Relationally Queer

A Pink Therapy Guide for Practitioners

Edited by Silva Neves and Dominic Davies

Chapter 1

Getting real about monogamism

Disrupting mononormative bias in sex therapy and relationship counselling

Dr Y Gávriel Ansara

Getting real about monogamism

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Monogamism (Anderson, 2010; cf. Twist et al., 2018) is the belief that monogamous people and relationships are superior, more mature, or more "natural", while polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships are inferior, inherently unstable, immature, less "committed", or "unnatural". Mononormativity (Pieper & Bauer, 2005) refers to the societal standard of monogamy that frames relationships in terms of a monogamy/"infidelity" binary. *Couple-centric bias* is the widespread mononormative bias that all people have or should desire a "couple" relationship.

This chapter explores ways to identify and disrupt mononormative bias in sex therapy and relationship counselling with polyamorous and multi-partnered people. I use the term "polyamorous and multi-partnered" people to acknowledge that people with polyamorous lived experiences are not necessarily partnered and that people with multiple partners may or may not self-identify as polyamorous. Additional forms of erotic and intimate connection are beyond the scope of this chapter. My social position in writing this chapter is as a polyamorous person and sex and relationship therapist with over a decade of experience in providing clinical guidance and therapeutic support alongside polyamorous people, kinship systems, and communities.

Monogamist forms of epistemic injustice

Fricker (2007) delineated two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. According to Fricker, *testimonial injustice* occurs when people's accounts of their lived experiences are treated as less credible due to their marginalised status (e.g., a polyamorous parent is viewed as having a less credible account of parenting than a monogamous parent, partially or entirely due to societal stigma against polyamorous people). *Hermeneutical injustice* describes challenges in understanding people's lived experiences, when such descriptions have been historically excluded from the collective explanatory resources people use to make sense of their lived experiences (e.g., when polyamorous people have difficulty explaining their lived experiences due to not having prior exposure to language about polyamorous dynamics and emotional responses).

Hermeneutical injustice against polyamorous and multi-partnered people pervades the professions of sex therapy, relationship counselling, and family therapy.

Virtually all assessments used in relationship and family therapy have been designed for, and tested only on, married woman/man dyads (Kisler & Lock, 2019). Most sex and relationship therapy studies are either influenced by unscientific biases about polyamorous relationships or exclude polyamorous people entirely (Girard & Brownlee, 2015). The leading relationship counselling approaches promote couple-centric frameworks that reinforce monogamism and exclude key concepts for respectful and effective relationship therapy with polyamorous and multi-partnered people and polycules (see definition on p.9). Even polyamorous and multi-partnered therapists have not been adequately prepared for clinical assessment and therapeutic work involving polyamorous and multi-partnered relationship systems.

Critical reflection on mononormative biases

Due to the aforementioned forms of hermeneutical injustice, many therapists have difficulty even identifying their own deeply entrenched mononormative biases. Kean (2018) addressed this gap by identifying 11 mononormative biases:

*   The passionate/romantic ideal of "one true love".
*   The steady/companionate ideal of a "soul mate".
*   The idea that the measure of commitment is sexual "fidelity".
*   The idea that the measure of commitment is emotional "fidelity".
*   The fact that "fidelity" and "faithfulness" are understood as synonyms of "monogamy".
*   The belief that having one sexual-romantic partner at a time is mature/natural/best.
*   The idea that there is a clear, coherent, and sustainable distinction between the categories of "friend" and "lover".
*   The belief that sex is healthy only in the company of romance and commitment.
*   The way romance and commitment are understood as leading to or synonymous with monogamy.
*   The belief that sex means you are serious about someone.
*   The contradictory belief that sex with more than one person shows you are not serious about those people.

Kean's longer version of this list delineates 50 mononormative biases (Kean, 2015, pp. 700–702). This list of 50 mononormative biases can be a valuable audit tool for practitioners wishing to conduct a mononormative bias inventory of their own clinical practice. Practitioners can also use these lists to guide solo and relationship therapy participants through critical self-reflection and serve as clinically beneficial disruptions to unexamined mononormative biases. However, practitioners must first examine and address our own mononormative biases before achieving the congruence and self-awareness necessary for this nuanced clinical work.

