Characterizing the Polyamorous Experience Through Research

Kacey O’Harra
Wright State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/biw

Part of the Medicine and Health Sciences Commons, and the Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Characterizing the Polyamorous Experience Through Research

KACEY O'HARRA

PSY 4540: Human Sexuality Capstone

Nominated by: Dr. Patricia Schiml

Kacey O’Harra is a research-oriented graduate of the WSU Behavioral Neuroscience concentration program, hoping to apply to Neuroscience PhD programs in the coming years to continue a career focused on researching the fine details of how the brain works. Kacey is also physically disabled and completed a minor in Disability Studies focusing on how various physical differences, mental and physical health conditions, and neuropsychological profiles interact with research both inside and outside of the medical field.

Author notes:
I became interested in this topic when a neuroendocrinology study examined in this capstone included data from polyamorous participants which challenged not only interpretation of the results, but also many assumptions within the existing rhetoric on human sexuality and interpersonal connection. The rapidly growing numbers of people both experimenting with and living long-term with relationships outside the normative standard, combined with the questions raised by the variance they introduce, show the importance of the work summarized here. This was a great opportunity to branch from my usual spheres of neuroscience and "back-end" psychology into more clinical and "front-end" psychology work.

Faculty notes:
Kacey’s paper, Characterizing the Polyamorous Experience Through Research, was a well-conceived and thorough review of the literature to date surrounding the nature of polyamorous relationships. Such non-traditional relationships are growing in number in our culture, and the paper not only describes their structures, motivating factors, and stability, but also addresses how they are changing our culture as they become increasingly accepted.
Abstract

Scientific study of polyamory and the individuals who practice it has seen a sharp increase in the last decade, revealing data and subjective experiences that support their capacity to be closely intimate and fulfilling, to bolster personal development, to provide a positive and stable family environment, and to mutually strengthen the bonds of each relationship involved. Understanding the unique experiences and challenges faced by polyamorous lovers is essential for cultural competence in relational research, clinical practice, institutional regulations, and moving toward greater social acceptance. Examined here are the associated stigmas and their impacts on polyamorous individuals, the motivations people have for becoming and remaining poly, the underlying values of the concept, the benefits these relationships can carry, prosocial behaviors that facilitate successful polyamory, the different ways multiple consensual relationships are arranged and interpreted, need fulfillment, the dynamics of poly families, and how jealousy and compersion interact within polyamorous contexts.

Keywords: consensual non-monogamy, marriage, parenting, counseling, healthcare, social work, relational maintenance
Polyamory represents a particularly defined form of consensual non-monogamy (CNM), the umbrella term for intimate relationship structures in which all parties involved are aware of each other and approving of extradyadic interaction. Other CNM relationship structures such as swinging and open relationships vary in their boundaries and negotiations, especially regarding sex versus love; however, polyamory, in keeping with the roots of the word, specifies emotionally intimate or loving relationships with more than one individual which may or may not include sexual intimacy (Grunt-Mejer & Chanska, 2020). Gaining a better understanding through study of the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences of polyamorous individuals and the processes behind the maintenance of multiple healthy and consensual emotionally intimate relationships is essential not only for professional competence in practices, such as therapy and social work with polyamorous clients, but also to broaden and correct bias in our understanding of relational issues and satisfaction, even as applied to monogamous couples (Balzarini et al., 2017).

Overview of Polyamory Research

Research and academic literature concerning multiple intimate partners primarily began with the sexual revolution characterizing the latter half of the 20th century (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016) and has steadily increased since (Meyer-Goodwin, 2021). However, many fail to differentiate polyamory from other markedly contrasted types of CNM such as swinging (Balzarini et al., 2018). Most do not measure or control for potentially critical variables such as the amount of time participants have been practicing non-monogamy (Flicker, Vaughan, & Meyers, 2021), and almost all theory and data analysis is based on dyadic relationships, which are notably not to be assumed in polyamorous culture (Boyd, 2017). Most studies rely on small convenience samples (Haupert et al., 2016), and much of the sampling and data collection is done online, greatly limiting its generalizability, as this tends to exclude those with less access to technology, less knowledge of or interest in online forums, and less permissive circumstances for openly identifying as polyamorous (Meyer-Goodwin, 2021).

