

Alternative Family Life in Canada
The lived Experiences of Polyamorous Families in the Fringes of Legality

A Thesis Presented to
The Alice Salomon Hochschule
-University of Applied Sciences-
Alice-Salomon-Platz 5 D-12627 Berlin

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
“Social Work as a Human Rights Profession”

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September 2018

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September 2018

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Professor Darja Zaviršek of the Faculty of Social Work at Univerza v Ljubljani for ongoing support and guidance. I would also like to thank Hilal Alkan from Alice Salomon Hochschule as the second reader of this thesis, I am gratefully indebted to her for providing excellent reference material and support with editing.

A huge debt of gratitude goes to the Windsor Polyamory community and to all the families who participated in the research interviews, this work is dedicated to you.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my partner David Briggs for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement. This would not have been possible without you. Thank you.

Abstract

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An Abstract of the thesis by
Charity Smith

This thesis represents the first qualitative study of polyamorous life in Canada, focusing on the lived experiences of five polyamorous families. The results showcase how diverse family structures in polyamory can be, with one family comprised of a long-term, stable triad in which two children were raised, a co-parenting family with numerous adults raising three children, and three additional families without children who maintain their own unique structures. Research indicates these families are well-equipped to support the development of their children and by offering multiple adults who can provide care have positive impacts on the participants who reported suffering from mental health issues as well. Concerning legality, participants cited being unable to share medical and social benefits with multiple partners as being their points of greatest concern. The participants largely rejected the idea of advocating for plural marriage, instead favoring the development of entirely new ways of proving legal kinship.

I. Introduction

Modern (Western) notions of monogamous marriage and family have roots in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero all helped to shape the notion of monogamy being the only socially acceptable form of family. The rapid expansion of Christianity after the fall of the Roman Empire further entrenched the cultural belief that monogamous marriage is the only socially desirable form of family.

Within Western traditions, monogamous marriage is seen as a natural and essential institution, providing the foundation of civil society and political authority. Monogamy is seen as an agent of social order and furthers cohesion of the state. Traditionalists argue that monogamy brings essential private goods to the couple (and any children) in addition to benefiting society and the state at large. To support these beliefs, traditionalists observe that some forms of non-monogamy such as polygamy can be harmful to women, children, and society as a whole. It should be noted that traditionalists don't make distinctions between different types of non-monogamous relationships, and assume that the negative effects from polygamy are present in all forms of non-monogamous relationship. As a result, monogamy is legally protected and promoted while polygamy is actively criminalized.

The aim of this thesis is to develop a thorough understanding of the reality of polyamorous family life in Canada today. The thesis will collect the life narratives of self-identifying polyamorous families in Canada and undergo an analysis set in the context of Canadian law. The thesis aims to explore the human rights protections (or lack thereof) granted to people living in nontraditional family structures, and to further investigate the implications that changing familial structures have for international human rights law. Using this analysis, the thesis will conclude with policy recommendations and a discussion of implications for social work at large to better accommodate nontraditional families in the future.

A. Understanding Polyamory

In order to understand the modern polyamory movement in Canada, it is critical to have an overall understanding of its context including, individual motivations to live the lifestyle, relationship forms, family dynamics, approaches to child rearing, and issues polyamorists face. Polyamory is said to be a cultural rebellion, springing from the sexual revolution of the 1960's and following in the path of second wave feminism (Patterson, 2018, p. 41). The term polyamory has its roots in Greek *polus* meaning "much" and Latin *amor* meaning "love" (Boyd, 2017a, p. 12). The most basic definition of polyamory is the practice of consensually negotiated long-term intimate emotional and sexual relationships between more than two people (Brunning, 2016; Haritaworn et al, 2006; Shannon & Willis, 2010; Emens, 2004; Schippers, 2016; and Sheff 2015). Polyamory is often conflated with other forms of unethical nonmonogamy including bigamy and polygamy. The key differentiator between polyamory and any other type of nonmonogamy is polyamory's egalitarian approach to power dynamics. By its very nature, polyamory critiques the patriarchy, challenges gender norms, rejects the notion of heterosexuality as a default, de-emphasizes the importance of genetics in determining familial grouping, and allows for many different relationship formations.