Mononormative vocabularies of emotion

The harmful impact of therapists' mononormative biases is well-established (e.g., Cassidy & Wong, 2018; Grunt-Mejer & Łyś, 2019; Henrich & Trawinski, 2016; Jordan, 2018; Kisler & Lock, 2019; van Tol, 2017). Vocabularies of emotion can be mechanisms for enacting mononormative social control (Harré & Parrott, 1996). Ritchie and Barker (2006) asserted that the construction of jealousy as a "natural" response to "infidelity" and a "negative" emotion perpetuates mononormative bias. Mononormative characterisations of jealousy neglect the therapeutic reasoning needed to distinguish between a monogamous person who is dissatisfied with their existing relationship *partner* and an ostensibly monogamous but actually polyamorous person who may be dissatisfied with their monogamous relationship *configuration*. Despite the central focus on "infidelity", "cheating", and "affairs" in relationship counselling, few of the major schools of relationship therapy have adequately acknowledged or addressed this distinction or taught the essential nature of investigating whether the monogamous aspect of the relationship agreement itself was established with mutual informed consent and discussion of multiple options, instead of being based on the coercive control dynamic of non-consensual or compulsory monogamy (see Heckert, 2010; Robinson, 2013).

Although extensive research has documented securely attached and emotionally mature polyamorous kinships, many relationship therapists have been taught that polyamorous relationships result from poor impulse control, insecure attachment, or emotional immaturity. Due to this stereotype, therapists routinely presume that an ostensibly monogamous person who engages in romantic or erotic intimacy outside of their monogamous relationship has made "a mistake", or "strayed", or that they or their monogamous relationship must be deficient. In a polycule-centred framework, therapists responding to so-called "infidelity" investigate whether monogamy was explicitly agreed upon or assumed and whether a new agreement needs to be negotiated to incorporate emerging needs and desires.

Therapists' failure to recognise polyamorous and multi-partnered people and relationship configurations is a clinical problem that endangers our ability to make accurate clinical judgements or achieve optimal clinical outcomes (Jordan, 2018). To address hermeneutical injustice, therapists must consider the implicit ideology of our language about emotions and the extent to which we integrate polyamorous and multi-partnered vocabularies and concepts. Although some cultures and societies already have traditional terms and concepts to describe multi-partnered relationship systems, Ritchie and Barker (2006) documented how English-speaking polyamorous communities in a mononormative society needed to develop new language to describe their identities, define their relationships, and express their emotions. They noted that vocabularies of emotion ascribe value and meaning to emotions and are therefore inherently ideological. Before practitioners can support people with expressing and processing their experiences, we need to share a more inclusive language of emotions (see Barker, 2005).

Mononormative vocabularies of emotion entrench couple-centric bias and limit clinical conceptualisations of romantic and erotic connections outside of dyads ("couples") to mononormative concepts such as "infidelity" and "adultery". Research suggests having romantic and/or sexual interactions with more than one person is much more common than therapists may presume (e.g., Haupert et al., 2017). Multiple studies have documented that at least 20% (and, in some studies, up to 70%) of ostensibly monogamous, married people have engaged in romantic and/or erotic interactions with additional partners, a finding that highlights the permeability and incongruity of the mono/polyam binary (see Kipnis, 1998, particularly footnote 4, p. 293).

Ritchie and Barker's (2006) participants described a polyamorous emotion called *compersion* as "an exact antonym of jealousy" (George, 1997, cited in Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 595), "taking joy in one's partner's other partners" (Cathy, 2000, cited in ibid.), or "the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another" (moderators of the LiveJournal Compersion community in 2003, as cited in ibid.). Other participants disliked compersion because "it somehow brings to mind the two words . . . compelled and coercion", preferring the term *frubbly* due to being "all in favour of a 'snuggly' word" (Jane, 2000, cited in ibid.). This contrast highlights the diversity of emotional vocabularies among English-speaking multi-partnered relationships.

Subsequent studies support Ritchie and Barker's (2006) finding that monogamous people need different vocabularies of emotion than polyamorous people. In a survey, Ritchie and Barker asked 529 monogamous people and 159 polyamorous and multi-partnered people to share their reactions to imagining their romantic partner with another partner. Monogamous partners reported greater emotional distress than polyamorous and multi-partnered people. Polyamorous and multi-partnered people reported thinking about their partner's other partners more frequently, and they were more likely to report positive emotional responses to imagining their romantic partner with another partner – including reactions consistent with compersion (see Mogilski et al., 2019 for complete findings, but see Hyde, 2005, for a feminist critique of this kind of "gender differences" approach and how this gender ideology can affect both research findings and researchers' interpretations of their findings). Mogilski et al.'s (2019) findings highlight the dangers of assuming the universality of monogamous emotional and communication norms and substantiate the need for practitioners to apply a polycule-centred vocabulary of emotions in therapeutic contexts.

