The Perspective of Polyamorous Relationships from Heterosexual Polyamorous Women

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experience of polyamory from the perspective of heterosexual polyamorous women through a mononormative framework. Interpretive phenomenology was used because it gives participants the opportunity to express this phenomenon on their own terms. This study focused on understanding the experience of heterosexual polyamorous women in the following areas: (1) understanding the decision to participate in polyamorous relationships, (2) exploring the boundaries heterosexual women use to regulate and maintain multiple relationships, and (3) giving these women the opportunity to refute assumptions and stereotypes associated with identifying themselves as polyamorous. Eight women whom identified as heterosexual and polyamorous participated in semi-structured telephone interviews. Data form these interviews were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological approach. Open coding and in-vivo coding were used to organize similar experiences into concepts that were then organized into themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. From this study, researchers gained insight into how polyamorous heterosexual woman make meaning of this phenomenon and offer recommendations for clinical professionals to use when working with this population.

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General Audience Abstract

Polyamory has been practiced for centuries in many different cultures (Labriola, 1999; Klesse, 2006; Robinson, 2013). Previous research on polyamorous relationships has focused primarily on homosexual males. There has been limited research on polyamorous relationships from the woman's perspective and no research focused exclusively on heterosexual women who identify as polyamorous. This study explored the lived experience of heterosexual polyamorous women in polyamorous relationships using interpretive phenomenology. This included understanding the decision to participate in polyamorous relationships, exploring the boundaries heterosexual women use to regulate and maintain multiple relationships, and giving these women the opportunity to refute assumptions and stereotypes associated with identifying themselves as polyamorous. The results of this research study provide insight into this perspective on polyamory and offer recommendations for clinical professionals to use when working with this population.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Setting

Surveys about non-monogamy indicate that polyamorous relationships may be more common than most people assume (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014, p. 151). Polyamory in short refers to the beliefs that it is possible to love more than one person at a time and focuses on creating and maintaining meaningful connections with multiple people (Klesse, 2006; Jordon, Grogan, Muruthi, & Bermúdez, 2016; Barker, 2005; Cassidy & Wong, 2018; Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014). There are several types of non-monogamous relationships, including but not limited to "partnered non-monogamy, swinging, polyamory, and monogamous/ non-monogamous combinations," (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014, p. 152). A general definition of an open relationship is 'having multiple emotionally intimate relationships simultaneously; often, though not always, these relationships are sexual in nature," (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014, p. 152). However, this definition may not fit for every polyamorous relationship. Zimmerman (2012) suggests that "open relationship" is more of "an umbrella term that encompasses any non-monogamous relationship."

The majority of research on the topic of polyamory centers primarily on homosexual men (Cohen, 2016, p. 230). There has been limited research conducted that focuses specifically on heterosexual individuals that participate in polyamorous relationships (Barker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Cassidy & Wong, 2018); furthermore, there is even less research on heterosexual women in polyamorous relationships. This study explores the phenomenon and lived experience of polyamorous relationships from heterosexual polyamorous women.

What is Polyamory

Throughout the literature, there have been multiple ways of defining polyamory, many of which are interchanged or overlapped in some way, shape or form. Literature uses several different words interchangeably to describe this phenomenon including, but not limited to, consensual non-monogamous, polyamory, non-monogamous, open non-monogamy, open relationship, non-traditional, and non-exclusive (Barker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegle, 2013; Chatara-Middleton, 2012; Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Weeks, Gambescia, & Hertlein, 2015; Zimmerman, 2012). Weeks, Gambescia, and Hertlein (2015) state that the term “polyamory” literally means “many loves” (p. 238); it is derived from the Greek word [poly] for "many" or "multiple,” and the Latin word [amor] for “love” (Klesse, 2006, p. 568). Barker (2005) defines polyamory as a relational structure that accepts an individual can love more than one person and can manage multiple intimate and sexual relationships simultaneously (p. 75). Duggal (2014) describes an open relationship with characteristics of being honest, open and of equal freedom for both partners (p. 76).

Fierman & Poulsen (2014) define polyamory as “having multiple emotionally intimate relationships simultaneously… [that are typically] sexual in nature” (p.152). Zimmerman (2012) and Chatara-Middleton (2012) have similar definitions, stating “the term encompasses any type of relationship that does not fall under the category of monogamy” (p.115); however, Zimmerman (2012) is referring to the term “open relationship” and Chatara-Middleton (2012) is referring to the term “non-monogamy.”

Throughout the literature, the term consensual non-monogamy (CNM) was used as an umbrella term for relationship arrangements that do not fit the monogamous staple (Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013; Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et

al., 2014). Many studies identified specific structures of relationship patterns within consensual non-monogamy which included polyamory, as well as partnered non-monogamy, swinging, solo polyamory, polyfidelity, and monogamous/non-monogamous partnership (Zimmerman, 2012; Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013; Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Brandon, 2011; Weeks, Gambescia, & Hertlein, 2015). Partnered non-monogamy consists of a committed couple that engages in non-emotionally intimate sexual relationships with individuals other than their committed partner (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Zimmerman, 2012). Swinging, which has also been referred to as "a lifestyle," is one of the most common forms of consensual non-monogamy (Brandon, 2011, p. 283). There are multiple ways of engaging in this subset; most common forms involve committed couples engaging in sexual activities with other people together and the exchange of committed partners for sexual activity (Brandon, 2011; Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Zimmerman, 2012).

Solo polyamory refers to single individuals who have multiple open relationships but does not want to be in any form of committed relationship (Zimmerman, 2012, p. 273). Polyfidelity is a group of three or more in a commitment relationship together, "in which each individual is intimately linked to each person in the group" (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Weeks, Gambescia, & Hertlein, 2015; Zimmerman, 2012). Lastly, monogamous/non-monogamous partnership refers to a committed couple in which one partner openly engages in extra-dyadic sex and the other partner does not (Zimmerman, 2012, p. 273).

In the context of this study, the term consensual non-monogamy and consensual non-monogamous will be used as umbrella terms for all relationship structures that involve multiple people with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014). Polyamory and polyamorous

relationships fall under the category of consensual non-monogamy and is distinguishable from other forms of consensual non-monogamy in its acceptance that individuals have the ability to love multiple people and engage in multiple emotional and intimate relationship concurrently. Furthermore, researchers will collaboratively establish a definition of this phenomenon with the participants of the study. Researchers want to allow participants to define what polyamory means to them and how they define their relationships rather than define it for them.

Mononormitivity

Bauer used the term mononormativity, which he defined as the "assumption that intimate, romantic, and sexual relationships can only occur, or are only normal, between two monogamous partners," (as cited in Wolkomir, 2015, p. 419). Monogamy has been presented as the norm and society has been so strongly socialized to conform to the principles of monogamy that any other type of relationship is seen negatively (Cohen, 2016; Labriola, 1999). Society uses negative language to describe and discuss consensual non-monogamous relationships such as betrayal, unfaithful, adultery, and cheating (Wolkomir, 2015, p. 419). Even though monogamy is favored and seen as superior (Cohen, 2016, p. 299), Conley et al. (2013) explain that humans are not "true monogamists" evident by the "historical records of infidelity, divorce, and use of mistresses and prostitutes" (p. 2). Similarly, Brandon (2011) describes that many of these "monogamists" participate in forms of secret non-monogamy. Researchers found that "60% of men and 50% of women" participated in sexual relationships with an individual that was not their committed partner while married (Brandon, 2011, p. 283). Zimmerman (2012) points out that there are inconsistencies between what monogamist preach and their actual behavior (p. 273).

While mainstream media has attempted to engrain into society that this is a monogamous world, it has been found that consensual non-monogamy is more common than one might assume (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Conley et al., 2013; Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Klesse, 2006); however, this relationship choice and structure is still deemed taboo (Conley et al., 2013, pp. 2-3). Society reinforces the "romantic love ideology," which is the idea that love should have "one and only soulmates" that are emotionally close and sexually loyal to a committed monogamous relationship (Wolkomir, 2015, p. 418). As a result, individuals in polyamorous relationships challenge this idea of romantic love and reject the notion that relationship needs, such as sexual and emotional closeness, are restricted to this "one and only" ideal (Wolkomir, 2015, p. 420).

Significance

Monogamy is considered to be superior and normal, creating a mononormative society; thus, individuals in other types of relationships that fall outside of these parameters are represented negatively (Cohen, 2016, p. 298). For heterosexual women, there can be the added stigma of being "promiscuous" or have their morality questioned (Aguilar, 2013, p.107). This study will raise awareness of the negative stereotypes and stigmas attached to polyamory and provide heterosexual polyamorous women with a voice to properly educate the public about this relationship orientation.

Rationale for Methodology

For this study, an interpretive phenomenological approach would be most fitting (Creswell, 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Phenomenological research is described as understanding a "lived experience" of a phenomenon (Waters, 2016); in this study, the phenomenon is the perspective of heterosexual women in polyamorous relationships. Interpretive

phenomenology refers to a qualitative research approach that focuses on exploring and understanding how the participants make sense of important life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn 2007).

Interpretive phenomenology strives to explore an experience and allow participants to express it "in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems," (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This theoretical framework would be best because it focuses on identifying meaning in participant's experiences without making assumptions and the essential concept of this study is to gain insight from the women's experiences in polyamorous relationships.

Most research examining polyamorous relationships has focused on the homosexual male population (Cohen, 2016, p. 301). Hence, there is a need to examine heterosexual individuals in polyamorous relationships, and more specifically the perspective from polyamorous heterosexual women. The data from this study provided insight into the experience of polyamory from women's perspective and assist clinicians work with individuals in the polyamorous population.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of heterosexual polyamorous women who challenge the tenets of mononormativity. This includes understanding the decision to participate in a polyamorous relationship, exploring boundaries heterosexual women use to regulate and maintain multiple relationships, and to work with these women to rectify assumptions and stereotypes associated to identifying as polyamorous. This study will assist clinicians to better understand how to work with heterosexual women who identify as being in a polyamorous relationship and allow these women to destigmatize polyamory through education and insight.

Theoretical Framework: Mononormativity

Monogamy is widely held as the dominant ideology in society (Aguilar, 2013; Cohen, 2016; Del Vera, 1999; Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Fleckenstein & Cox, 2015; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016, Labriola; 1999). Pieper and Bauer (2005) noticed how researchers would compare other relationship styles to monogamous relationships and formed the term "mononormativity" to describe the ideology that monogamy is the only "moral, normal, natural and healthy form of romantic relationship," (as cited in McCoy, Stinson, Ross & Hjelmstad, 2014; Rothschild, 2018; Barker, 2011; Jordan et al, 2016; Stavinoha, 2017). This perspective argues that monogamy is the norm and assumes that all individuals want to be monogamous and implies that monogamy is the only option (Trahan, 2014; Aguilar, 2013; Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013). It also implies that it is expected for all people to conform to monogamous relationships (Jordan et al., 2016; Table, Sandoval, & Weger, 2017).