B. Polyamorous Belief System

Polyamorous relationships are based on a practice of radically open and honest communication driven by a deep level of self-awareness. Emphasis is placed on full egalitarianism, inclusivity, relational autonomy, informed consent, self-possession, and promoting love and sex over jealousy (Haritaworn et al, 2006; Emens, 2004; Klesse, 2011; Patterson 2018; Boyd, 2017b). By placing emphasis on self-knowledge, polyamory challenges individuals to be deeply aware of their desires, needs, wants and boundaries and creates a space where discussing any of these issues with a partner feels safe and encouraged. This practice of radical honesty and self-awareness forms a foundation of trust and intimacy that can then be drawn upon whenever conflict or feelings of jealousy arise. To lie is inherently harmful in polyamorous relationships because it erodes this foundation of trust (Emens, 2004, p.44). Consent is an important topic and is vital to

enable polyamorous people to make informed decisions regarding relationships and sexual encounters. The importance of consent stems from the belief that individual liberty and freedom of choice should be valued above conforming to societal norms and expectations (Emens, 2004,p.41). Self-possession is a concept from feminism that emphasizes that no person should have ownership over another. Extending this belief to relationships, polyamorists would argue that individuals should always feel free to pursue new sexual or emotional relationships even if they are currently partnered. This belief stands in stark contrast to the established monogamous norm, which promotes the idea that a partner can demand sexual and emotional fidelity.

C. Relationship Structure

The structural makeup of polyamorous relationships is inherently diverse; any structure that can be consensually negotiated is possible. Klesse (2011) observes that the decision to label oneself as polyamorous often occurs when boundaries between friendship, lover, and partner relationships become blurred (p. 17). Some relationships have a defined hierarchical structure involving primary, secondary, and tertiary partners, often forming around cohabitating couples (Brunning, 2016; Shannon & Willis, 2010; Sheff, 2015). Primary partners tend to resemble spouses in the traditional sense, and they may seek additional partners together or individually. One commonly seen configuration is the “Vee” where one person is in a relationship with two other people who have no additional connection with each other. Another common configuration is a triad where three people are all equally intertwined, often forming around a married or long term couple finding a third person to date together, while quads tend to be composed of two couples (Sheff, 2015; Boyd 2017). Non-hierarchical structures do exist in polyamory and can present as a form of relationship anarchy. In these types of relationships there is no core couple and all partners are seen as equal. Solo polyamory prioritizes autonomy above all, and these individuals do not seek to connect their other partners.

D. Identifying as Polyamorous

Polyamory is gaining traction globally; in 2015 there were more than 265 publicly listed polyamory advocacy and social groups across 158 countries (Manley et al, 2015, p.168). As public awareness of polyamory and nontraditional relationship structures increases more and more people choose to adopt the lifestyle. Due to its radically inclusive nature, the reasons for people choosing polyamory are almost as diverse as the potential relationship structures it provides.

Some individuals who come out as polyamorous have said that they see it as a lifestyle choice they adopted after careful consideration, while others feel that it is a natural way of being (Klesse, 2014, p. 90). This idea that inclination towards polyamory can be innate is supported by Barker who reports that most respondents say polyamory feels "...natural and real" with only a small number of participants expressing a strong opinion that it is "...something that you choose" (Barker 2005 p.83). Depending on one's perspective, polyamory can be viewed as a natural way of being, an identity, a lifestyle that has its own social structures and norms.

People identify with polyamory for many reasons; its inclusive nature creates difficulty in isolating any one reason why individuals choose it. Many are seeking multiple intimate relationships, having more needs met, more love, more sexual variety, family expansion, feeling natural, or even an outlet for rebellious self expression (Sheff, 2015; Brunning, 2016). A common thread in many polyamorous communities is a belief that it is unrealistic for a single individual in a monogamous relationship to meet all of their needs, and that it is only social pressure and reinforced mono-normativity that prevents people from finding multiple partners to fulfill unrequited desires. They would argue that polyamory's emphasis on radical inclusion makes room for close relationships to form regardless of sexual connections, allowing people to interact as equals without being pressured to fit into narrowly defined boxes and socially imposed boundaries (Brunning, 2016, p.4).