More than one in five single Americans has engaged in some form of consensual non-monogamy, with about 5% acting on a CNM relationship at a given time (Haupert et al., 2017). Despite sample skewing in many non-monogamy studies thus far suggesting its prevalence in highly educated Caucasians (Morrison et al., 2013), this proportion tends to be the same across different ethnicities, education and income levels, geographic regions, and religious and political affiliations, but begins to vary with gender and sexual orientation (Haupert et al., 2017). CNM survey participants have consistently identified as non-heterosexual and as some form of genderqueer more often than their monogamous counterparts, partially explained by these respondents being more fluid over time and less likely to define their gender or sexuality in more polar or traditional terms (van Anders, Manley, & Diamond, 2015). An early study noted that many of the bisexual polyamorous women studied had no same-sex intimate experience or bisexual identity before becoming polyamorous, suggesting a greater openness of sexuality could mediate the correlation (Sheff, 2005). The inference that polyamorous or other non-monogamous individuals are mostly bisexual has little foundation, however, especially considering that only about 1-3% of the US population reports being bisexual, and CNM is not
as uncommon among heterosexual and predominantly homosexual people as this assumption necessitates, suggesting sampling bias in studies on non-monogamy is a more likely explanation for many of these quantitative differences. Some counteracting influences have also been hypothesized, such as a potential decline of non-monogamy among gay men following the AIDS crisis, or the concurrent rise of mononormative scripts in LGBTQ+ culture along with the rise of marriage equality (Haupert et al., 2017).

Most polyamorous respondents have up to three partners, and one committed partner at the time of being surveyed is most common (van Anders, Manley, & Diamond, 2015). Many studies, however, exclude participants without at least two concurrent partners at the time of the study (Balzarini et al., 2019b), which due to the fluidity and constantly evolving negotiations of polyamory (Kleese, 2018), may exclude poly individuals who don’t prefer to or aren’t able to find and maintain three or more committed partners at all times in order to retain an outside definition of non-monogamy, while single relationships come and go and evolve over time. Though polyamory is practiced, structured, and negotiated in very diverse ways, throughout many communities on average, multi-directional poly relationships involve three people at a given time, often with at least one married couple (Boyd, 2017), and the average polyamorous family appears to be a couple cohabitating with children and both with their own partners (Kleese, 2018).

Public & Professional Perceptions

Most of the general population, including many clinical professionals, believe that humans are naturally monogamous, often vaguely mentioning supportive evolutionary theories without explicitly discussing any in particular, and purport the moral correctness and necessity of the practice by its standardization in society and theorized biological roots. Many monogamous individuals feel that true love is based in sharing one’s entire life with a single partner, a sense of being uniquely chosen, and immense time and effort, which many feel are only possible with one exclusive partner (Grunt-Mejer & Chanska, 2020). In response to critiques on the universal superiority of monogamy, such as the prevalence of infidelity and divorce, or results across nearly 50 countries showing that most men and about half of women expect to have more than one partner within five years (van Anders, Manley, & Diamond, 2015), cheating is defended above CNM morally with the argument that there is at least an attempt at monogamy (Brown, 2020) and that issues in the relationship can be resolved if both partners take responsibility. Further dissatisfaction is usually attributed to choosing the wrong partner. Serial monogamy, describing the common situation of being in many separate and relatively short monogamous relationships one after another over time, is defended even by clinicians as having still greater security and self-certainty than in any non-monogamous relationship. The statements of professional experts in relationship therapy characteristically waver, seemingly without their awareness, between one concept of ideal love that comes naturally and easily with the right partner and one which is supposed to require constant work and sacrifice (Grunt-Mejer & Chanska, 2020).

Although most with experience in polyamory agree that social tolerance is improving, at least in Western culture where many of these studies are conducted (Boyd, 2017), the vast majority of reactions and perceptions from friends, family, coworkers, and the public are still
those of shock and disgust (Cardoso, Rosa, & da Silva, 2021). One of the most unanimously experienced reactions of misunderstanding involves sexual generalizations about people’s motivations for polyamory; most agree that people generally see the relationship structure as a fetish or kink (Boyd, 2017), and common comments from family and peers include that a polyamorist simply desires a threesome (Table, Sandoval, & Weger, 2017) or to cheat or sleep around without consequences (Cardoso, Pascoal, & Maiochi, 2021). Consensually non-monogamous people are universally viewed as more promiscuous and at higher risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), even by respondents who are CNM themselves, and only very marginally improving when polyamory as multiple loving relationships with or without sex is distinguished from other CNM such as swingers who frequently negotiate only on extradyadic sex and often maintain largely monogamous emotional boundaries (Balzarini et al., 2018). Table, Sandoval, & Weger (2017) theorize that this sexualization of the intent of polyamory results from internalizing monogamy as the moral basis of intimate relations.