Monogamy and monogamous relationships are defined as "one person [being] limited to loving or intimately relating with only one other person at a time," (Trahan, 2017). Table and colleagues (2017) define monogamy as an exclusive dyadic relationship between a man and a woman in which both members are sexually loyal to only each other until one or both people die (p. 280). Mononormativity presumes that monogamy is necessary, as it is the only way to properly fulfill relationship needs (Hutzler, Giuliano, Herselman, & Johnson, 2016). However, Conley et al. (2013) argues that it is impractical to expect one person to meet all their partners relational needs and that individuals in polyamorous relationships are connected to more people to fulfill all their relational needs (p. 57).

Jordan et al. (2016) claims that monogamous relationships are not the problem of monogamy, but the "way in which monogamy has become institutionalized, idealized, and naturalized throughout various cultural institutions such as religion, education, media, policy, and the family that it is perceived as compulsory," (p. 112). However, Rothschild (2018) argues that while mononormativity may be the dominant belief among society, alternative relationship orientations exist (p. 32). Polyamory challenges the tenets of mononormativity but receives great backlash in the process.

Mononormative Privilege

In the mononormative perspective, if a relationship does not conform to its tenets, it is "ignored, hidden, avoided and marginalized" (Trahan, 2018 p. 59). Polyamorous relationships are stigmatized as deviant, unnatural, dysfunctional and damaging (Baker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Ferrer, 2008). However, research has shown that polyamory is becoming more common and polyamorous people are challenging the negative perspectives toward their lifestyle (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Conley et al., 2013).

Polyamory has been associated with many negative stigmas; it is perceived as deviant behavior, weird, bad, disapproved of, and demonized (Barker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013). Polyamorous relationships have been viewed as "unstable, psychologically damaging, immature, and selfish" (Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013). Furthermore, the individuals that participate in polyamorous relationships are stigmatized with being promiscuous, shallow, narcissistic, and egocentric (Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2006). This implies that polyamorous people have an "unreasonable number of sexual partners;" however research has indicated that

individuals in polyamorous relationships “tend to have fewer sexual partners than people who practice monogamy” (Klesse, 2006, p. 568).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceptions of Polyamorous Relationships

Stigmatized

Monogamy has been presented as the norm and people have been strongly socialized to conform to the principles of monogamy. Other types of relationships risk being harshly judged and shunned by our society (Barker, 2005; McCoy et al., 2014). These other types of relationships are also seen in a negative light (Cohen, 2016; Labriola, 1999). Society uses negative language to describe and discuss polyamorous relationships, "using terms of betrayal like 'unfaithfulness' or of immorality like 'cheating' or 'adultery,'" (Wolkomir, 2015, p. 419). Consensual non-monogamy has been associated with many negative stigmas; it is perceived as deviant behavior and disapproved of (Barker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013). Furthermore, researchers argue that monogamous people view polyamory more negatively because it contradicts the "one true love" ideology (Medora, Larson, Hortacˇsu, & Dave, 2002; Matsick et al., 2014).

Monogamy is associated with stability and maturity, (Stelboum, 1999, p. 44), whereas consensual non-monogamy is viewed as "unstable, psychologically damaging, immature, and selfish" (Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013). Due to the patriarchal philosophy associated to monogamy, women identifying as consensual non-monogamous receive more scrutiny, being perceived as engaging in "transgressive behavior, [which is] punishable in some cultures by death," (Stelboum, 1999, p. 44). Those involved in consensual non-monogamy are considered "fundamentally flawed," (Conley et al., 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin & Conley, 2013; Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2015). However, Rubel & Bogaert (2015) reported that research has not reliably found a correlation between consensual non-monogamy and poorer

psychological well-being (p. 975).

Polyamorous relationships are frequently judged as “less sexually satisfying, lower in trustworthiness and morality, and more sexually risky” when compared to monogamy (Hutzler et al., 2016). Research indicates that monogamist people assume individuals in polyamorous relationships are unsatisfied in their relationships and lead polyamorous relationships to more likely be criticized (Matsick et al., 2014; Conley et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2015). Studies have suggested that monogamous people believe polyamorous people are “in greater need of counseling,” (Matsick et al., 2014, p. 342). Contrary to these beliefs, research has found that polyamorous relationships are as satisfying and fruitful as monogamous relationships (Hosking, 2013; Cohen, 2016). Cohen (2016) argues that society’s “heterocentric view of monogamy [created] the idea that individuals cannot be satisfied in open relationship[s],” (p. 300). Additionally, literature does not support the assumption that polyamorous relationships are harmful to psychological well-being (Rubel & Bogaert, 2015, p.979). In a study completed by Barker (2011), no difference was found between people in polyamorous relationships and those in monogamous relationships in the areas of mental health, attachment style and personality (as cited in Cohen, 2016, p. 299).

There is an assumption that individuals partnered in a polyamorous relationship have unresolved problems and/or are unhappy in their relationship together (Matsick et al., 2014; Cohen, 2016). Other reasons for participating in a polyamorous relationship are stereotyped as it being “a free for all... that an individual is moving from person to person,” to “engage in casual, recreational sex rather than meaningful, emotional and sexual relationships,” (Cohen, 2014; Matsick et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2016). Polyamorous people are stigmatized as not seeking long term commitments, but being strictly sexual and pleasure focused, thus leading to an

unreasonable number of sexual partners (Klesse, 2006, p. 577).

Despite the general consensus, polyamory "emphasizes that having multiple lovers does not mean "sleeping around" but instead represents engagement in several caring, intimate, honest, equal, and nonexclusive relationships," (Aguilar, 2013, p. 109). Research has shown that participating in polyamorous relationships is more focused on getting to know others and does not correlate to poor need fulfillment by their primary partner (Cohen, 2016; Mitchell, Bartholomew & Cobb, 2014). These findings can contribute to destigmatizing polyamory "because they suggest individuals can have fulfilling, satisfying, and committed relationships with multiple partners without those relationships having a negative influence," (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Promiscuity

These negative perceptions from the mononormative society have led individuals that participate in polyamorous relationships being stigmatized as promiscuous (Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2006). As Aguilar (2013) noted, "being judged as promiscuous [is] a label with more serious consequences for women than men," (p. 118). Researchers have identified promiscuity/promiscuous as a derogatory term with strong negative overtones that are often associated to a lack of an ethical value system and responsibility, and immorality (Klesse, 2006; Aguilar, 2013; Jordon et al., 2016). There are implications that 'promiscuous polyamorists' have an "unreasonable number of sexual partners," and "do it with anyone," (Klesse, 2016; Aguilar, 2013; Jordon et al., 2016).

Contrary to these beliefs, research has indicated that individuals in polyamorous relationships actually have fewer sexual partners than monogamist individuals (Klesse, 2006, p. 568). The polyamorous discourse emphasizes that "having many sexual relationships is not the

point of polyamory... [it is] about commitment and emotional closeness... and an honest interest in building intimate long-term relationships," (Klesse, 2006; Aguilar, 2013). Klesse (2016) discusses the idea of polyamory as a form of "responsible non-monogamy," which can exist when each partner is cognizant of and consents to the non-monogamous aspect of the relationship arrangement (p. 571). This definition highlights the two essential tenets within polyamory of honesty and consensus and rejects the belief that polyamory is strictly sex and pleasure focused (Klesse, 2006, p. 565). The idea of 'responsible non-monogamy' is constructed on "challeng[ing] the negative assumptions of non-monogamous people as promiscuous, over-sexed, self-obsessed, [and] irrational," (Klesse, 2006, p. 577).

Jealousy within the Relationship.

Another theme that presented itself within the literature was the feeling of jealousy and its presentation in polyamorous relationships. It is assumed that jealousy will arise in polyamorous relationships and emerge when one partner "feel[s] threatened... [because] their partner [is] having their needs met by other intimate partners," (Mint, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2014). Deri (2015) and Pines (2013) describe jealousy as "generated by feelings of ownership and betrayal," and Mint (2010) notes that jealousy within polyamorous relationships is an issue of power (as cited in Jordon et al., 2016, p. 6).

Aguilar (2013), discusses how people experience jealousy when there is a fear of their partner straying, which emphasizes the mononormative tenets that monogamy and jealousy is inherent (p. 107). However, other researchers identify jealousy as a "cultural byproduct of monogamy reinforced by the dominant society... [and is] dictated by cultural norms that tell us how to feel," (Aguilar, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014; Jordon et al., 2016). In point of fact, research has found that jealousy is less harmful and less frequent in polyamorous relationships (Conley et

al., 2013; Moors et al., 2015).

Jealousy is regarded as a healthy experience in polyamory and seen as "something that is manageable rather than intolerable," (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015). Polyamorists do not see jealousy as a "roadblock" in the relationship or an innate response of an additional relationship, "but instead report positive reactions... that can contribute to personal development and bring a couple closer together," (Conley et al., 2013; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015). Research suggests that jealousy can be addressed openly in polyamorous relationships since the other relationships are in the open (Jordon et al., 2016, p. 6). This openness about jealousy leads to a process of overcoming and transforming jealousy into the feelings of happiness and enjoyment when a loved partner experiences pleasure, love, and closeness with another person; several researchers describe this new emotional phenomenon as compersion (Aguilar, 2013; Jordon et al., 2016; Wolfe, 2003; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015; de Visser & McDonald, 2007; McCoy et al., 2014).

Infidelity

In the realm of mononormativity, jealousy is a substantial concern due to the fear of infidelity and cheating. Some researchers make the clarification that 'infidelity' is specific languaging for unfaithfulness, cheating behaviors and/or non-consensual extra dyadic relations within a legally monogamous marriage (Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Henrich & Trawinski, 2016; Bairstow, 2017). For this study, the term 'infidelity' will be used to identify any of these behaviors in romantic relationships, regardless of marital status. Research has shown that jealousy was rated higher and more intense when there was a history of infidelity in past relationships (Cohen, 2016, p. 300). Furthermore, results revealed that previously unfaithful partners were more jealous and viewed more behaviors as cheating (Cohen, 2016, p. 311).

In point of fact, “infidelity is one of the top reasons people seek counseling... as approximately a third of monogamous partnerships are touched by affairs,” (Conley et al, 2013; McCoy et al., 2014). Research has shown that there are higher rates of sexual infidelity than sexual faithfulness (Sartorius, 2004, p. 82). One study found that about a quarter of married men reported engaging in extramarital affairs, while other research “suggests between 1.5% and 3.6%” of married individuals have cheated on their spouse within the last year. (Anderson, 2010, p. 853). Furthermore, researchers reported that “once men [have] cheated, eight out of ten do so again,” (Anderson, 2010, p. 853).

However, the concept of ‘infidelity’ differs in polyamory due to their definition of the term (Rubel & Bogaert, 2015; Conley et al., 2013). Polyamory “eliminate[s] the conflict... [of] whether it is appropriate to be attracted to [and to engage with] others,” and “accepts that it is possible to love many people simultaneously,” (Conley et al., 2013; Barker, 2005). Thus, polyamory does not fit the definition of infidelity or cheating due to the consensual agreement to be involved in extra dyadic relations (Conley et al., 2013; Cohen, 2016; Barker, 2005).

