every desire or emotion is confronted with multiple partners, and so committing to the expressive work is definitely a must in polyamorous relationships. These polyamorous relationships grow with each person like in monogamous relationships as opposed to the notion that this lifestyle is unstable. Brunning defends polyamory by stating that rather as seeing people as goods in a relationship, polys desire and nurture intimacy and love for other people. Moreover, polyamory can defuse anxiety and insecurity by fostering confidence and secure attachments. This research study clearly lays out the objections of polyamory while also acknowledging and describing the interpersonal work that comes from being in one.

Modern polyamory faces continuous stigmas every day, as Khazan mentioned in her article. Although it is a growing lifestyle, a 2005 study cited in Khazan's article revealed that open marriage is one of the least desirable partnerships, with as much as 95% of its participants criticizing it. As a result, many polyamorous practitioners might find it difficult to seek professional mental health, as seen in the article "Polyamory: A Call for Increased Mental Health Professional Awareness" by Nicole Graham. According to his research, an alarming third of therapists in a study by J.J. Knapp thought that people in open relationships had some sort of mental or personality disorder with just a little less of them admitting to trying to influence those in polyamorous relationships to pursue monogamous ones. His case study included a 21-year-old female student with a history of depression and anxiety seeking help from a psychiatrist, who

blamed her suicidal thoughts entirely on her polyamorous lifestyle. The student reported that she did not feel comfortable revealing her sexual history because her psychiatrist was dismissive of the importance of her polyamorous relationships and seemed to judge her for them. She made the effort to disconnect from her poly community, only to rejoin later on after evaluating that they are her main emotional supports. The author clearly advocates for a better therapeutic alliance, or the relationship between a psychotherapist and patient, due to it being one of the greatest weapons to fighting mental disorders as communication and care would be better. According to Graham, most mental health curricula do not cover polyamory, which results in the failure to understand and appreciate the lifestyle on the mental health professionals' part. A major limitation to this research paper is the fact that the author only included one case study of one patient. The sample size is not nearly enough to make a correct hypothesis that all mental health professionals are similar to the one the case study describes.

Polyamory is an area that most couples would never try due to its habitual destabilization of monogamous dynamics, which includes commitment to only one other person. However, even though there are objections, criticisms, and stigmas about the lifestyle, many people would still risk the lashings due to it being a perfect fit for their romantic lives. It is not a perfect concept, however, and many may fail trying it out due to its ironic emotional exclusivity. Polyamory requires immense self-analyzation due to natural jealousy issues that may sprout about. Moreover, it requires constant supervision, a massive amount of trust and open communication with every other partner, which may become exhausting after an extensive amount of time. However, it is a perfectly viable and growing form of love that should harbor more positive attention and care for its distinct character.

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