Unfortunately, some of the most popular introductory texts on polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships contain mononormative biases (see Ansara, 2020 for a list of useful educational resources). Therapists must reflect on how the vocabularies of emotion we invoke in therapeutic contexts can enact monogamist erasure of some people's emotional experiences (Cassidy & Wong, 2018). Well-intentioned empathy cannot replace the expertise and skill that come from lived experience; for monogamous therapists, cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998) can establish safer therapeutic environments than unsustainable claims of

cultural competence. Polyamorous and multi-partnered people need therapists to be comfortable and familiar with using polyamorous vocabularies of emotion in clinical practice (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). This need for fluency in polycule-centred language may be one of the reasons why many polyamorous and multi-partnered people have reported having better experiences with therapists who are polyamorous and/or multi-partnered than with therapists who are monogamous. Monogamous therapists can be most successful when they acknowledge and critically reflect on how mononormative privilege can limit their understanding. It is difficult to conceal one's relative unfamiliarity and discomfort with polyamorous vocabularies of emotion. To address this limitation, monogamous practitioners can educate themselves through exposure to a range of polyamorous communities and lived experience narratives outside of sessions and can express cultural humility both within and beyond sessions by acknowledging that polyamorous and multi-partnered people are the best authorities to consult about our own lives.

Using polyamorous vocabularies of emotion and experience can promote greater visibility and understanding. The term *polycule* describes all people within a multi-partnered kinship system as a kind of polyamorous "molecule" (Creation, 2019; Fern, 2020; Sheff & Wolf, 2015). Polycules can also include monogamous partners of a polyamorous partner in the system. Terms such as *pod*, *bubble*, and *House* are sometimes preferred to the term *family*, which some multi-partnered people consider exclusionary. The term family also has discriminatory connotations that stem from its history of being weaponised in political campaigns that have targeted people outside of heteronormative nuclear families. Where the term "family" is used, qualifiers can be added (e.g., *found* family, *chosen* family, family *of origin,* or *bio* family) to avoid the default privileging of some familial bonds over others (see also Kaldera, 2005; Kean, 2018). Polyamorous kinship systems, particularly polyamorous parents, have yet to be adequately addressed within the field of family therapy or even recognised as legitimate forms of families, despite some promising developments by some polyamorous family and parenting researchers (e.g., Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020). For example, in response to my presentation on working with polyamorous families at a national family therapy peak body, one family therapist said that although they had enjoyed my presentation, it was "not about families" and "not relevant to family therapy". This kind of monogamist bias is an example of how the term "family" is often defined by family therapists in ways that exclude and discriminate against polyamorous and multi-partnered people and our kinship systems.

Attachments that matter

Some people practise *hierarchical polyamory*, in which partners are ranked in terms of their relative closeness and primacy (e.g., "primary partner", "secondary partner"). In contrast, some polyamorous people practise *egalitarian polyamory*, often termed *non-hierarchical polyamory*. Some people consider hierarchical approaches inherently oppressive, stifling, or dehumanising due to

the hierarchical privilege granted to some partners. Some of the most intractable relationship conflicts can occur between polyamorous partners who disagree regarding whether their relationships should have a hierarchical or egalitarian structure. It is essential to be aware that structure alone does not determine the relative quality or oppressiveness of a particular relationship sub-system within a polycule; what matters more is the extent to which the needs of all polycule members are prioritised and adequately addressed. Fern (2020) described the ideal polyamorous relational state of *polysecurity* as one in which all polycule members can experience the multi-partnered relationship system as a safe haven and a secure attachment base.

The terms *solo polyamory* and *single polyamory* are each used in a variety of contrasting context-dependent ways, sometimes treated as distinct and sometimes used interchangeably. Depending on context, these terms may refer to polyamorous people who do not wish to engage in any erotic or romantic commitments; people who wish to have erotic and/or romantic connections but avoid "couple" status, cohabitation, and/or hierarchical relationships (e.g., *primary*, *secondary*, and other categories for rank-ordering one's partners); people who view themselves as their own primary partner; and people who prioritise emotional intimacy rather than romantic and/or erotic relational components when determining the value and primacy of their relationships (see Fern, 2020, pp. 114–115 for discussion of some common misconceptions regarding solo polyamory).