E. Benefits of Polyamorous Family Life

Family is an important concept in polyamory as it allows for expansion beyond marital or genetic relationships to include any individuals who share deeply intimate bonds. Where boundaries between relationships may become blurred resulting in platonic friends being considered family as readily as sexual partners may become family. In essence, polyamorous families can be large and interconnected networks of people which defies the traditional notion of nuclear monogamous connection.

The polyamorous belief in radical honesty permeates throughout the family structure, and proponents note that this equips parents to be potentially much more open and honest with children than their monogamous counterparts. Many polyamorous families believe that such openness and honesty in the family cultivates a deeper sense of emotional intimacy between all family members. These parents often use age appropriate boundaries to determine what and how information is shared with children (Sheff, 2015; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). This in turn creates an environment that practitioners believe promotes values like sex positivity, inclusiveness, and consent culture for the children raised within it.

Polyamorous families often have a large pool of shared resources, which in turn can be divided and shared between family members. Put another way, more adults living together who all can potentially work in some cases leads to greatly increased financial security and stability. Take for example a triad or a vee formation where two members work while another raises children (or pursues other areas of interest like art or education). If one of the working partners loses their job, they still have one source of income that can sustain the family while the others look for new work. Another possible scenario is taking turns with child rearing – family members can rotate who is working and who stays at home or pursues other interests based on mutual agreements. In summary, many practitioners of polyamory believe that the lifestyle uniquely equips families to meet the demands of childcare, domestic work, and earning income by sharing the load between multiple adults, ultimately resulting in greater support both for adults and children than that which is provided by monogamous family life.

F. Children and Polyamory

All current research indicates that children growing up in polyamorous households face no negative effects from being raised with multiple parental figures when compared to children growing up in monogamous (or serially monogamous) families (Sheff, 2015). Sheff noted that children growing up in polyamorous families were especially well-adjusted, self-confident, intelligent and articulate. A small narrative study conducted by Pallotta-Chiarolli (2006) found like Sheff that children in polyamorous families received lots of support and self-esteem by having more adults to relate to.

For some polyamorous families, knowing the biological father of children is of no interest when all members of the family agree to be equal parents to their offspring. Sheff (2015) theorizes that this is done as a direct act of rebellion against patriarchy and monogamous culture, as it is not placing lineage on one father. Children growing up in polyamorous families or extended networks often see other adults as "...aunts and uncles" (Sheff, 2015, p.206). Both Sheff and Pallotta-Chiarolli found that young children have a very self-centered view and only understand adult interaction in terms of shared experiences they have rather than an abstract concept of parentage. Youth between age nine and twelve are more aware of their familial structures and the way the adults in the family interact. Teenagers tended to know and understand their parental relationships more however, as typical teenagers they were more interested in their own social world than that of their parents. Of note is that teenagers raised in polyamorous families frequently question whether or not they themselves are polyamorous (Sheff, 2015, p.186). In short, children raised in polyamorous families have been shown in these limited studies to perceive nothing unusual about the way that they are raised, and that they actively benefit from having more adults in the home to provide additional support, interaction, and love.

G. Marriage and Divorce

In her research, Sheff (2015) found that polyamorous people do not want plural marriage (p.220), but rather to find a means of disentangling social benefits and support structures from the legacy of patriarchal marriage. In practical terms, they seek to find protection and clarification for child custody that isn't dependent on genetic relationships and for the ability to confer family status to anyone they choose, especially when it comes to issues like health coverage, hospital visitation, and property rights. In order to gain access to vital services and protection many polyamorous people will get married even if they remain intrinsically opposed to the institution (Navarro, 2016, p. 445). This can result in some polyamorous relationships leaving certain members in precarious situations, especially when part of the group is forced to marry in order to get a vital protection while the rest are left without any recourse to prove their connections (Navarro, 2016, p. 445). Some polyamorous families use marriage and divorce as a strategic tool to try to ensure social benefits are going to the family members that need it the most. Just as monogamous relationships sometimes break down to the point that the State must provide help in determining the division of child custody and property, polyamorous relationships too can break down, but without any form of legal recognition there is no recourse to seek legal support in this process

In conclusion individuals choose to be polyamorous for many reasons, valuing relationships built on radical honesty, communication, and the notion that love is not a finite resource. Polyamorous families are not wholly unlike monogamous families, and both have unique strengths and weaknesses. It is crucial to note that polyamorous people are not seeking plural marriage but rather to find a new way to allocate social benefits that does not rely on a patriarchal notion of monogamous marriage to gain recognition or legal status.