People outside the community define polyamory with examples that are often gendered, imbalanced, and functionally instrumental or manipulative rather than rooted in meaningful relationships, frequently using language surrounding what is “allowed” compared to the language stressing respect and consent used by polyamorous lovers (Cardoso, Pascoal, & Maiochi, 2021). Even when explicitly mentioned, it tends to go ignored in outside perceptions that all partners regardless of gender usually have their own additional relationships with other people (Cardoso, Rosa, & da Silva, 2021). Many find that their peers see a cohabitating or long-standing partner as the “real” partner, and any other relationships as flings or affairs, assumed meaningless by comparison and not based in true human connection (Brown, 2020). Polyamorous relationships are generally seen as incapable of the levels of passion, closeness, trust, satisfaction, or commitment that can be achieved by monogamy (Balzarini et al., 2021).

Polyamory is also dehumanized to an extent that outpaces homosexuality in the modern world based on the lack of emotion attributed to those engaging in each (Rodrigues et al., 2018). The average outsider views polyamorous-identifying people as intensely selfish, rejecting of self-control and responsibility, escaping of commitment, and unwilling to compromise their needs with those of their partners. This view persists in the majority of clinical professionals, who pathologize CNM without distinction from cheating secretly in an otherwise monogamous relationship, purporting influences of fear of abandonment, incapacity to form meaningful bonds, or a lack of understanding of healthy dependency (Grunt-Mejer & Chanska, 2020). Common theories from therapists without experience with polyamorous clients also include secretly unfulfilling marriages, personality disorders, especially antisocial personality disorder, or unresolved neuroticism (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018). At best, polyamory is construed by negative onlooking clinicians and public members as a sign of immaturity or a phase, seen as tolerable only in young adults; CNM is equated to “dating around” before “settling down” at a certain age (Brown, 2020), and friends and family often assume monogamy will prevail once a polyamorous person finds the “right” partner (Table, Sandoval, & Weger, 2017).

In professional work and university environments, polyamorous lovers guard the details of their personal lives carefully in order to maintain an image of being competent, trustworthy, and in control of themselves (Table, Sandoval, & Weger, 2017). Many feel once they are no longer assumed to be monogamous, they are seen and treated as unreliable, rebellious, or
mentally ill, and must continuously attempt to validate themselves at significant costs to mental
effort and emotional energy (Brown, 2020). Stigma against high promiscuity is notorious for its
social exclusion and disgusted reactions, seen during the HIV crisis with gay men and more
modernly with African American women (Balzarini et al., 2018). There are social and even legal
ramifications to being “outed” as polyamorous, much like the consequences of being openly
homosexual, as outlined in queer theory (Meyer-Goodwin, 2021). Sexual double standards and
monogamous coding in the law amplify the potential repercussions for women in alignment with
feminist theory (Aguilar, 2013), and comments on media depictions of polyamorous
relationships are heavily gendered, with “women” being one of the most common words used in
negative comments (Cardoso, Rosa, & da Silva, 2021). While the dominant narrative of
monogamy is well-established with nearly infinite guidance, validation, and support, and
therefore does not generally require critical thinking about one’s individual beliefs about
intimacy and relationships, the constant moral challenge from all of everyday society and the
internalized mononormativity and poly negativity faced by polyamorous people has been found
to negatively impact their relationship maintenance and satisfaction in ways polyamory itself has
not been shown to (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018).