Although polyamory does not fit the definition, society still considers any behaviors that do not align with the views of mononormativity as cheating (Mint, 2004, p. 65). This position “assume[s] that non-monogamy is the same as infidelity,” (McLean et al., 2014, p. 96). Thus, polyamorous relationships are perceived as unfaithful or adultery, insinuating that maintaining multiple relationships at the same time is wrong (McLean, 2004; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Wolkomir, 2015).

Challenging Norms of Mononormativity

While mononormativity is the dominant ideology in society, there are alternatives to this relationship dynamic that challenge these tenets. Mitchell et al. (2014) describe how polyamory

"violates strong norms in Western culture that demand monogamy and restrict romantic love to monogamous couples," (p. 329). Barker's (2005) research involved interviewing polyamorous individuals and many "viewed their polyamorous behavior as "natural," spoke of being "wired this way," and said they "couldn't help" their desire for multiple relationships," (as cited in Aguilar, 2013, p. 110). Polyamorous relationships challenge the tenets of monogamy and the idea that one can only be happy and satisfied within a monogamous relationship.

Monogamy is Patriarchal

Another theme identified within the literature is the concept that the dominant ideology of monogamy is patriarchal and grants men with unearned privileges (Augilar, 2013; Jordon et al., 2016; Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2006; Stelboum, 1999). Robinson (1997) describes how monogamy "privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy," (as cited in Aguilar, 2013, p. 108). Researchers argue that monogamy originates from the patriarchal culture which promotes male superiority and identifies marriage as male ownership of a woman (Jordon et al., 2016; Augilar, 2013; Stelboum, 1999).

Klesse (2016) identified how even within certain forms of consensual non-monogamy, this patriarchal theme is present; for example, swinging is typically referred to as "wife-swapping," which indicates this as "a male-centred (hetero)sexual interaction based on the exchange of women," (p. 575). However, rebuffing the dominant ideology of monogamy was a rebellion against this possessive patriarchal relationship design (Aguilar, 2013; Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2016). One study identified monogamy as "a restrictive tool used by the patriarchy to thwart women's sexual energies," during the feminist upsurge in the 1960's and 1970's (Stelboum, 1999, p. 44).

Sexual Liberties for Women

Aguilar (2013) describes how there is a meaningful overlap between the tenets of polyamory and feminism in that "both connect monogamy and patriarchal ownership of women, and both emphasize women's sexual agency and liberation," (p. 109). Research argues that consensual non-monogamy revolutionized gendered power relationships and grants women freedom within their sexual liberties (Aguilar, 2013, Robinson, 1997; Barker, 2005). McCoy et al. (2014) discussed how polyamorous women "felt empowered by their greater freedom to make their own sexual choices, create new roles for themselves, and express themselves sexually," (p. 136). Research also found that women in monogamous relationships are more dependent and isolated from their communities than women in consensual non-monogamous relationships (McCoy et al., 2014; Barker & Richie, 2007; Aguilar, 2013).

Consensual Non-monogamy (CNM)

Within the literature, relationships in which individuals are knowingly involved with more than one person is frequently referred to as consensual non-monogamy (CNM) (Cohen, 2016; Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014; Conley et al., 2013). Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) is defined as "engaging in sexual and/or romantic relationships with more than one person at a time, and with the full knowledge and consent of all persons involved," and is used as an umbrella term to include the various different relationship configurations relationships that fit this definition, such as polyamory (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014). A key component of polyamory emphasized in the literature is the role of honesty and agreed consent within the relationship to be romantically, sexually and/or emotionally involved with other individuals (Cohen, 2016; Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016;

Matsick et al., 2014; Conley et al., 2013). Duplassie & Fairbrother (2016) argue that involvement with individuals outside of the relationship without the consent of the other person is considered non-consensual non-monogamy, or hidden non-monogamy (p. 2).

Hidden Non-monogamy

Barker (2005) reported that "monogamous people were threatened by polyamory because it represented an honest way of having more than one lover, something many monogamous people might do, or consider doing, but might not... due to the dominant cultural rules around infidelity," (p. 81). However, statistics show that cheating rates have increased, implying that monogamous individuals may not actually follow the tenets of mononormativity (Conley et al., 2013, p. 25). Researchers have defined these cheating behaviors in monogamous relationships as "non-consensual non-monogamy," or "hidden non-monogamy" (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Mint, 2004; Mogilski, Memering, Welling and Shackelford, 2017). This hidden non-monogamy allows the adulterer to maintain a monogamous identity while not acting monogamously (Mint, 2004; Barker, 2005).

Polyamory is Oppressed

Research has discussed the discrimination and challenges polyamorous people have endured (Cassidy & Wong, 2017; Jordon et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2014). Some have argued that polyamory will destroy the institution of marriage (Aguilar, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014) and is relevant in the "slippery slope" argument that "if same-sex marriage is legalized then the next development would be multiple relationships becoming more prevalent," (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016). Cassidy & Wong (2018) point out that while same-sex couples now have this availability, it took "years of marginalization and oppression as a result of not receiving such benefits easily or earlier reifies privilege for monogamous relationships," (p. 125). This implies

there is a potential for polyamorous individuals to be denied benefits that are allotted to monogamous and legally recognized partnerships (Cassidy & Wong, 2018, p. 126).

Individuals in polyamorous relationships face the risk of discrimination in different areas of their lives, such as in the workplace, school and health benefits (Cassidy & Wong, 2018; Jordon et al., 2016; Conley et al., 2013). Research found that there are no state and/or federal laws that protect polyamorous people from discrimination, which means there is no legal consequences for those that discriminate against them (Conley et al., 2013, p. 6). For example, "job termination based on one's status as [polyamorous] ... would be perfectly legal," (Conley et al., 2013, p. 6).

A partner that is not legally recognized can be denied benefits, such as government tax deductions, work-provided medical insurance, and parental right because there is no acknowledgment of multiple-partner relationships (Jordon et al., 2016; Robinson, 2013; Conley et al., 2013; Klesse 2006; Peace, 2012). Due to the effects of discrimination and oppression, polyamorous people may feel they have to live "double lives," and keep their relationship status private, or "closeted" (Jordon et al., 2016; Peace, 2012).

Research Question

While there has been some research on polyamorous relationships, a vast majority of it pertains specifically to studying the population of gay men (Hosking, 2013; Hoffa, Beoughera, Chakravartya, Darbesb, & Neilands, 2010; Bettinger, 2006; van Eeden-Moorefield, Malloy, & Benson, 2016; Klesse, 2006; Cohen, 2016). The second most studied population for polyamorous relationships are lesbians and bisexual men and women (Labriola, 1999; Klesse, 2006; Robinson, 2013). There has been limited research specifically on heterosexual individuals that engage in polyamorous relationships; furthermore, the research that has been conducted focuses primarily

on the male's perspective (Aguilar, 2013; Barker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Fierman & Poulsen, 2014; Klesse, 2006). For example, within the polyamorous structure of swinging is a more commonly known practice recognized as "wife-swapping"; this implies a male-dominant interaction based on the exchange of a man's woman (Klesse, 2006, p. 575).

This study uses an interpretive phenomenological approach to better understand the lived experience of heterosexual women in polyamorous relationships. While exploring this phenomenon, researchers sought to understand the decision process for participating in polyamorous relationships, explore the boundaries heterosexual women created to regulate and maintain multiple relationships, and most important, to give these women the opportunity to demystify any negative stereotypes associated to polyamory. This study will help clinicians better understand how to work with heterosexual women who identify as being in a polyamorous relationship and allow these women to destigmatize polyamory through education and insight. This study explored the following research questions:

1) What is the perspective of polyamorous relationships from heterosexual women?
2) How do heterosexual women experience polyamorous relationships?

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Design of the Study

This study used a phenomenological research design, which is intended to encompass the lived experience of individuals involved in a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Interpretive phenomenology focuses on exploring and understanding how participants make sense of important life experiences without researchers making assumptions about the phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn 2007). This approach is most fitting because it gives participants the opportunity to express this phenomenon on their own terms. From this study, researchers gained insight into how polyamorous heterosexual woman make meaning of this phenomenon.

Participants

Participants were considered eligible for this study by meeting the following criteria: a) identify as a heterosexual woman, b) identify as being polyamorous, c) is currently in a polyamorous relationship; "polyamorous relationship" was defined as "maintaining relationships with more than one person at a time, and with the full knowledge and consent of all persons involved;" and d) between the ages of 22 and 38.

Twenty-eight women responded to the recruitment posts, of which twelve women did not respond to follow-up emails regarding their interest in the study, one woman withdrew following screening questionnaire (Appendix C) due to time constraints, and sixteen women who completed the screening questionnaire, demographic information (Appendix E) and a signed consent form (Appendix D); however, eight of these sixteen women did not respond to follow-up emails to schedule an interview. In total, eight women took part in a telephone interview regarding their experience as a heterosexual polyamorous woman. These interviews were

recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analyzing and coding. A detailed chart of demographic information can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographics*

Participants*	Age	Sexual Orientation	Marital Status	Current number of partners	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	Race	Employment Status	Education
Amy	30	Heterosexual	Married	2	No	Caucasian	Full time	Some college
Brenda	38	Heterosexual	Married	2	No	Caucasian	Self-employed	Some college
Denise	32	Heterosexual	Married	2	No	Caucasian	Full time	Bachelors
Elizabeth	22	Heterosexual	Single	2	Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano	Caucasian	Full time	Bachelors
Fiona	36	Heterosexual	Married	3	No	Caucasian	Part time	Bachelors
Grace	35	Heterosexual	Married	3	No	Caucasian	Full time	Some college
Hellen	34	Heterosexual	Married	2	No	Caucasian	Stay at home mom	Graduate or Professional degree
Karen	31	Heterosexual	Married	4	No	Caucasian	Full time	Bachelors

*Names of the participants have been changed for confidentiality purposes

Procedures

For this study, internet forums were used to recruit participants. Researchers requested permission from moderators (Appendix A) to post about recruitment to gain participants (Appendix B). Potential participants received screening questions (Appendix C) to be completed and returned to be considered for this study. Participants who met the research participation criteria received an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D and E) via email. The consent form outlines the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits to participation, the participants' ability to withdraw from the study at any point, and confidentiality. A demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) was used to collect participant's age, location, gender identity, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, nationality, education, occupation, employment status, household income, relationship status, any previous marriages or children, and current partner relationship duration.

Data Collection and Analysis

Researchers conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with a series of open-ended questions (Appendix G) that lasted approximately an hour. Each participant's interview was recorded and then transcribed word for word. An interpretive phenomenological approach was taken in analyzing the collected data. This approach was most fitting to allow participants to express their experiences in polyamorous relationships in their own terms. Researchers coded interviews first with an initial coding of the data and then more thoroughly with line-by-line coding. A combination of open coding and in vivo coding were used in the analysis of the transcribed interviews.