The related concept of *relationship anarchy* (Nordgren, 2006) describes an adaptation of political anarchist principles applied to interpersonal relationships. Although this term is often misused to describe all non-hierarchical multi-partnered relationships, Fern (2020) explained that

> relationship anarchists seek to dismantle the social hierarchies dictating how sexual and romantic relationships are prioritized over all other forms of love, and so people who identify as relationship anarchists make less distinction between the importance or value of their lovers over their friends or other people in their life, and they do not only reserve intimacy or romance for the people they have sex with.
>
> (p. 115)

Popular media representations of polyamory typically exclude people on the aromantic (aro) and asexual (ace) spectra, some of whom engage in romance and/or erotic activities under some conditions. Definitions of polyamory that centre on romantic and erotic intimacy can devalue or exclude people on the aro and/or ace spectrum who seek secure interpersonal attachments primarily through emotional rather than romantic or erotic forms of intimacy. Relationship anarchy has the potential to subvert the social hierarchies that devalue aro and ace spectrum people's interpersonal attachments. To achieve inclusive practice with aro and ace spectrum people, practitioners must recognise and affirm that romantic and erotic forms of intimacy are not universal indicators of relationship quality.

Kean (2018, 2015) critiqued attempts to disentangle sex and love in a consistent manner across a diversity of relationship configurations and interrogated the politics of delineating interpersonal categories and relationship valuations. Kean reminded readers that

> it is crucial to recognise that while these inconsistencies within mononormativity become apparent in the context of the non-monogamous sex/love skirmishes described in this article, the skirmishes do not cause the inconsistencies. Practitioners of different kinds of non-monogamy jostling for position in relation to mainstream practices of sex, love, and friendship simply elucidate the fact that the relational logics that sustain those practices only ever partially cohere.
>
> (Kean, 2018, p. 13)

Challenging everyday monogamism means recognising the social relations of power at play in these culturally mononormative naming and meaning-making processes and avoiding relational logics that grant therapists the authority to determine each person's relative value and meaning in the relational system. Consider how therapists might misconstrue (which involve infrequent contact) or fail to grasp the significance of a *queerplatonic relationship (QPR),* an intimate and intense relationship with diverse and sometimes conflicting definitions that cannot be adequately defined within a "friend versus lover" binary (Coyote, 2019). Furthermore, Kean (2018) indicated that the goal of achieving coherent relational logic and distinctions (e.g., friend versus lover) might itself be inherently problematic and unattainable.

Polyamory means different things to different people (Klesse, 2011; Klesse, 2014b). Where polyamory is, for some people, a behaviour (e.g., Barker, 2005), for others, it is a lifestyle and identity (e.g., Henrich & Trawinski, 2016) or a relational orientation (e.g., Jordan, 2018). Some people define polyamory as a relationship philosophy (Klesse, 2013), a political stance, or a way of approaching the relational dimension of life (e.g., Anapol, 2010; Nordgren, 2006). By focussing on the diversity of polyamorous and multi-partnered people's lived experiences and kinship bonds instead of on abstract theoretical constructs, practitioners can prioritise the feelings and needs of actual polyamorous and multi-partnered people, relationships, and communities.

Everyday mononormative concepts

Therapists trained in mononormative relationship therapy approaches are often unaware that describing their scope of practice as "couples counselling" unintentionally communicates an unwillingness to work with people in multi-partnered relational systems. Conceptualising relationship therapy work solely in terms of "couples" can also impair therapists' diagnostic reasoning. Therapists primed by couple-centric concepts may omit pivotal questions and considerations when

exploring people's relationship and attachment histories. By limiting the scope of relationship therapy to "couples", therapists may also overlook the often crucial need to include *metamours* (people who share one or more partner[s] in common without being designated romantic or erotic partners to each other) in psychosocial history taking, in relationship assessments, and in the core tasks of relationship therapy.

Where metamours are included, therapists often relegate them to the marginalised or demonised status of "the other woman/man/person". Metamours play pivotal roles in many polyamorous and multi-partnered people's lives, with some metamour relationships having equal importance to romantic and erotic partnerships. Some metamour relationships can shift into romantic and/or erotic partnerships while people continue their relationships with their shared partners. Some metamour relationships develop and deepen following relationship dissolution with a previously shared romantic and/or erotic partner. Given the diverse permutations within polycules, it is vital for therapists to consider metamours as integral to the relational system and to value metamours' insights regarding the relationships within their polycule.