True Motivations and Values

Contrary to widely held public assumptions, controlled research on polyamorous
relationships has not found them to be any less emotionally close, healthy, or trusting. Studies
into polyamory specifically have even found fairly consistent results that these relationships tend
to bring greater happiness, more frequent and enjoyable sex, better physical health, higher
satisfaction (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018), greater intimacy, better need fulfillment, more
secure attachment (Morrison et al., 2013), and even simultaneously higher eroticism and
nurturance on average than monogamous couples, thanks to complementary influence from
multiple relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019a). Polyamorous families feel they garner much more
essential support for raising their children from multiple partners, rather than the children
receiving less attention and affection (Arsenau, Landry & Darling, 2019). Although avoidant
attachment is associated with more positive views on consensual non-monogamy, actual
engagement in CNM is negatively associated; it has been proposed that this could be because
avoidant motivations and behaviors are not likely to be well received in the polyamorous
community with its foundations in open communication and trust (Duplassie & Fairbrother,
2018). Despite being perceived as at higher risk for STIs than monogamous dyads by people of
every relationship orientation (Balzarini et al., 2018), polyamorous and other CNM partners are
not just more likely to test for STIs at the generally recommended level but are also more likely
to use condoms during sex with all sexual partners (Lehmiller, 2015). By contrast, rates of
unprotected sex are high for monogamous infidelity reported in 20-40% of marriages and 70% of
monogamous relationships, and partners often do not find out there has been any potential
exposure outside the couple, greatly increasing the risk of unknowingly transmitting an STI
(Meyer-Goodwin, 2021).

The values polyamory grounds itself in have been outlined in literature, not only the
consent and honesty necessitated by the basic definition of the practice, but also integrity,
rejection of possessiveness, and knowing oneself. Fluidity and acceptance of change are also
critical to many experiences; the boundaries of relationships and how kinship is interpreted
evolve over time with life changes and ongoing negotiation (Kleese, 2018), such that polyamorous study participants tend to have more committed relationships that previously involved sex than those that currently involve sex, with many challenging the adequacy of “ex” or “ex-partner” as a label in interviews (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). Poly participants of the Loving More nonprofit compared to the general population on average disagree more strongly that “it is better to have a bad marriage than no marriage at all,” are more likely to agree that personal freedom in marriage can be more important than companionship, to which most tend to disagree, and are more likely to disagree that “couples don’t take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available,” while the general population tends to agree (Fleckenstein, Bergstrand, & Cox, 2012). Mutually fulfilling polyamory can reportedly be facilitated with introspective and articulate communication of needs, getting comfortable with experiences outside mainstream culture (which could account for more queer individuals willing to participate in CNM research), finding partners with shared values and lifestyles, embracing sexuality, access to community resources, (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018), openness, sharing tasks, and having supportive networks (Rubinsky, 2019a).

There are many motivations that drive different people to be polyamorous, both initially and through ongoing benefits like those mentioned above. For many, with emotional intimacy and love as the staples of bonds defined as polyamorous, the mutual self-development through close relationships underlying Relational Cultural Theory (Meyer-Goodwin, 2021) is allowed more opportunity for growth through additional meaningful relationships unrestricted by the social expectations of monogamy (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). Certain experiences appear to be common introductions to the concept of CNM, such as exposure to the CNM practices of others, discovering bisexuality or other major aspects of sexuality in adulthood, or unexpectedly experiencing romantic love for two people simultaneously (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018). Differences in sexual preferences between partners are also mentioned as an important motivation for consensually non-monogamous adults identifying with BDSM or kink, a population that overlaps substantially possibly due to shared values in consensual negotiation of relationship dynamics and preserving individual autonomy (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). On the other hand, life becoming too busy or not having anywhere to go for privacy can motivate reducing relationships or not seeking out new partners (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018). Polyamorists stress that although uniquely beneficial to their personal development, continuous and intense emotional work is required at levels monogamy does not generally demand and can be more difficult to manage (Aguilar, 2013).

Relationship Structures

Relationship structures vary among polyamorists, with some identifying one relationship as primary and all others as secondary, some considering multiple partners as co-primary (Balzarini et al., 2019a), and some rejecting any implied hierarchy between their relationships (Balzarini et al., 2017), an interpretation enabled by the principle of polyamory that each partnership is valuable and entirely unique based on different intellectual, emotional, and lifestyle connections (Aguilar, 2013). For many polyamorous units, one or two partners are considered primary based on marriage, living together, or having children together (Arsenau, Landry, & Darling, 2019). In a 2017 survey, about 55% of participants identified either with co-primary or non-hierarchical configurations (Balzarini et al., 2019c). A number of the
relationships labeled as non-hierarchical can be interpreted as pseudo-primary based either on the length of the relationship compared to pseudo-secondaries, cohabitation, or a significantly greater amount of time around each other, similar to living together (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). However, the effect size of differences between primary and secondary relationships is smaller between these pseudo-primary and pseudo-secondary partners (Balzarini et al., 2019c).