In vivo coding was used to describe how participants defined polyamory and what it meant to them. Researchers felt it was important to use in vivo coding for these themes to ensure an accurate representation of participants experience was being presented in how they define polyamory. Open coding was used to organize similar experiences into concepts that were then organized into themes and subthemes that emerged. For example, the quotes "Any outside relationship would need to be using condoms," and "the reasonably common [rule] about needing protection," were coded and organized into the subtheme of practicing safe sex.

Several themes emerged during the analysis of the collected data, including themes previously discussed in the literature. The major themes researchers found include how participants define polyamory and its significance to them, their decision process in identifying as polyamorous and transition, the experience of managing multiple relationships, and stressors related to polyamory.

Validity

To ensure reliability and validity, researchers used bracketing to ensure objectivity throughout the analysis and coding of data. The semi-structured interview and open-ended questions reduced the chance of leading participants to responses. Additionally, researchers and thesis chair independently coded two interviews and compared coded to identify similarities. Once it was determined similar codes were found, researchers completed coding the rest of the interviews and consulted with the thesis chair throughout the coding process.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Findings

This study explored the lived experience of polyamorous relationship from the perspective of heterosexual polyamorous women. Participants were asked to described their lived experience in polyamorous relationships to gain insight into how they make meaning of this phenomenon. The data was organized into themes which include the significance of polyamory to the participants, their decision process, explore rules and boundaries to maintain multiple relationships and misconceptions made about their lifestyle. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the themes and the number of participants that experienced each theme.

Table 2: *Themes and Thematic Categories (n = 8)*

Theme and Thematic Categories	*n*	%
1. Significance of Polyamory to Participants		
a. Freedom	5	63
b. Relationships grow and develop naturally	3	38
c. Not restricted	4	50
2. Decision Process: Identifying as Polyamorous		
a. Always this way	5	63
b. Monogamous by default	3	38
c. Discord with monogamy	4	50
d. Polyamory made more sense	6	75
3. Transition from Monogamy to Polyamory		
a. No transition	5	63
b. Difficult and confusing	3	38
4. Managing Multiple Relationships		
a. Managing jealousy		
i. Do not feel jealousy	3	38

Table 2: *Themes and Thematic Categories (n = 8)*

Theme and Thematic Categories	*n*	%
ii. Identify primary and secondary emotions	5	63
b. Rules and Boundaries		
i. Practice safe sex	8	100
c. Important Characteristics to Healthy Relationships		
i. Communication	8	100
ii. Honesty	5	63
iii. Trust	6	75
iv. Just like monogamy	4	50
5. Support Networks		
a. Partners	8	100
b. Metamours	5	63
c. Family	4	50
d. Community	4	50
6. Stressors in Polyamorous Relationships		
a. Time	7	88
b. Finding other partners	5	63
c. Closeted polyamory	6	75
d. Family concerns	4	50
e. Family conflict	5	63
f. Assumptions		
i. Easy sex	7	88
ii. Bisexual	7	88
7. Children		
a. Concern for effect on children	5	63
b. Effects of children on the relationships	3	38

Significance of Polyamory to Participants

Participants described polyamory having a significant meaning for them, which several described as freedom. Fiona stated “Freedom. It means to me, being able to live my authentic self. And to fill my life with love in a way that I am not able to do through monogamy.” Similarly, Amy described being polyamorous as:

> Freedom to let relationships with people who come into my life develop naturally… The ability to live a life true to myself… But when I can just be me and just talk about my husband and my partner and my boyfriends, you know. It's freeing. It's-- it's wonderful.

Participants emphasized the importance of allowing relationships to develop and grow naturally, as well as not feeling limited or restricted. For example, Grace stated “it's just the ability to be me and to allow my friendships and relationships grow and be what they are naturally as opposed to put confines on them.” Likewise, Hellen reported “I am free to explore the relationships around me and that I'm able-- that I'm not restricted. At no part do my partners ever restrict who I can and cannot love.”

Participants expressed freedom and not restricted differently in terms of the significance to them. Freedom was described in how polyamory made them feel, whereas not restricted encompassed not being limited by mononormative norms, not feeling restricted in their relationship, or restricted by their partners. Several participants described having multiple partners as “what felt comfortable” to them. Fiona described it as “I feel complete. I don't feel like something's missing from me anymore.”

Decision Process: Identifying as Polyamorous

Participants discussed the experience of how this phenomenon surfaced for them and various themes regarding the decision to participate in polyamorous relationships emerged. Most

participants described polyamory as something that came naturally to them. For example, Hellen described polyamory as “I have always been this way. It was never really a decision.” Other participants stated they were “monogamous by default,” and did not know they could challenge the tenets of mononormativity. Several participants discussed their discord with monogamy and how they could not conform to its’ rules. Some participants fell into a combination of each theme, such as Amy, who described her introduction to polyamory as:

> …a light bulb, basically like one of those cartoon moments, a light bulb going off above your head. "Wow. This is a possibility. People can do this. You're allowed to do this. Cool." This makes a whole hell of a lot of sense to me, more so than the monogamy culture that I've grown up with, which always seemed oddly co-dependent to me and very oddly, like, sometimes to the point of unhealthy codependency, attachment, jealousy, possessive weirdness, which is very not my thing… I was monogamous by default.

Karen reported her and her husband “never really saw monogamy as especially rational, but we'd never even known that it was something that we were allowed to question.” Fiona and Brenda described similar experiences and discord in being “unhappily monogamous,” and expressing their feelings clearly with their partners. Fiona reported, “before we got married, I told [my husband], ‘I can never be monogamous again. That's not a thing I'm ever willing to do again. It's not who I am, it's not what I can do.’” Denise explained her belief that people are not meant for monogamy:

> I think most people are not really designed to be monogamous to one person throughout their entire life. As we grow and age, we evolve into different people and we don't if it's realistic to expect one person to meet all of the needs you're going to have as you evolve as a person throughout your entire life.

A few participants described a phenomenon of struggling with monogamy due to falling in love with another person and assuming that meant they must not love their current partner. Fiona detailed:

> I would be in love with one person and then meet somebody else and love them too. But "oh no, that must mean I don't love the first person anymore." So, I would break up with them because obviously, if I felt feelings for somebody else, then I'm no longer in love with that person, but I would still miss that person. You know, society tells us about our one true love. And so I would give that person up. And that pattern repeated over and over and over again until I found out what polyamory was and experienced it for myself.

Furthermore, Grace expressed a sense of relief in knowing that how she felt was not unconventional and that others thought this way too.

> I realized at that point in time that the things that I thought were kind of… I don't know if 'broken' is the correct terminology, but things that I thought were weird about me and didn't fit right made more sense with polyamory. Like the fact that I could be dating somebody and love this person and still very much love another individual. And that all… before I thought, "well, that obviously means I must not love the first person as much as I thought I did." So, the realization that my feelings were not necessarily completely abnormal was kind of what drove me to want to stick with poly[amory] in future relationships.

Overall, participants expressed how monogamy was not a good fit for them and that polyamory made more sense in how they felt. Grace, among several other participants, described it as "I just didn't have the words or I didn't have the description to understand why I was feeling the way I was." A majority of participants described not knowing there were other options beside

monogamy and, upon being introduced to the concept, did their own research and educated themselves on consensual non-monogamy. Elizabeth reported “that's what got me into polyamory… after I learned about his non-monogamy. I did research on my own and I decided that the word polyamory suits me.”

Transition from Monogamy to Polyamory

Participants described the experience of shifting from monogamy to polyamory and two subthemes emerged under this category. Some participants described feeling like there was no real transition for them, whereas other participants discussed it being a confusing experience for themselves and others. Most of the participants who felt there was no transition identified as having “always been polyamorous” or were unaware of the alternatives to monogamy. For example, Hellen described “I've always had two… I had two really close male friends…that turned to two male friends that I was dating… and they both kind of knew. And then they were both okay with it. There's always been two.”

Amy reported “I [didn’t] really have much of a transition… it was less of a transition, more of like a switch clicking.” Likewise, Grace recounted:

> It almost felt like it wasn't much of a transition for me, just because… I always had the ability to have feelings for multiple people and care about them in that way. And it didn't make sense to me before, so having that information of what poly was, I'm like, “oh, this makes sense. This is what I've kind of always been.”

However, other participants described this experience as more confusing and slower for them.

Fiona described the transition as “long and slow and horrific.” She explained how her husband from a previous marriage wanted to try swinging, and how she and the other man developed an emotional connection. Fiona recounted that while her ex-husband was open to her

exploring this relationship, “we put all sorts of rules surrounding this relationship… that would constantly change. And so, it ended in this big, fiery mess of awfulness because nothing [could] thrive under those circumstances. It was just bad all around.” However, from this experience, Fiona stated “it did show me that having an emotional connection and having a loving connection with more than one person was something that I really yearned for.”

Brenda and Denise described similar experiences in exploring polyamory. Brenda described polyamory as an ambiguous position between a physical connection and an emotional connection:

> [Polyamory is] more about having an emotional connection to someone rather than, say swinging, but that's kind of a blurry line, you know. Because you can start out swinging and then catch feelings for somebody and then there you are. Or you can swing for years and never meet anybody you're interested in having a romantic relationship with.

Brenda reported an 11-year time span in which her only partner was her husband, stating “that was mostly circumstantial… I didn't meet anybody… it was more, you know, me just not being interested more than anything else.” However, Brenda recounted the experience of bringing another partner in after so long:

> Those 11 years of monogamy, I think [my husband] sort of relaxed and thought, "oh, well, maybe she's over it," or something… It wasn't a thing that he had to think about. It wasn't a thing that he had to work through his feelings about. It was something that I told him when we first met and then never really went anywhere. So, you know, after 11 years of that, to have me fall in love with someone was a little jarring. And it had originally started with him wanting to swing. So, it was kind of his idea which I think it made it

> harder. You know, "Here I brought this person in and now my wife has fallen in love with him. I've done this to myself," kind of deal.

In addition to navigating this with her partners, Brenda discussed reminding her family of her polyamorous status.

> When I told my family about my new relationship, I kind of had to remind them that, "hey, this is kind of the way things have always been for me. I realize that it's been a while and you guys probably forgot. But, you know, this shouldn't be a surprise."

Overall, Brenda reported her family was supportive; “My dad was very positive… He likes both of my partners.” As for Denise, she explained how she and her husband were not sexually compatible and discussed exploring having other sexual partners. However, her relationship with this other partner evolved into a more intimate and emotional connection. Denise recounted:

> This is all of our only poly[amorous] experience, and so I'm not super experienced with poly[amory]…I think it could have happened better, for sure. It was a very confusing mess in the beginning… It was really slow. It’s been a pretty long transition… So basically, it was like a slow evolution of, like, "maybe this is a temporary thing" that went to "or maybe this is a more permanent thing" to "maybe this actually works pretty well for us."