II. Polyamory in Canada

The following section provides an overview of polyamory in Canada based on the 2017 study on *The Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada*. The aim of this section is to show the demographics unique to Canada, as the vast majority of extant literature examined polyamorous life in the United States of America. This section will discuss demographics, religious background, education, income, polyamorous relationship structures, and legal actions families have taken to protect themselves. This sets the context and backdrop for the following chapters, which discuss the author's own narrative study completed with polyamorous families in Canada.

Nationally the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association (CPAA) is the main body for advocacy and the advancement of polyamory issues in Canada. The exact number of Canadians who are polyamorous is unknown, however Boyd (2017a) estimates almost 72,000 Canadians would be polyamorous (Boyd, 2017a, p. 16). Boyd in partnership with the CPAA conducted a study on Canadian Perceptions of Polyamory with primary data gatherers via an electronic survey with 547 respondents (Boyd, 2017a, p. 17). 91.6% of respondents were from British Columbia, Ontario, Alberta, and Quebec, which also host the majority of the population of Canada (Boyd, 2017b).

A. Demographics

Participants largely ranged between 25-44 years of age (Boyd, 2017a, 2017b) representing a disproportionately younger demographic. In line with other studies done on younger people, the respondents showed a high degree of gender diversity with 30% identifying as male, 59.7% female, 3.5% gender queer, and 3.2% gender fluid. The study found that the most common sexual identities were heterosexual, bisexual, and pansexual (Boyd, 2017a, 2017b). The majority of the respondents (90.2%) identified as Caucasian followed by Métis, African Canadian, Chinese, and First Nations (Boyd, 2017b, p.24).

B. Religion

Respondents most often identified as having no religion or as atheist/agnostic. Among respondents who indicated being religious the majority were Christian followed by Wicca, Paganism and Pantheism (Boyd, 2017a, 2017b). It should be noted that this tendency to reject religious affiliation differs greatly from the overall Canadian population, which predominately identifies as Christian (67.3%) based on the 2011 Census (Boyd, 2017b, p.30).

C. Education and Income

With regards to annual income, the study found that respondents had generally higher incomes than the Canadian population with few respondents earning less than \$25,000 yearly. Income disparity was visible across gender identifications with those identifying as male earning more than both those identifying as female and other. In addition to disparity across gender, those who reported wages of higher than \$60,000 yearly identified exclusively as heterosexual or homosexual, while those with incomes lower than \$60,000 identified as other sexualities (Boyd, 2017b, p.29). Those who experience intersectionality between race, orientation, and identity were also the lowest wage earners. With multiple potential earners in the home, family incomes for polyamorous people were significantly higher than that of their monogamous counterparts. This study indicates that polyamorous respondents have higher levels of education ranging from college diplomas and undergraduate degrees, to post graduate/professional degrees (Boyd, 2017b p.34). In general, those who are publicly out as polyamorous tend to be more highly educated with greater income than other Canadians, a fact which is discussed in much greater detail in the theory section of this work.

D. Rights and Responsibilities of Family Members

Boyd's study indicates that few polyamorous families have taken legal steps to formalize their relationship rights and responsibilities. Amongst participants who had formalized some part of their polyamorous relationships medical or personal care arrangements, power of attorney, and school authorizations for children were most

commonly cited. Respondents between 35-54 years of age were more likely to have completed legal steps to protect their families while younger cohorts were more likely to have completed cohabitation agreements (Boyd, 2017b, p.52). Perhaps this is due to older cohorts having greater income than younger respondents to afford the legal support to draft binding wills and agreements.