Many partnerships that can be considered primary or pseudo-primary are afforded certain privileges to a greater extent. These partnerships can pass more easily as monogamous relationships in a mononormative society, allowing for more public and family acceptance, and often eliminating a need for secrecy that persists in many cases with secondary relationships. Individuals are also able to invest more in their primary relationships with inherently limited resources such as money and children, although it should be noted that relationship investments accrue over time and will be higher by nature of most primary dyads; it is unknown how much this accounts for primary-secondary investment differences. Similarly, commitment levels differ on average between primary and secondary polyamorous pairs, but as relationship marginalization is a strong predictor of commitment, it could account for any amount of the variance between these types of relationships (Balzarini et al., 2017).

The average polyamorous primary partner relationship is rated with more satisfaction than the average monogamous relationship; however, satisfaction is not necessarily higher for secondary partnerships (Balzarini et al., 2021). There is some interaction regarding relational satisfaction. For example, greater satisfaction with a secondary partner is associated with greater commitment to both primary and secondary partners (Balzarini et al., 2017), and need fulfillment interactions between relationship types predict satisfaction in both (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). Greater communication in primary dyads and the greater proportion of time spent on sex in secondary relationships appear to be mostly mediated by the much greater amount of time spent together, especially for cohabiting couples (Balzarini et al., 2017). Likely for the same reason, more nurturance and less eroticism is experienced with primary partners compared to secondary partners, with the combined effect of both exceeding the eroticism and nurturance experienced by the average monogamous couple (Balzarini et al., 2019a). Consensually non-monogamous lovers appraise their primary partnerships with both more personal importance and more confidence that their partners will not act against their consent (Mogilski et al., 2019).

Jealousy and Compersion

Compersion, a concept not exclusive to the context of intimate relationships but emerging as a term from the polyamorous community due to the salient relevance of the missing language, encompasses the affection and positive range of emotions that can be experienced secondhand in response to a partner’s extradyadic involvement (Meyer-Goodwin, 2021). Polyamorists compare the response of joy and love felt in their unique circumstances to that experienced by people regardless of relationship orientation around a loved one accomplishing something important to them or receiving recognition, although the polyamorous experience of compersion uniquely interlaces with intimacy in its positive reflection (Balzarini et al., 2021). Polyamorous lovers describe feeling reassured through their partner’s independent support network and its reciprocal support of their relationship, excited as though the joy is contagious, empowered by their
partner’s ongoing free choice to be with them, more loving through seeing their partner give and receive love, and for a minority, even aroused by extradyadic sex (Flicker, Vaughan, & Meyers, 2021). Compersion is not experienced universally by polyamorists (Rubinsky, 2019b) and comes more easily to some than to others but can be facilitated by a learned release of insecurity, similar to how jealousy can be cognitively learned through past experience (Meyer-Goodwin et al., 2021).

Romantic compersion has been conceptualized in both social and scientific discourse as the opposite of jealousy, especially as it posits itself on the assumption that a relationship’s love is in abundance with no need for competition (Morrison et al., 2013). However, increasingly including consensually non-monogamous relationships in research has suggested that these experiences may not be opposing ends of a continuum (Flicker, Vaughan, & Meyers, 2021). Mogilski et al. (2019) even propose that romantic compersion in polyamory, especially among queer polyamorous individuals, could more closely reflect the comfort of provisioning resources to a highly valued partner. Concepts of jealousy can still be present in polyamorous relationships, even alongside high compersion, and the two can commonly be felt simultaneously as part of a more complex system of emotions and cognitions (Balzarini et al., 2021), although polyamorous people report jealousy from an extradyadic threat less often than jealousy from insufficient needs or other more general relationship insecurity (Rubinsky, 2019b). This difference is likely related to principles defining the ongoing practice of polyamory, which promote working to overcome jealous feelings through introspection, open communication, and negotiation (Balzarini et al., 2021). Jealousy behaviors of spying and controlling do, however, strengthen the negative impact of identity gaps on poly relationships (Rubinsky, 2019a).