Denise continued:

> And so, it was a lot of navigating where [new partner] fit in. He's still trying to figure out, after six years, like, "is this something that is going to work long term?" Or would he actually prefer a monogamous relationship, where it's more traditional, you know, with a wife and kids and all of that… [Right now] we are all communicating and happy and comfortable. So, not really sure where it will end up.

Denise's experience indicates that not only the transition into polyamory can be a confusing situation, but maintaining multiple relationships long term can be a confusing process as well.

Managing Multiple Relationships

Each participant has had their own unique experience in determining how polyamory works for them and their relationships. Several participants mentioned that they "were not making a blanket statement for polyamorous people," or how "this is merely what works for us. This might not work for everyone." Participants described several ways in which they manage their multiple relationships. Several subthemes emerged with this category, including relationship structures, managing jealousy, negotiating rules and boundaries, and important characteristics in maintaining healthy polyamorous relationships.

Relationships structure. Before describing how they manage their relationships, it is important to understand key terms participants used to describe their experience. A detailed chart of these terms and definitions can be found on Table 3.

Table 3: *Terms and Definitions (n = 8)*

Term	Definition	*n*	%
1. Polyamory	a. Ethical non-monogamy	6	75
	b. Focused on building emotionally intimate relationships	5	63
	c. Consent focused	8	100
	d. Loving multiple people	8	100
	e. Being open to new relationships	5	63
	f. To have more than one loving relationship at a time	4	50
	g. Ability to have more than one relationship at the same time with full consent and knowledge of everyone involved.	3	38
2. Ethical Non-monogamy	Another term for consensual non-monogamy; as being involved in sexual and/or romantic relationships with more than one individual concurrently with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved.	6	75
3. Relationship Escalator	Traditional steps in a relationship. i.e., meet, date, kiss, have sex, move in together, get married, have children, etc.	2	25
4. Non-Hierarchical Solo Polyamory	Having multiple relationships that is not primary-styled (i.e. no primary or secondary partners), nor are bound by the relationship escalator (i.e. not necessarily looking to live together, get married or join finances)	1	13

5.	Closed Triad	Relationship composed of three people who are romantically connected to each other.	1	13
6.	Poly-V	One person has two partners who are not involved with each other	2	25

Table 3: Terms and Definitions (n = 8)

Term		Definition	*n*	%
7.	Relatively Closed	Partners are not currently seeking other partners; however, it is an option that would require a conversation	1	13
8.	Poly-saturated	Not currently looking for more partners due to feeling fulfilled with the number of current partners.	1	13
9.	Polycule	A connected network of people in polyamorous relationships	4	50
10.	Metamours	A partner of a partner	8	100
11.	Kitchen Table Poly	A friendly and open relationship with metamours.	4	50
12.	Parallel Poly	A non-existent, or intentionally avoided, relationship with metamours.	2	25

A frequent and important principle among how the participants defined polyamory revolved around consent and behaving ethically. All eight participants refer to consent and/or ethical behavior in how they defined polyamory. For example, Amy stated how "[Polyamory is] a very consent focused culture. Very focused on the ethical part of ethical non-monogamy."

The term ethical non-monogamy used by participants is synonymous to previous literatures use of the term consensual non-monogamy (CNM) and defined as being sexually and/or romantically involved with more than one person simultaneously with the full knowledge and consent of all persons involved (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014). Elizabeth and Grace had similar definitions for polyamory, describing it as being open to developing new relationships and having multiple partners concurrently. Karen highlighted the significance of respect in her definition of polyamory, "you know, the three-word definition, ethical non-monogamy, is really all there is to it. But it's so much bigger than that. It's about respect for other people. About respect for yourself. It's about honesty and consent."

Furthermore, participants emphasized the important difference in polyamory from other forms of consensual non-monogamy with the tenet of the ability to love multiple people. For example, Elizabeth reported that polyamory was about "loving multiple people. I think it's significant that polyamory is about love and relationships and not just about sex." Grace described her experience as, "…both my husband and I feel that love and relationships aren't confining, they're not binding…you do not run out of love. You don't run out of feelings for people." Similarly, Brenda stated:

> I guess I had a hard time putting limits on relationships. It's not that I have to date more than one person to be happy. It's that I feel uncomfortable saying this is the last time I will ever fall in love with someone. But I also don't want to leave the relationships that I'm in.

Participants discussed different structures that fit for their relationships and lifestyle. Elizabeth described her relationship structure as "non-hierarchical solo poly," which refers to "the practice of having multiple relationships that is not primary-styled (i.e. no primary or secondary partners), nor are bound by the relationship escalator (i.e. not necessarily looking to live together, get married or join finances)," (Duck-Chong, 2017). Karen defined the term "relationship escalator," as "the steps that you take in a traditional relationship. You meet, you go on a date, you kiss, you sex, you move in together, you get married, you have kids, you divorce." Elizabeth explains "I'm not planning to get married anytime soon or to settle down any time soon. I think even if I was monogamous, I would be saying that."

Brenda reported she is in a "closed triad," which is a relationship composed of three people who are romantically connected to each other. Hellen and Denise described their relationship structure as a "poly-v," in which one person has two partners who are not involved

with each other. Denise described her relationship structure as “relatively closed,” and elaborated that “they both don't have any other partners. But it's not like off-limits for that to happen. It would just need…to be a discussion.” Furthermore, Hellen stated “I'm not looking for any other relationships because I have my two husbands and I'm--they call it poly-saturated. I'm saturated. That's good for me.”

The remaining participants’ relationship structures would fall under the term “polycule.” A polycule is “a connected network of people in polyamorous relationships” (Lemoine, 2019), or a polyamorous group of people linked through their consensual non-monogamous relationships. The term is a blend of the words “polyamory” and “molecule” due to the similarity of this polyamorous network to “a model of a chemical molecule, which uses lines, circular shapes, or symbols to indicate bonds between atoms,” (Lemoine, 2019). Karen describes get-togethers with her polycule, stating “it’s really nice having the whole polycule together, because it's a relatively small one, and it’s a great way to hang around and chat with people.”

In addition to the relationship structures between the romantic partners is the relationship between metamours. Elizabeth educated researchers on the term metamour, which refers to “a partner of a partner.” Furthermore, Amy discussed the terms “kitchen table poly” and “parallel poly” for the types of dynamics within metamour relationships. Amy explained, “those are pretty much the two where it's basically you talk to and you're friendly with metamours - Kitchen table; Or you don't really interact with them at all - Parallel.” In her own experience, Amy stated, “my partner is also friends with my husband… I like being friends with my partner's partners because they have good taste and they know cool people.”

Karen described her experience with metamour relationships as sibling-like:

> I dunno how to describe the relationship because it's a really unique one. It is like-- it is kind of like a sibling relationship because you can't choose them and they're about your age. But at the same time, it's also-- like it different because your partner chose them. You probably have something in common or, like, you know, you're probably going to like each other anyway.

On the other side of the spectrum, Hellen recounted an experience in which "[both of my husbands] have dated other people who just want nothing to do with me or my family. They don't even want to know that I exist." However, Hellen emphasized the importance of at least being on speaking level, "because what happens if one of [the guys] is traveling and something happens, well I need to be able to call you to let you know because you're going to want to know what's going on with him." Based on the participants responses, the metamour relationship varies from person to person and relationship to relationship; there is no standard.

Managing jealousy. Participants emphasized the importance of communicating feelings of jealousy with their partners and being open to discussing such occurrences. Some participants discussed jealousy being a non-issue, stating how they or their partners just do not experience the emotion. Grace stated "When it comes to my husband, I don't think either him or I have ever had jealousy pick up with the two of us. There's just compersion." Many participants described managing jealousy in terms of identifying the primary and secondary emotions related to the triggered feelings. As for Grace and her boyfriend, she explained:

> If jealousy spikes up for something, there is something that is triggering it. It is not necessarily jealous of a person or yourself because of things. Like we will try to focus in on the actual reason behind jealousy.

Fiona explained that “being in a polyamorous lifestyle does not necessarily mean that you will never, ever feel jealousy.” Fiona expressed how the consequential behaviors are more important than the emotion itself:

> I don't think that jealousy is necessary--necessarily a bad thing. Feelings in and of themselves are never bad. It's how you act on them that matters… I always communicate it to my partner, but I communicate it also with a thoughtful response of "Why am I feeling jealousy? Okay, and what's the reason behind that? And what's the reason behind that? And what's the reason behind that?"

Hellen and Karen related jealousy to “an emotion like anger,” and “identifying the root cause of the emotion.” Hellen emphasized, “[it’s about] attacking the root of it and figuring out what's really going on. And then by doing that, it pretty much takes care of the jealousy. Jealousy is a symptom, not a problem. It is not the root problem.”

Rules and boundaries. Participants were asked if they followed any pre-set rules or boundaries within their relationships. Every participant discussed the importance of sexual safety and using protection. When asked about rules or boundaries in general, Karen replied “there's nothing really formal beyond the umm, like, the reasonably common one about needing protection.” Likewise, Grace stated “rules about simple things like protection, you know. Sexual safety is incredibly important.”

Furthermore, a few participants described wanting to know their partners sexual histories and obtaining documentation of STD testing. For example, Elizabeth stated:

> In the past I've been asking people verbally about their STD history and testing history, and then they'll tell me, like, "I'm clean" or "I think I'm clean" or "I've been tested in the

> past year or something." And I'd like to be able to see those records or at least have some kind of proof that they've done the test recently and that it came back clean.

Similarly, a few participants discussed trying to have a child and this rule changing slightly with those circumstances. Fiona reported:

> Currently, since we're trying to have a child, it's use protection with anybody else, always. When we were not trying to have a child, it was use protection until you trust them and know their sexual history and everyone's been tested.

In addition to safe sex practices, some participants discussed other rules or boundaries that worked for their specific relationship dynamics. For example, Hellen explained:

> We all have a house rule of if you're dating anybody, you have to be dating them for at least six months before they come to the house because we can't have random people coming in and out of our children's lives.

Grace discussed the importance of keeping her family informed of her whereabouts, stating "I will just disappear for a weekend. And with [my] husband and kids, I can't do that…I keep reminding myself, 'I need to check in. There are other people that matters here.'" Lastly, Amy discusses keeping promises and respecting their partners time with other partners:

> The only other thing is, don't ditch me. If you've got plans, those plans are sacrosanct, don't-- Not without a real good reason would you ditch someone. And definitely not canceling one date to go on another date with someone else, which has never been a problem for us. Also not interrupting the other partners date time without a real good reason. – Amy

Overall, rules and boundaries within relationships were focused mainly on sexual safety; this was the only boundary that all participants bought up and identified as a hard rule. Other boundaries

discussed were dependent on the relationship structure or dynamic and varied person to person. Hellen commented how the rules and boundaries in her relationships is what works for her family and partners, but that it is not the only way; “And not all poly[amorous] people act [this] way.”