When it comes to public perception, many respondents believe that the general population sees polyamory as a kink or fetish and not a legitimate form of family. Overall respondents believe that acceptance of polyamory is growing but that negative media portrayal and poorly written anti-polygamy laws perpetuate negative perceptions of polyamorous relationships. Anti-polygamy laws are also seen by some of the respondents as a large deterrent from being openly polyamorous simply because they make no distinction between unethical and coercive forms of nonmonogamy and ethical, consensual polyamory (Boyd, 2017b).

In conclusion to date, the majority of Canadians who are openly polyamorous tend to be white and upper-middle class with higher levels of education and employment compared the broader population. People choose to be polyamorous for diverse reasons, but common themes throughout the lifestyle include emphasizing open and direct communication, gender equality and radical egalitarianism, defining family by choice, and inclusiveness. All extant research indicates that children raised in polyamorous families suffer no ill effects from their nontraditional upbringing and some limited evidence supports proponent claims that the lifestyle offers benefits to children that are not readily available to children raised in more traditional family settings.

III. Canadian Law

The following chapter is critical in situating polyamory in the context of Canadian law. The *Civil Marriage Act* and *Criminal Code of Canada* are the only federal tools impacting family. The *Civil Marriage Act* enacted in 2005 legalized same sex marriage and the *Criminal Code of Canada* prohibits polygamy and bigamy and is important for our understanding of family life in Canada. Family and marriage law at the discretion of the provinces resulting in each province having different family legislation. A provincial

overview and its impacts on polyamorous families in outlined later in this chapter. This chapter is highly critical of the impacts of National and Provincial law on polyamory.

A. Marriage In Canada

Marriage laws began to change in Canada with divorce legislation being introduced in 1968(Boyd, 2017b) and with this came changes in societal attitudes towards family. Leading to an influx of separated divorced, blended, and mixed families. However today in Canada the normative concept of family remains is the heterosexual couple with children. However, this reality is changing, and it may no longer make sense to think of this as "normal". Calder's research (2009) indicates that the majority of Canadians do not live in an environment that meets the normative definition of heterosexual monogamous family. Calder found that "15.7 percent of families in Canada are lone parent families and that 37.6 percent of Canadian marriages will end in divorce before the thirtieth wedding anniversary" (Calder, 2009, p.59). She concludes that only 44 percent of Canadian households fit the normative definition of family.

Calder's research is further reinforced by Dr. Wu (BCSC 2011) who analyzed Canadian family trends between 1981 and 2006, found a substantial decrease in the incidence of married households and an increase in common law households. His research indicates that if Canadians become married they do so later in life and in proportionally fewer numbers than previous generations. Dr. Wu notes that the widely held belief that marriage is now a dissolvable contract (and the resultant increase in no fault divorces) is one factor driving this trend. In line 475 of British Columbia Supreme Court (BCSC)2011 Wu argued that "the growth of common-law marriage and other non-traditional households should caution us against defining conjugal unions and families in an inflexible manner". In other words, the idea of redefining the notion of family is not an abstract concept for the future, the time to begin a discussion on the rights of and definitions of families in Canada is already here.

B. Canadian Criminal Code

In 2010 Justice Bauman oversaw the Constitutional Question of s. 293 which defines polygamy as a criminal offence under the *Criminal Code of Canada*, R.S.C. 1985, c.C-46 (Criminal Code). The matter of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which was brought forth by Blackmore, Oler, and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day. Blackmore and Oler were leaders of a Mormon community in Bountiful, British Columbia. Blackmore and Oler used the charter of rights and freedoms on the grounds of religious freedom to challenge polygamy laws. Ultimately, Justice Bauman determined “s. 293 criminalizes three (or more) adults from agreeing to form a conjugal union together, prohibiting any association between individuals gaining recognition as a valid and legal conjugal union. While polyamorous activities are not prohibited per se, s.293 criminalizes polygamous *groupings*” (BCSC, 2011, pg. 193). During the trial, the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association also argued s. 293 prohibits polyamorous communities from developing new forms of ceremonial rights pertaining to polyamory, laying the groundwork for future polyamory cases using religious freedom clauses as a potential avenue of gaining additional recognition. Advocacy actions promoting the interests of those who are polyamory largely went ignored by the court and the Canadian press.