Polyamorous lovers report more cognitive jealousy, or processing and appraisal, but less emotional jealousy, or affective reaction, than monogamous lovers in response to extradyadic involvement, most likely influenced by the common practice of communicating frequently and transparently about such involvement. This cognitive reappraisal could also explain the disappearance of typical gendered patterns in jealousy toward sexual versus emotional extradyadic involvement in polyamorous samples. A mirrored pattern appears in reactions of compersion; however, men are more likely than women to report feeling compersion over their partner falling in love, while women are more likely than men to report compersion in response to their companion’s sexual involvement (Mogilski et al., 2019). In support of this challenge to the scope of jealousy’s conceptualization and treatment in relationship research, Rubinsky (2019b) found that the expression of jealousy, rather than the experience, appears to be more impactful on couples; the communicative response to jealousy outweighed both the emotional and cognitive affect in explaining variation in relationship satisfaction. Insight such as this from understudied consensually non-monogamous samples is critical to relational therapy and research because the assumption of jealousy as an unavoidable and polarly negative experience surrounding actual (not just perceived) extra-pair involvement may have obscured a large part of our understanding of healthy reactions to such involvement (Balzarini et al., 2021).

Need Fulfillment

In the past hundred years, Western culture has seen an increasing emphasis on love in partnership and marriage, translating to normalization of a greater and more exclusive reliance
on romantic partners for the fulfillment of various types of needs, not only for sexual and emotional intimacy, but also needs like companionship and intellectual stimulation. Overreliance on romantic partners in fulfilling needs to the point of relational problems has been cautioned by clinicians and research findings (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). The polyamorous community contains narratives avoiding over-burdening individual relationships by sharing needs like tasks, emotional advice, sexual needs, coping mechanisms, (Rubinsky, 2019a), independent free time, and the above-mentioned companionship and intellectual stimulation (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014).

Additionally, polyamorists monitor the ongoing needs of their existing partners, and how the fulfillment of these may be impacted by the intense and exciting feelings of first connecting with a new partner, coined as new relationship energy or NRE (Rubinsky, 2019a). Greater fulfillment of needs from more relationships appears to be more relevant of an influence in the general decision to be polyamorous and unrelated to active commitment to different partners or the active motivation to seek additional partners. Contrary to common assumptions, need fulfillment appears to operate independently between an individual’s different concurrent relationships; polyamorous individuals do not appear to seek out partners to compensate for insufficiently met needs or to contrast how well different partners meet their needs (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014).

Polyamorous parents and families praise having more support for their needs and the needs of their children (Arsenau, Landry, & Darling, 2019), and may through more comprehensive fulfillment of their own needs and the associated mental outcomes, improve their ability to be a relaxed and positive presence around children. Additional partners involved with children also fulfill critical family roles of demonstrating healthy, supportive, and loving relationships, introspective awareness of one’s own needs, and in the case of poly men, healthy depictions of masculinity and male-male interactions that are mutually supportive instead of antagonistic (Kleese, 2018).

**Recommendations for Practice and Future Research**

Given the substantial data supporting the validity of polyamorous relationships and the closeness and satisfaction they attain to an equal or greater extent compared to the monogamous standard, human service practitioners should examine and attempt to confront their personal prejudices on how they regard CNM relationships and the clients that present them, allowing interactions to address the unique problems polyamorous clients and community members face, rather than their consensual non-monogamy as the problem itself (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018). Relational experts must avoid theorizing a universal concept of love and instead focus on the subjectivity of the emotions it encompasses and trust human experience. They should avoid attempting to pressure clients into monogamy as well as disbelieving or denying the validity of multiple intimate attachments (Grunt-Mejer & Chanska, 2020). Particular aspects or identities of sexuality should not be pathologized without causing significant distress or delegated as overtly personal and private, facilitating the erasure of dissent from heteronormative and mononormative culture (Cardoso, Rosa, & da Silva, 2021).
Workplaces and universities, given the data on polyamory in culture, should strive not to discriminate against different kinds of partnerships and families (Brown, 2020). Institutions should consider the inclusion of polyamorous arrangements with questions concerning insurance coverage, relationship statuses on medical information forms, hospital policies on the number of supporting parties during pregnancy and birth (Arsenau, Landry, & Darling, 2019), divorce, guardians registered with children’s schools, next-of-kin communication with doctors, assisted reproduction, immigration legislation, and other concerns (Boyd, 2017). Future research on polyamorous individuals should acknowledge co-primary and non-hierarchical poly arrangements, include participants and measures for non-dyadic relationships, distinguish between forms of consensual non-monogamy differing in their structure or general boundaries, control for additional variables such as the amount of time subjects have been practicing CNM, and attempt to profile typical variation in boundaries and negotiations.
References