Important characteristics in maintaining healthy polyamorous relationships

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of communication. The theme of communication has been entwined with all of the themes previously discussed thus far; participants have discussed the importance of communication in identifying relationship structures, managing jealousy and in negotiating boundaries. Brenda commented when bringing in her new partner and negotiating the dynamics:

> In the last three years, we've had more serious conversations about our relationship than we did in the prior 11. And part of that has to do with opening our relationships… I don't think I have ever talked about relationships more than at any other point in my life.

When asked about general characteristics important for maintaining healthy relationships, Fiona reported “communication really is key. More so, I think, than monogamous relationships only because it's more complicated. There [are] more factors involved.” Denise emphasized the importance of communicating with partners as a group:

> I think everybody says communication. I think, for us, it's-- I've realized that the communication really needs to happen with all of us present because me being a go between--err, I think probably anybody being a go between--just leaves room for misinterpretation or doubt or whatever else.

Several participants related polyamorous relationships as being “just like with monogamous relationships” just with more people. Elizabeth reported “In general, pretty much the same things

in keeping monogamous relationships healthy. Communication, signs of affection, whatever is your agreed upon amount of commitment. All those kinds of things." Similarly, Karen described:

> I think it's the same thing as normal relationships. I shouldn't really call relationships normal, but, you know, honesty, being attentive to your partner, being forthright with your feelings, any problems you have. Communication is a big one.

Fiona described how similar polyamory is to monogamy, but argued it is more rewarding:

> Every wonderful time that you would have in a monogamous couple, you have it times however many people you're with. And when you're with a good group, when you're with a good, you know, poly-triad or polycule or whatever you want to call it. The love that's there is just so fulfilling.

Participants discussed the similarities of polyamorous relationships being just like monogamous relationships and the importance of communication, honesty and trust within all their relationships.

Support Network

A common theme discussed by all of the participants was having a larger support network, either from current partners, metamours, or family. Participants commented on the logical advantages, such as feeling they were part of a team, as well as the emotional support they receive from their partners. Fiona reported, "if my husband's not available, my boyfriend's there. Or if my boyfriend is not available, I can always vent to his wife. Or if she's not available, my husband's there. There's always somebody there to support you through tough times." Hellen discussed feeling accepted and the familial support her partners experience:

> Everyone has always been really accepting... they're completely accepting. And both my husbands get invited to all the family events and, like. Nathan's dad gets along with Oscar

> really well, and they've formed their own relationship and whatnot… it just means there's an extra mouth and a nice guy at dinner.

Karen discussed the support network within the polycule and how even though she is not directly involved with someone, they are still willing to help out:

> The thing that no one really talk[s] about is that there's tiers of favors that you're willing to do for each other… The whole polycule is sort of a bank of people who are willing to do those big favors for you because even though, like-- Stacy's partner, Victor. Like, I'm not dating him. He's not even dating one of my partners. But he's always willing to help me out… And, you know, the whole "it takes a village to raise a child," type of thing. [Polyamory] gives you a village…polyamory gives people that community.

Several participants also discussed being involved in community groups or online groups related to polyamory. Karen discussed running a polyamory meetup group in her hometown and assisting others navigate polyamory. Similarly, Elizabeth discussed attending an in-person meet up group, stating that "I like knowing that if I want to get more involved and see them all the time or start seeing leadership and showing up to the potluck, that's available, I could start doing that."

Stressors in Polyamorous Relationships

Among the common stressors found within relationships, participant described several that were specific to their polyamorous status. Subthemes emerged with this category, including time and finding partners, closeted polyamory, family conflict and concerns, and assumptions made about heterosexual polyamorous women.

Time and finding partners. Participants discussed some of the disadvantages of polyamory and the most frequent answers were about time and finding other partners. Hellen

described it as “you only have a finite amount of time.” Similarly, Brenda stated “we're busy people, it seems less-- I can't imagine that someone would be interested in "Oh, I have five minutes on a Sunday or whatever." It doesn't seem fair to anyone.” Fiona discussed how everyone has a hectic schedule and argues time is really the biggest issue.

Additionally, several participants mentioned the difficulties of finding another partner if they have the time. Amy stated that contrary to popular belief, the dating pool in the polyamorous community is limited. Elizabeth reported anxieties that other people might not be interested in dating due to her polyamorous status. Brenda and Grace discussed how everyone is looking for different things and it can be difficult to find a partner that meets a specific criterion. Furthermore, Fiona and Grace mention the difficulty of finding partners that are trustworthy; Grace reported “I have difficulty finding guys that aren't, kind of, sleazy and like cheater types.”

Closeted Polyamory. A frequently discussed stressor mentioned by over half the participants was related to not being open as polyamorous, also described as “closeted poly.” Amy reported she does not discuss her polyamorous status with people who are not going to be accepting of it and is closeted with her family. Fiona discussed how she kept it secret for a long time:

> [It] was very painful for me because I felt like a hypocrite because I'm all about being your authentic self and being out and proud of who you are, whomever that may be. And yet I was holding this secret and pretty much lying to everybody by omission.

Fiona continues, stating she has felt marginalized due to her polyamorous status, “I've lost friends who just don't understand… There are places where I can't be open about it. I'm a teacher throughout the school year, and I'm very closed about it there for fear that I'll lose my job.” Denise stated that she has not felt marginalized likely because she is not open with her

polyamorous status. She reported “we're not really out as being poly[amorous], so no. But I definitely feel like if we were out, then, yes, we would be [marginalized].”

Denise described the difficulties of hiding her relationships and that possibly causing its demise:

> I have this partner that it's really important and I've been with for a very long time, but not very many people know that… In a way [it] invalidat[es] the relationship…it's frustrating and…makes things even more difficult to figure out. And, eventually, if the situation ends, that's probably going to be the reason why, because of, like, the logistics of trying to live our lives but not having anybody be disowned by their family or get fired from their job or things like that.

Grace described the effect of hiding and others not knowing the significance of her relationship:

> So, there is an aspect of hiding, kind of hiding who we are. Hiding how we are with some of our friends. Like, our family knows the people that were involved with. They know that they're good friends of ours. They just don't understand the impact they have on our lives, which is sometimes hard and disappointing to have to deal with.

Additionally, participants discussed the effect of their families being unaware of their polyamorous status, such as their partners not being involved in major holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Family conflict and concern. While some participants struggled with their families not knowing, other participants discussed family concern, and sometimes conflict, due to being fully aware of their polyamorous status. Fiona discussed her family’s reaction to knowing she is polyamorous, stating “my family hates it and they don't like me to talk about “those people" or

"that thing that I do." They really don't like it when I bring it up." Similarly, Karen described major family conflict due to her and her partners polyamorous status:

> We sort of said, "look, we [her and her partners] need to start being invited to these things, like as a family." And his sister went completely berserk about it. Didn't want us around the children, all that sort of thing. And he didn't speak to his family for a whole year. It was really hard…I think his mom still wishes that he'd get a real girlfriend.

In spite of this, a few participants discussed family becoming more open and supportive of their polyamorous status. Karen described telling her mother about her polyamorous status, and how there was concern at first about how that would work; however, Karen reported her mother is "okay with it now." Similarly, Elizabeth explained:

> My mom in particular has taken a while to get over her hurdle of accepting what this means to me. Her most common concern, and one that I've heard a couple of times elsewhere, is that polyamory means just having a lot of sex.

Assumptions made about heterosexual polyamorous women. This idea that polyamory is associated with easy sex was brought up as a frequent assumption from many participants. Amy stated "Two most common [misconceptions] would be that my husband and I are looking for a third partner or that we're just looking for sex and we want to slut it around." Likewise, Fiona reported "I get a lot of slutty comments, you know, like, 'polyamorous people are easy or slutty or hogging everyone.'"

More than half the participants reported society having the assumption that as a polyamorous woman, that meant they were bisexual. Amy reported "most folks who hear "polyamorous women" and assume: (1) slut. And (2) bisexual." Similarly, Fiona stated "the

majority of people that I meet just expect that I'm bisexual and expect that I will fall in love with both of them and expect that I'll sleep with the wives or the girlfriend."

Other common misconceptions participants reported were society's belief that polyamorous people were serial cheaters, or that something was wrong in their relationship. Fiona explained:

> "There's something wrong in the relationship, that you didn't get enough love as a child." Things like that. I got a lot of "Something must be wrong with your marriage, because I am married. "Are you coerced into this?"

Lastly, Hellen expressed frustration with these misconceptions and a desire to educate others on her lifestyle:

> I guess the biggest thing and the whole reason why I wanted to participate in this is that there's this misconception out there that people who are polyamorous are all these crazy, either, like, hippies or wanting free love or whatever. And that's... We're just not… we're not some like free love freaks living in a commune out in the woods somewhere. We're pretty darn normal.

Effect on Children

More than half the participants discussed their polyamorous status and the effect on their children. Brenda reported:

> I worry about how it might affect my kid. His social life, you know. If other parents are going to look at us and say "well, we don't want our kids playing with that kid because his parents are weird." So that's a concern, but we haven't been cut off yet.

Fiona reported how she and her husband are trying to have a child and the effect that decision has had on her other relationship. Fiona stated, "[my] longer-term boyfriend actually recently

asked if we could sort…step back a little bit more on the emotional scale because he doesn't want to be like the second daddy if I have a kid."

Denise discussed concerns for the future of managing a closeted polyamorous status and children:

> It's rough. I mean, especially now because [my husband, boyfriend and I are] trying to navigate what it's gonna look like when there are kids in the picture and trying to say, like, "In some ways, [boyfriend will] be an equal parent, but also, like, the family won't know that. So you're not really an equal parent."

Grace described how it is easier to date other people than it is her husband due to child care:

> We have an easier time having dates with other people than having dates with each other. Just because, with three kids means, like… one of us stay home with the kids while the other goes out is kind of easy…We don't get a lot of date nights for us. So, we have to try to find ways to still spend that time together without leaving the house, which is difficult sometimes.

Additionally, Brenda discussed the experience managing the relationships in blended families. Brenda stated:

> There is the potential that you have, like I do, a step-kid. Fortunately, her mom's not going to be a problem about it, but it would be very easy. And I have heard of people who, you know, they're divorced and have a child with someone and then they're in a polyamorous relationship and their ex-spouse, baby daddy, whatever, throws a big fit and goes to court about it. We're fortunate that that hasn't been a problem.

Brenda continued, reporting the positive effect on the relationship with her step-daughter:

> After my stepdaughter found out that [her father and I] had a boyfriend and that her father is bisexual. She came to us and said that she's bisexual. So, it ended up having a positive ending in that that made her feel more comfortable coming to us about that.

Furthermore, Hellen describes an overall familial aspect to polyamory:

> We have three kids and there are never more children than there are adults…There's always someone to help with homework. There's always someone to help pick up a kid. I have the amazing ability to be a stay at home mom right now, because both the husbands are working, so we're still a two-income household… As far as holidays go, I mean, we do all of our holidays together because we're family.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to understand the lived experience of polyamorous relationships among heterosexual women. This included, 1) understanding the decision to participate in polyamorous relationships, 2) exploring the boundaries heterosexual women use to regulate and maintain multiple relationships, and 3) giving these women the opportunity to refute assumptions and stereotypes associated with identifying themselves as polyamorous. This study contributes to current literature by focusing on heterosexual polyamorous woman, which has been a previously underrepresented population within the literature related to polyamorous relationships (Barker, 2005; Cohen, 2016; Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Cassidy & Wong, 2018).