In relationship and family therapy, genograms are widely used visual tools through which therapists use codes and symbols to obtain and communicate detailed information about the composition, dynamics, and patterns in kinship systems. In addition, genograms can illustrate affective, behavioural, and cognitive components. Genograms have also been used as a therapeutic assessment method and as a form of "intervention" (McGoldrick et al., 2008). Genograms created by polyamorous and multi-partnered people typically prioritise information that is excluded from the mononormative, couple-centric genograms with which most therapists are familiar.

Mononormative genograms represent people with symbols based on their gender, whereas polyam-generated genograms often limit gender references to pronoun(s) use or omit gender entirely. Conversely, polyam-generated genograms often contain information missing from mononormative genograms. Polycule-centred genograms typically identify relationship dynamics such as *nesting partners* (a common polyamorous term for cohabiting partners in an egalitarian polyamorous kinship system), metamours, former lovers, asexual romances, queerplatonic relationships, long-distance relationships, people with shared parenting/child caregiving roles, people who share finances or projects, and people who are considering becoming lovers (e.g., Wolf, 2013, 2015, 2016). Some hierarchical polycules construct genograms that delineate primary and secondary partners, relationships between monogamous and polyamorous partners, relationship anarchists, and people who practise solo polyamory. Some polyam genograms identify monogamous people within the polycule, whereas a mononormative genogram would simply assume monogamous status. Several websites allow people to create their own polycule genograms (e.g., https://polycul.es/create). Within polyamorous social networks, it is common for new and prospective partners to share polycule genograms or similar diagrams to

facilitate clear communication about their existing relationship systems and kinship bonds.

Whereas monogamist notions of relational systems presume that all sub-systems take the form of dyads, some polycules consist of triadic, quadratic, or other structures without any dyads. This includes *triads* (three people who are all relationship partners to each other), *quads* (four people in a relationship with each other), and *Vs* also known as *pivots*, *anchors*, or *hinges* (two partners with a shared partner in common who are each other's metamours).

Many well-intentioned therapists refer to polyamorous people as living "alternative lifestyles" or as "non-traditional". Yet polyamorous people come from all walks of life and may lead conventional or conservative lifestyles. From a cross-cultural and historical perspective, the contemporary couple relationship is the "alternative lifestyle". The ethnocentric bias in referring to relationships with more than two people as "non-traditional" is evident when one considers cultures and societies where formal recognition of multiple partners has been and continues to be "traditional" (e.g., Benedict, 2017; Du, 2016; Legros, 2014; Zeitzen, 2020). Cross-cultural analyses reveal that monogamy is not merely a neutral and universally normative social construct but a culturally specific, settler-colonial construct embedded with the racialisation, ethnocentrism, and ableism of its historical roots. When a therapist uses the phrase "alternative lifestyle", their assumption that all people in polyamorous and multi-partnered relationship systems are living a particular "lifestyle" and that they are countercultural in some way reinforces ethnocentric and racist ideology.

Researchers have documented age, income, gender, sexuality, culture, and racialised demographic category diversity among polyamorous people and relationships (Moors et al., 2014; Rubin et al., 2014). Some people in polyamorous kinship systems are part of particular religious, cultural, and subcultural communities, whereas others are part of the dominant cultural group in their region. Multi-partnered people come from across the political and socioeconomic spectrum. Multi-partnered people can experience unique socioeconomic inequalities due to the impact of intersecting racialised and class-based oppression on their options for accessing and navigating intimacy and care, household formation, and spaces and institutions (Klesse, 2014a). Some polyamorous and multi-partnered people have experienced intersecting racism, classism, and other forms of systemic oppression within polyamorous communities (Sheff & Hammers, 2011; see Manduley, 2015). Some multi-partnered people are parents; some are therapists. No single lifestyle or way of life is common to people with polyamorous and/or multi-partnered lived experience, so-called "alternative" or otherwise.

Despite recent increases in the number of countries that recognise dyadic same-gender: dyadic same-gender marriages for people with binary woman or man administrative gender designations – and, in some jurisdictions such as Australia, recognition for non-binary people's marriages – there is only limited and heavily gendered formal recognition for multi-partnered relationships worldwide. A variety of countries recognise the right of men within particular religious and cultural communities to have multiple spouses as long as they marry women. According

to anthropological records, about 85% of human societies have permitted men to marry multiple women (Henrich et al., 2012). Fewer jurisdictions currently permit women and non-binary people to have multiple spouses of any gender. In the matrilineal Naxi or Na (often called Moso or Mósuō) society in southwestern China, it is traditional practice for women to have multiple *tisese* or "walking back and forth" relationships with *acia*, partners who live in separate dwellings (Du, 2016; Hua, 2001; Shih, 2000). There is no traditional term for "husband" or "father" in Na society (Hua, 2001; Shih, 2000). Historically, these multi-partnered relationships did not involve contractual agreements, binding obligations, or exclusivity, although some of these aspects of tisese relationships have shifted in recent decades in some Na communities that have had more contact with other cultures (Shih, 2000).