Polyamory is one of many forms of consensual non-monogamy; consensual non-monogamy is defined as being involved in sexual and/or romantic relationships with more than one individual concurrently with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014). Participants used the expression ethical non-monogamy, which is another term for consensual non-monogamy. The participants in this study emphasized the importance in polyamorous relationships to behave ethically and to be a consent focused culture. This is an important factor in understanding the lived experience of polyamorous relationships among the participants. Engaging in romantic and/or sexual relationships without the knowledge or consent of everyone involved defies the tenets of ethical non-monogamy, which would impact the overall experience.

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of creating emotionally intimate relationships and the ability to love multiple people, which is a distinguishing aspect in polyamory as compared to other forms of consensual non-monogamy. These testimonies

coincide with previous research results that stated polyamory is not about having many sexual partners, but forming emotionally intimate long-term relationships (Klesse, 2006; Aguilar, 2013). Participants described intimate relationships as concentrating on connecting with another person and having feelings for them, rather than focusing primarily on the physical aspects.

Participants reported that polyamory has a significant meaning for them, beyond its' traditional definition. Consistent with research conducted by McCoy et al. (2014), participants expressed polyamory gave them freedom. This freedom allows their relationships to develop and grow naturally. Additionally, participants expanded this idea to include the ability to be their "authentic self" and emphasized the importance of not feeling constrained by monogamy and with whom they are allowed to love. This significance means the participants are not hindered by mononormative norms or restricted to this dominant ideology that does not fit their lifestyle.

Conversely, several participants discussed not being open with their polyamorous status, or "closeted." Participants reported a closeted polyamorous status for fear of judgement and/or repercussions, such as job loss, which is consistent with the findings in Conley's et al., (2013) research. Participants identified the consequential difficulties of remaining closeted and feeling as if they had to hide part of themselves in certain arenas of their lives. Participants talked about the hardship of their families, co-workers, and/or friends being oblivious to the significance of a partner and the relationship due to their closeted status. Participants reported it felt invalidating to the relationships and that they were "lying by omission" by not directly identifying the significance of a relationship to them. These experiences insinuate a paradoxical "hidden freedom" within polyamory derived by mononormative norms and societal backlash.

Similar to Barker's (2005) research, several participants in this study described their polyamorous status as a natural fit, stating they have "always been this way." Contrary to

societal belief that love requires individuals to find their "one and only soul mate" (Wolkomir, 2015), several participants discussed a phenomenon of falling in love with another person and assumed that meant they must not love their current partner. This recurring experience in women's monogamous relationships eventually led those participants to explore polyamory and identify it as a better fit for their lifestyle. These accounts validate the literal meaning of the word "polyamory" and the ability to have "many loves," (Weeks, Gambescia, & Hertlein, 2015).

Furthermore, participants whom reported they had "always felt this way," or were merely "monogamous by default" because they did not know they could question the tenets of mononormativity also reported no real transition from monogamy to polyamory. One participant described it as "more like a switch clicking." Other participants reported feeling they were "broken" or "weird" for not being able to conform to monogamy, and expressed relief in learning their thoughts were not unusual and there were like minded individuals out there. This indicates an acceptance of them in the polyamorous community, and more importantly, of themselves.

Participants discussed different structures and dynamics within their romantic relationships, as well as with metamours, a term for a partner's partners. Two types of relationship dynamics between metamours were discussed; a friendly and open relationship with metamours is described at kitchen table poly, whereas a non-existent, or intentionally avoided, relationship with metamours is called parallel poly. Participants reported experiencing these dynamics with different variations in every relationship, which can be dependent on several factors, such as the people involved, personalities, and communication styles. This is an important factor in exploring participants' lived experience by indicating every experience will be unique based on the individual's specific relationship structure and dynamic.

More than half of the participants discussed exploring their primary and secondary emotions when they are feeling anger or jealousy, and identifying the underlying issue. A few participants described managing these emotions as a self-reflective journey to understand the root cause that has triggered the emotional response. Participants emphasized the importance of communicating their feelings with their partners and not transferring blame, but acknowledging their experience of the emotion. These accounts imply a high level of emotional understanding of self in polyamorous relationship.

Participants reported creating and adhering to numerous rules and boundaries caused grave difficulties in nurturing polyamorous relationships. A number of participants described implementing several rules in the beginning of their exploration into polyamory and the eventual demise of those relationships. Participants indicated rules within relationships are dependent on what works for them and will vary from one polyamorous relationship to the next; however, the universal boundary reported by every participant was the importance of safe sex practices and using protection. These testimonies indicate that rules and boundaries are not necessary to maintaining multiple healthy relationships.

Participants reported communication as an essential element in maintaining healthy relationships. The theme of communication appeared consistently throughout the interviews. Additionally, several participants reported maintaining healthy polyamorous relationships was the same as with monogamous relationships, just with more people. Participant statements imply that the important elements of maintaining healthy relationships, such as communication, trust and honesty, remain constant, regardless of the number of people within the relationships.

Participants report receiving support and acceptance in several forms, such as from their partners, sometimes family, and through the poly-community. Participants identified feeling

there was always someone they could turn to for support, both logistically and emotionally. This contradicts the mononormative idea that monogamy is the only way to properly fulfill relationship needs (Hutzler et al., 2016). Some participants discussed in-person meet up groups they know about, or even head up, and the significance of knowing that they have the opportunity to be more involved in the poly-community if they so choose.

Most participants described an assumption from society that polyamory is about "easy sex," and that polyamorous individuals are "serial cheaters." Some participants reported a misconception that something must be wrong in their relationship or they must have a weak relationship to resort to polyamory. These reports build on existing evidence that relationships that do not fit within the tenets of mononormativity can be judged harshly and seen in a negative light (Matsick et al., 2014; Cohen, 2016; Jordan et al., 2016; Klesse, 2006). While previous studies have discussed stereotypes and assumptions associated to polyamory (Barker, 2005; McCoy et al., 2014; Cohen, 2016; Conley et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2013; Hutzler et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2016; Klesse, 2006), participants reported an assumption specific to their population of heterosexual polyamorous women; more than half reported an assumption that their polyamorous status meant they were bisexual. This is significant insight into the lived experience for heterosexual polyamorous women.

More than half the participants discussed parenting aspects in terms of polyamory. One participant reported concerns of their polyamorous status causing judgement from other parents that could impact their child's social circle. Another participant discussed managing a blended family and he dynamics of how a polyamorous status could cause conflict with the step-child's biological mother. A participant describes her ability to be a stay at home mom and still maintain a two-income household due to her polyamorous relationships. Testimonies suggest the

experience in polyamorous relationships and management of relationship differ for participants who have children and those who do not.

Clinical Implications

Due to the mononormativity in society, some of these beliefs can unknowingly bleed into a therapists' clinical work and create assumptions about consensual non-monogamous clients. Past studies have shown that therapists assume "that sex outside of a primary relationship is a sign that the relationship is troubled," and that "therapists associate non-monogamy with relationship dysfunction and individual psychopathology," (Conley et al., 2013; Cohen, 2016). While working through a mononormative lens may not be intentional, the consequential assumptions may "discriminate or offend clients who... engage in alternate forms of relationships," (Cassidy & Wong, 2018, p. 120).

Additionally, studies have found that consensual non-monogamous clients view the therapist as "incompetent concerning their non-monogamous status," (Brandon, 2011; Cassidy & Wong, 2018). When working with polyamorous clients, clinicians should make an effort to familiarize themselves with current research about the polyamorous population. Consensual non-monogamous clients might be more apprehensive in seeking relationship related counseling due to concerns of judgement and misunderstanding by the therapist.

Based on past studies (Conley et al., 2013; Cohen, 2016), clinicians should be mindful to remain objective and not make assumptions based on the stereotypes for this population. Participants discussed specific stressors within polyamorous relationships, such as maintaining a closeted polyamorous status, hiding part of themselves in certain arenas of their lives, or lack of support from family of origin, that clinician should be aware of when working with this population. Clinicians can assist clients in beginning a dialogue to educate family and friends

about their polyamorous lifestyle. Clinicians can also help find resources and encourage clients getting involved in the polyamorous community, such as local meetup groups, to develop a wider support network. Making an effort to better understand the clients' experience can assist in the joining process and creating the therapeutic relationship. It is important for clinicians to create a safe and non-judgmental space for the client to feel comfortable.

Clinicians providing therapy for a couple or family who identify as polyamorous should be cognizant of their own values regarding mononormativity and ensure it does not influence the therapy or therapeutic relationship. Evident from participant testimonies, transitioning to polyamory can be a difficult and confusing process. Clients may often present to therapy due to the stress and confusion related to this transition and it is important for clinicians remain objective and not lead clients in one direction or another based on their own personal values. Additionally, due to the assumptions that polyamorous people have weak relationships or that something must be wrong in the relationship, it is important clinicians remain unbiased and curious to avoid wrongly assuming the client's presenting issue is due to their polyamorous status.

Communication was a prominent theme throughout the interviews, being described as a key factor in maintaining healthy polyamorous relationships. Similar to monogamous relationships, failure to communicate well with partners can cause relational problems and stress. One participant reported the importance in her relationships of communicating with everyone involved and present so she is not "the go-between." This type of transparent communication can assist in limiting triangulation and misunderstandings between partners.

Additionally, participants identified trust and honesty as important in their relationships. With the participant's notion that maintaining healthy polyamorous relationships is the same for

healthy monogamous relationships, clinicians should assess all the factors that contribute to the presenting problem rather than assume the polyamorous status is the cause. If a clinician recognizes difficulty in doing this, he or she should address the issue with their supervisor.

Comparable to working with monogamous clients, clinicians can use techniques such as assessing communication patterns, tracking to identify patterns of interactions that contribute to the presenting problem, and reframing to present an alternative perspective when working with polyamorous clients. In terms of clinical theory, Bowen Family Systems Theory would be helpful in gaining background information on the client and presenting issue. Creating a genogram with the client would be beneficial in understanding not only the family background and relationship, but also the polyamorous relationships. This tool would assist in understanding the clients' perspectives of the relationships and presenting problem, while also giving the clinician a better understanding of the clients' polyamorous relationship structures and dynamics.

Limitations and Further Research

One of the limitations of the study is its small sample size. While eight participants is a suitable number for an exploratory study, ideally participants would have been recruited until saturation was reached. Additionally, all participants in this sample identified as Caucasian; this limits the experience in terms of diversity. Future research can extend recruitment time to reach saturation and concentrate on different ethnic backgrounds to include a more diverse sample.