In 2012, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Public Notary Claudia do Nascimento Domingues provided official state recognition for the civil union between a triad of two women and a man, despite vocal criticism by some religious organisations (BBC News, 2012). In the United States, the suburban city of Somerville in Massachusetts has formally recognised simultaneously registered partnerships with multiple partners since June 2020 (Fox, 2020). Somerville is currently one of the only places in the world that offers something approaching – but not fully equal to – equitable relationship recognition for people of all genders in multi-partnered kinship systems.

Since at least the 1990s, the term "marriage equality" has become synonymous with the movement for legal recognition of civil marriages between two monogamous partners with the same gender marker on their government-issued identity documents (e.g., Marriage Equality USA, n.d.). Therapists familiar with struggles for dyadic same-gender marriage recognition sometimes use the phrase "marriage equality" when discussing people's legislative rights and options for relationship recognition. Unfortunately, this misleading phrase functions to erase the ongoing lack of equitable relationship rights for people in polyamorous relationships and multi-partnered kinship systems.

In many jurisdictions, there is still profound marriage inequality and blatant, state-sanctioned discrimination against people in multi-partnered kinship systems. Many people in multi-partnered relationships face the agonising choice regarding whether to gain legal protections and marriage recognition with one partner while risking the devaluing of all other partners or to forgo marriage benefits with any one partner to prevent discrimination against their other relationships. Polyamorous and multi-partnered people also experience immigration discrimination. Many countries have partnership visa eligibility requirements that deny access to people in polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships. In some countries, people with partner visas can face deportation, criminal fraud charges, and state-sanctioned abuse if they are discovered to be polyamorous or multi-partnered (Jenkins & Rickert, 2020; Klesse, 2016). In many countries, polyamorous people can lose or be denied custody of their children or face criminal charges and state-sanctioned abuse solely due to being polyamorous or multi-partnered (Jenkins &

Rickert, 2020; Klesse, 2019; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020). Therapists who recognise these legitimate concerns can avoid unwitting complicity with state-sanctioned abuse of polyamorous and multi-partnered people. In such cases, it is important to recognise the anti-oppressive practice principle that advocacy is a professional duty when working with people with lived experience of oppression and marginalisation (Brown, 2019).

The term "consensual non-monogamies" (CNM) is often used where a similar qualifier is not used to describe monogamy as "consensual". This linguistic disparity can obscure ubiquitous forms of non-consensual monogamy, such as compulsory and coerced monogamy (e.g., Wilkinson, 2012). This selective use of the qualifier "consensual" also places polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships under inherent moral suspicion for consent violations, despite the well-established ethical norms for consent, negotiation, and boundaries in polyamorous communities. This inequitable framing also obscures polyamorous community norms centred around ethical principles such as honesty, communication, consent, respectful negotiation, and integrity (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). A polycule-centred approach can recognise polyamorous relationships and kinship systems as distinct phenomena without disproportionate use of a moral qualifier (e.g., "consensual") or comparisons to a monogamous reference point (e.g., "non-monogamy").

As clarified by various authors (e.g., Cohen, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014; Conley, in Naftulin, 2019), open monogamy is distinct from polyamory. The term "open monogamy" typically refers to couple-centric, dyadic relationships in which two partners formally agree to engage in romantic and/or erotic connections with other people while maintaining couple privilege and primacy. This is distinct from polyamory, which does not automatically presume that any two people in a multi-partnered relationship agree or desire to privilege their dyadic bond as superior to, or more important than, their other partner relationships. Fern (2020) observed that polyamorous representations in English language formats up to the early 2000s highlighted hierarchical polyamorous relationships and described multi-partner relationships in terms of primary and secondary partners. This focus on hierarchical polyamorous relationships and the use of couple-centric terminology to describe multiple partners (e.g., "extra-pair relationships" in Mogilski et al., 2019) persists in contemporary research. Hierarchical bias also pervades commonly recommended introductory educational resources on polyamorous and multi-partner relationships. In the foreword to Fern (2020), author Eve Rickert acknowledges that Rickert's co-authored critique of hierarchical polyamorous relationships

> fell short. It placed the onus of building security almost entirely on the individual who felt insecure. Despite the many people who were helped by the book, this inappropriate focus caused harm, and over time, I grew to understand there was something missing in our framework – I just didn't have the words for what.
>
> (Rickert, in Fern, 2020, p. x, para. 3)

This hermeneutical injustice is part of why many therapists struggle to distinguish between polyamorous and open relationships. Polycule-centred practice interrogates the power and privilege dynamics that can occur when a monogamous dyad invites additional partners into a pre-existing, couple-centric relationship while preserving the original couple-privileged hierarchy and retaining agreements that were not equitably co-authored by everyone in the polycule.

Polyamorous relationships are not necessarily "open"; the term *polyfidelitous* is often used to designate a closed polyamorous relationship system or polycule. An "open monogamy stance" differs from a polycule-centred practice, which values all relationships within a polycule. To avoid harming our participants, therapists need to transcend dyadic thinking that presumes all relationships have a dyad at their base.

One pervasive monogamist assumption is that a monogamous dyad who wish to shift into a multi-partnered relational system can do so while maintaining the exact same dynamic, core agreements, and boundaries of their pre-existing monogamous relationship. This approach can endanger the wellbeing of all people in the relational system. In Fern (2020), Eve Rickert noted that the hierarchical frameworks in media representations such as *Polyamorous: Married and Dating*

> did a dismal job of honouring the attachment needs of partners who were considered "secondary": those outside a primary, usually presumed to be nesting, couple, whose bond was presumed to be more valid or worthy of protection than the others "opened up" to.
>
> (Rickert, in Fern, 2020, p. ix)

The original relationship can only meet the needs of additional, newer polycule members by giving those new members an opportunity to communicate, negotiate, and change the previously established dynamic. Denying new polycule members this right violates the ethical norms of polyamorous communities (e.g., Barker & Langdridge, 2010). The default hierarchical structure of open, couple-centred relationships requires specific attention to ensure that the attachment-related needs of newer partners are adequately addressed (Fern, 2020).

Autonomy vs. permission norms

Polyamorous community norms about romantic and erotic intimacy and relationship status vary widely. Although relational categories are inherently fraught, permeable, and contested (Heckert, 2010; Kean, 2018; Klesse, 2006; Robinson, 2013), establishing clear and consensual boundaries is vital to relational safety and autonomy. In my therapeutic practice, I have identified two contrasting ethical boundary norms within polyamorous and multi-partnered communities and relationships: the *autonomy norm*, which holds that all people have a default right to unconstrained autonomy in their erotic and romantic activities, and the *permission norm*, which holds that partners have a default right to expect erotic and

romantic exclusivity unless given specific approval. In the autonomy norm, partners are free to engage in romantic and erotic intimacy and to contract relationships in any manner they choose unless they have given explicit consent to limit this behaviour or consult with partners before making decisions. Conversely, in the permission norm, partners set limits on their partners' romantic or erotic intimacy with other people. This means one partner expects another partner not to engage in romantic or erotic behaviour outside their relationship unless they have given explicit permission.

Mononormative counselling approaches typically presume the moral superiority of the permission norm. This presumption can undermine a crucial task of relationship therapists, which is to assist people in identifying and communicating about the norms underlying relational conflicts and ruptures. In cases where the terms of a monogamous relationship agreement have been violated, practitioners need to explore whether the agreement is meeting the needs of all partners, whether the contract was consensual or coerced, and whether the rupture is due to a values conflict between partners (e.g., autonomy norm vs. permission norm) or due to the existing agreement not matching the desired arrangement.

Evaluating relationship quality

The contrast between actual evidence and commonly held assumptions in the field of relationship counselling further demonstrates the need for practitioner familiarity with relevant research findings. Although Cohen's (2016) experiment on perceptions of relationship satisfaction among monogamous, open, and polyamorous "couples" [sic] found that monogamous couples were assumed to have higher relationship satisfaction than "open couples", Muise et al.'s (2019) study of 1,054 "consensually nonmonogamous" people found that people who were more sexually fulfilled in their "primary" relationship also reported greater relationship satisfaction with their "secondary" partner. Similarly, in a study of 1,093 polyamorous people, Mitchell et al. (2014) found that participants with two concurrent romantic partners reported high levels of need fulfilment and satisfaction, and there was no association between need fulfilment with one partner and relationship satisfaction with another.