The inclusion criteria had a narrow age range consisting of a particular generation; this excluded older generations and possibly more experienced individuals in the polyamorous community. Furthermore, inclusion criteria exclude potential participants that were not currently in a polyamorous relationship, but had been previously. Further research could expand on the inclusion criteria to gain the perspective among the older generation to explore how their

experiences are similar and/or different to the findings in this study. This could include the individuals who were previously in polyamorous relationships and their perspective on experience presently.

Additionally, findings from this study could be explored more in depth, such as the different experiences of closeted versus open polyamorous statuses, exploring whether there is a gender bias correlation with the stereotype of bisexuality, and a child's experience of their parents engaging in polyamorous relationships. Future studies can explore more in-depth the involvement of children and the effect on the dynamics in polyamorous relationships. Furthermore, researchers can explore the occurrence of marriage within polyamory and the significance of primary and secondary partners. An inquiry that emerged from the data questioned if and how polyamorous people select a primary partner, and how children and marriage then relate to and are affected by this selection.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experience of heterosexual polyamorous woman, which has been an underrepresented population in previous literature. This included, 1) understanding the decision to participate in polyamorous relationships, 2) exploring the boundaries heterosexual women use to regulate and maintain multiple relationships, and 3) giving these women the opportunity to refute assumptions and stereotypes associated with identifying themselves as polyamorous. This study matched earlier literature findings, while also contributing to the literature to include the perspective of heterosexual woman among the polyamorous population.

Participants reported being monogamous because they did not know they could challenge the tenets of mononormativity. For most participants, transitioning from monogamy to polyamory was effortless, while others described a more difficult and confusing process.

Regardless, participants described how polyamory was a better fit and made more sense to them than monogamy.

Every participant discussed the boundary of practicing safe sex, while specifying that other rules and boundaries are dependent on what works for their relationships and dynamics. Participants indicted the qualities to maintaining healthy relationships, such as communication, trust and honesty, were the same in both polyamorous and monogamous relationships. Overall, the participants' experiences provided insight into loving and functional relationships that did not require conformity to the tenets of mononormativity.

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Appendix A
Social Media Script and Permission Request to Moderators

I am recruiting for my thesis research study exploring polyamorous relationships from the perspective of heterosexual polyamorous women. This research study is being conducted to satisfy program requirements for a master's degree in human development with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech. I am requesting your permission as the moderator of this blog/forum/site to utilize this social media outlet to recruit participants for this study. Participation is confidential and voluntary.

Appendix B
Participant Recruitment Email

I am delighted to announce that I am now recruiting for my thesis research study exploring polyamorous relationships from the perspective of heterosexual polyamorous women. This research study is being conducted to satisfy program requirements for a master's degree in human development with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech with the intention of publication. Participation is confidential and voluntary.

Participant eligibility includes:

a) identify as a heterosexual woman,

b) identify as being polyamorous,

c) is currently in a polyamorous relationship; "polyamorous relationship" will be defined as "maintaining meaningful, sexual and/or romantic relationships with more than one person at a time, and with the full knowledge and consent of all persons involved."

d) be between the ages of 22 and 38

What is involved in the study?

• A screening questionnaire
• A brief demographic questionnaire
• A telephone interview lasting approximately one to two hours. The researcher will ask questions about participant's experiences and perspective of participating in polyamorous relationships.

I can be contacted at kmh0789@vt.edu.

Thank you! Sincerely,

Kalyn Hendrickson
Virginia Tech MFT Masters Candidate kmh0789@vt.edu

Appendix C
Screening Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in this study exploring polyamorous relationships and the perspective of heterosexual polyamorous women. This is a brief screening of 5 yes or no questions to determine your eligibility to participate in this research study. Your responses will only be used to determine your eligibility and will not be included as data. All responses will be destroyed after the recruitment process for this study is completed.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research participant, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at irb@vt.edu or (540) 231-3732.

I have read the conditions of this screening questionnaire. By continuing to the questionnaire, I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent to participate in this screening questionnaire.

1. Are you between the ages of 22 and 38? Yes/No
2. Do you identify as a heterosexual polyamorous woman? Yes/No
3. Are you currently in a polyamorous relationship? Yes/No
4. Are you comfortable comprehending and speaking proficient English to participate in an approximate one to two-hour interview regarding your experience being in a polyamorous relationship? Yes/No
5. What email address would you like to be contacted at?

Based on yes responses:
You have met the criteria designated by the researchers. Continuing with the study will include an estimated hour interview on your experience of being partnered to a couples therapist and a quick demographic questionnaire. Expect an email from Kalyn Hendrickson, kmh0789@vt.edu, within 48 hours regarding a detailed consent form and scheduling a date and time for this interview.

Based on no responses:
Unfortunately, do not meet the criteria designated by the researchers. I certainly appreciate your time and interest in the study. Please feel free to share my contact information with anyone you think may qualify. Take care.

Appendix D
Research Informed Consent
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Thank you for your interest in this study on the perspective of polyamorous relationships from heterosexual polyamorous women. Below is information regarding this study.

Title of Project: The Perspective of Polyamorous Relationships from Heterosexual Polyamorous Women

Researchers:

Ellie Cunanan-Petty, LMFT, Principle Investigator
Email: ecunanan@vt.edu Phone Number: 703-538-8461

Kalyn Hendrickson, M.S. Candidate, Co-investigator
Email: kmh0789@vt.edu Phone Number: 703-594-7790

I. Purpose of Research: This thesis research study is being conducted in fulfillment of the degree requirements for a master's in marriage and family therapy with the intent of publication. The purpose of the current study is to explore the perspective of polyamorous relationships from heterosexual polyamorous women.

II. Procedures: You will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (5 to 10 minutes) and an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 60 – 90 minutes over the phone.

III. Risks: The researchers anticipate minimal risks for participating in this research study. Some interview questions may cause emotional discomfort, depending on personal experiences with the topic of the study. If the interview becomes too emotionally distressing, the interview will cease, and researcher will provide mental health referrals should you wish to further process the thoughts and emotions that arise from the interview. Payment for service from any mental health providers to which you are referred shall be your responsibility, and shall not be covered by the researchers, nor Virginia Tech.

IV. Benefits: The answers you provide will help Psychotherapists better understand the experience of heterosexual polyamorous women and may have more awareness in how they work with individuals or partners in polyamorous relationships. Talking about your experiences may provide a cathartic benefit to you; however, no promise or guarantee of benefits has been made as an incentive for your participation.

V. Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to keep the information you provide strictly confidential. All identifying information provided in the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. Individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript include the researchers and committee chair. The audiotapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked. Any

identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from the coded data to protect your confidentiality. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the thesis report and/or in subsequent publications, however, your name and other identifying information will not be disclosed on any reports or publications. Please note the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human participants involved in research.

VI. Freedom to Withdraw: It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty. Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a participant should not continue in the research study.

VII. Questions or Concerns. Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document. Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research participant, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at irb@vt.edu or (540) 231-3732.

VIII. Participant's Consent:

I have read the Consent Form and the conditions of this project. I have had all of my questions answered, and I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Participant's Name Date

_____ _____

Principle Investigator's Name Date

_____ _____

Co-investigator's Name Date

Appendix E
Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study exploring polyamorous relationships from the perspective of heterosexual polyamorous women. Before we begin the interview, I have a brief demographic questionnaire. Your answers to the demographic questions will not be audio-recorded. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the following questions, you may choose to not answer those questions.

Age (in years): _____ Location (city/state)_____

Gender: _____ Preferred Pronouns: _____

Sexual Orientation:_____ Nationality: _____

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
a) No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
b) Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
c) Yes, Puerto Rican
d) Yes, Cuban
e) Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – Print origin_____

What is your race? Circle one or more.

a) White
b) Black or African Am.
c) American Indian or Alaska Native
d) Asian Indian
e) Chinese
f) Filipino
g) Japanese
h) Vietnamese
i) Korean
j) Other Asian – Print race_____
k) Native Hawaiian
l) Guamanian or Chamorro
m) Other Pacific Islander –Print race _____
n) Samoan
o) Some other race – Print race _____

What is your occupation? _____

What is your employment status?
a) Retired
b) Unemployed
c) Full time
d) Part time
e) Student
f) Other _____

How much education have you completed?
a) No schooling completed
b) Less than high school
c) High school equivalency (GED)
d) High school diploma
e) Some college, not currently enrolled
f) Some college, currently enrolled
g) Associate's degree
h) Bachelor's degree
i) Graduate or professional degree not completed
j) Graduate or professional degree, completed

What is your annual household income?

a) Between $0-24,999
b) Between $25,000-49,999
c) Between $50,000-74,999
d) Between $75,000-99,999
e) Between $100,000-$149,999
f) Between $150,000-$199,999
g) $200,000 or more

Describe the structure of your current relationships: _____

Length in each Relationship (in years): _____

Have you been married previously? Yes/No If yes, how many times and how long? _____

Have any of your partners been married previously? Yes/No If yes, how many times and how long? _____

Appendix F
Confidentially Agreement for Transcriptionist

The following paragraph contains the policies to which the participants in this study agreed. Please read it carefully as you will be required to help us protect the confidentiality and rights of the study participants.

> Every effort will be made to keep the information you provide strictly confidential. All identifying information provided in the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. Individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript include the researchers and committee chair. The audio tapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked. Any identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from the coded data to protect your confidentiality. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the thesis report and/or in subsequent publications, however, your name and other identifying information will not be disclosed on any reports or publications. Please note the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human participants involved in research.

I, *(print name)*_____, understand that through the experience I will have in working on this research study, that I must maintain strict confidentiality as to any identifying information of the study participants; any information as to the participants and/or their families must remain within strictest confidence in order to protect the privacy, rights, sensitivities, and feelings of the participants involved in this study.

My signature below signifies that I will abide by this confidentiality agreement.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix G
Interview Questions

Experience

- How do you define polyamory?
- What does being polyamorous mean to you?
- How do you explain polyamory to others?
- What are some things people tend to misunderstand about polyamory?
- Have you ever felt marginalized for being polyamorous and how?
- Please talk about the reactions of those with whom you have shared about your polyamorous relationships. Are there people in your life to whom you have not shared that you are polyamorous?
- What problems have you encountered?
- How have you dealt with these problems?
- Where do you go for support/information/role models?
- What are the advantages of a poly relationship?
- What are the disadvantages of polyamory?

Decision Process

- Can you describe the first time you were introduced to polyamory?
- When and how did you make the decision to be polyamorous?
- When did you first identify as polyamorous? Do you see polyamory as who you are or what you do or both?
- Please talk about your first experience in a polyamorous relationship and how you transitioned from monogamy to polyamory.

Boundaries

- Do you have rules or boundaries for yourself in your poly relationships?
- Do you have rules or boundaries for your partners?
- How have you and your partners negotiated boundaries with each relationship?
- How do you manage jealousy?
- How do you divide important dates (Holidays, birthdays) between partners?
- What do you think is important in keeping a poly relationship healthy?
- How do you define the person/people you are involved with?
- Have you had any negative experiences when negotiating your relationships? How did you address those issues?