Therapists often rely on mononormative biases when evaluating polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships. Some couple-centric relationship quality indicators that are often applied to relationship counselling with polyamorous and multi-partnered people include:

- The age of relationship initiation (e.g., "met and married at 18").
- The chronological duration of the relationship (e.g., "married for 20 years").
- Whether they are cohabiting.
- Whether they have procreated or are raising children together.
- Owning a home and/or other assets together.
- Formal relationship recognition, particularly marital status.

- Public and social recognition (including whether or not a particular partner has met their partner's biological parents, work colleagues, or members of their spiritual and cultural communities).
- Whether they are "sexual partners" (some polyamorous relationships are non-sexual).
- Whether they are *fluid bonded* (a term for people who do not use barriers to prevent bodily fluid exchange during physical intimacy).
- Whether they are a woman/man dyad.

These mononormative indicators have all been critiqued by polyamorous communities as biased and unhelpful (Kean, 2018; Klesse, 2006). For example, *comet* relationships, which have "elliptical orbits like comets in space" (Graham, 2019), challenge the mononormative assumption that the quantity and frequency of time spent together is a universal indicator of relationship quality. Comet relationships may be deep, spiritual connections with only infrequent contact due to geographical distance or existing capacities (see Ansara, 2020 to learn more about the existential and emotional significance of comet relationships).

In contrast to the aforementioned mononormative relationship indicators, Fern's (2020) *HEARTS of being secure* (HEARTS) model identifies "the different ingredients, skills, capacities and ways of being required for secure functioning in multiple attachment-based partnerships" (Fern, 2020, p. 173). Fern's model, which was developed through an evidence base of actual polyamorous and multi-partnered people, includes these polycule-centred indicators of relationship quality:

- Here (being here and present with me).
- Expressed delight.
- Attunement.
- Rituals and routines.
- Turning towards after conflict.
- Secure attachment with self.

Whereas couple-centric indicators focus primarily on external and societal markers to determine relationship quality, the polycule-centred HEARTS model indicators prioritise affective experience, interpersonal skills, personal development, and relational dynamics.

From default dyad thinking to polycule-centred practice

Polycule-centred practice requires a shift away from *default dyad thinking*, in which dyads are viewed as the "natural" base unit of relational systems. Polycule-centred therapists support therapy participants to examine their own mononormative

biases and re-evaluate their perspectives, relationship agreements, and boundaries. Some key clinical elements of polycule-centred practice are:

- Investigating and acknowledging coercive/compulsory monogamy.
- Not assuming polyamory is inherently less consensual.
- Recognising polyamory is not necessarily "open".
- Being aware of the power and privilege dynamics when a relationship built as a "two-person tent" wants to "open up".
- Investigating apparent "infidelity", "affairs", and "cheating" in terms of whether the monogamy was with informed consent, coerced, compulsory, or a relationship agreement breach.
- Respecting and valuing the needs of everyone in the relational system.
- Identifying and addressing couple privilege, hierarchical privilege, and other mononormative biases.
- Making sure relationship configurations and agreements are negotiated and consensual, not "mono by default".
- Clarifying relational norms (i.e., autonomy vs. permission norm).
- Addressing relational ruptures that result from non-consensual hierarchies, compulsory and coerced monogamy, and changing awareness and needs.
- Engaging in psychoeducation so people are aware of diverse relational structures and norms.
- Helping people to identify and address privilege and bias in their relational system.
- Identifying non-consensual, mononormative relational dynamics such as:

    - Unicorns – People who join a dyad but are not consulted in relationship decisions.
    - Lassoers – "I'm your one true love! You know you only want me."
    - Love Police – "Do what you want *sexually*, but you can't *love* anyone else!" (In effect, the Love Police rule promotes the sexual objectification of other partners.)
    - Pyramids – "I have to matter the most!"
    - Islands – "I want nothing to do with your other partners!"

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide clinical guidance on how to address each of these common multi-partnered relational dynamics, practitioners can facilitate exploration in relationship therapy by using polycule-centred language like the terms I use earlier.

Conclusion

Mononormative biases are deeply entrenched in sex therapy and relationship counselling. This situation is improving as more polyamorous therapists and therapy participants challenge our erasure and marginalisation. Applying

polycule-centred practice can strengthen people's relationships, improve their communications, and address their core emotional needs in a relational system in a more equitable and ethical way.

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