C. Impacts of National Law on Polyamorous Families

The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* grants the following fundamental protections to all Canadian citizens: the right to religion, free communication, and peaceful assembly and association. Much of the philosophical underpinnings of Canadian law are based in the historical morals and values of Western Christianity. This very fact creates a paradox – Canadians are granted the freedom of conscience and religion, but the unspoken reality is that this only extends in so far as one's beliefs conform to Christian value systems. Criminalization and preventing recognition of non-monogamy infringe upon the right to association upon, as the government is able to dictate whom one calls family.

The Canadian Charter unequivocally states that “everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security and the right not to be deprived thereof” (*Canadian Charter*, 1982, s 6(2)(b) p.3) One can make a strong argument that polyamorous families are better able to provide security to its members than their monogamous counterparts. One of the often overlooked benefits of polyamory is the increased financial and material benefits afforded to a family that has more than two adults available to work in gainful employment, maintain the household, and engage in other socially beneficial activities like child rearing. Polyamorous families are also uniquely equipped to accommodate individuals with disabilities (Sheff, 2015) – by having multiple people who can rotate between roles of breadwinner, caregiver, and household maintainer, the quality of life for all of the individuals involved can be markedly improved. A sad but very real consideration is the simple fact that the more resources concentrated within a family unit, the better their access to fundamental justice. Lastly, 15. (1) of the *Charter* provides that everyone be afforded equity before and under the law. However, current law defining the role and purpose of family is enshrined in historical religious discrimination based on sex, gender, and relationship form.

In the case of *Blackmore and Oler*, the British Columbia Supreme Court rule laws criminalizing polygamy were found to be in line with the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This continues to show how Canadian law condemns non-monogamy and views non-monogamous relationships as being inherently and criminally wrong. Calder (2009) notes that there has been some progress towards redefining family. In the 2000 Supreme Court Ruling *M. v. H.*, the Court found that the current definition of 'spouse' in Ontario's family law is unconstitutional, leading to changes in 68 different statutes to extend benefits to common law couples. While this was a step in the right direction, the laws continue to recognize monogamy as the only viable form for a relationship to take.

In conclusion in the eyes of national law polyamorous relationships are not prohibited by the *Criminal Code* however, they are not recognized as a legitimate form of relationships. The polyamorous relationships can only be criminalized if a formalization or marriage of the relationships occurs. With very minimal recognition this continues to place polyamorous individuals and families at risk which monogamous families do not

encounter. The Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association suggests the unclear distinction between polygamy and polyamory results in many polyamorous seeking information regarding criminal consequences, which may occur based on their polyamorous lifestyle.

D. Polyamory and Legal Concerns

Akin to monogamous families, polyamorous families have similar issues and concerns however there are more people involved placing different members of the polyamorous family outside of legal means of support. Most often issues arise when relationship deteriorates and dissolve. Areas of law, which are applicable to polyamory, include the *Divorce Act*, however this is only applicable to married couples within a polyamorous dynamic. As well as local laws regarding matrimonial property and family law. Issues of concern include however are not limited to the following as identified in Boyd's 2017a study: 1) Care and management of children; 2) child support entitlements; 3) entitlement to spousal support; 4) the division of property; and 5) allocation of debt.

In addition to concerns listed above often those in polyamorous relationships are outside of the ability to claim social supports/ benefits due to social institutions assumption that relationships are dyadic. For example the Canadian Pensions Plan and the Old Age Security only provides benefits to one spouse or common law partner. The Canadian Revenue Agency assumes that taxpayers have sequential relationships rather than concurrent relationships, limiting ones access to tax benefits. On a provincial level legislation changes region-to-region reading wills, estates, power of attorneys, domestic relations, health care, extend medical benefits, and family law regarding children. In these situations polyamorous families may have to choose which members receive benefits and which are denied various benefits, thus placing polyamorous families in precarious situations.

E. Overview of Provincial Law in Relation to Polyamory

In Canada the provinces and territories are responsible for family law, thus there are many differences in what family legally constitutes coast to coast. In the following sections an analysis of British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland provincial law will occur as participants in the study reside in Ontario and British Columbian. Special note is paid to Newfoundland due to a recent court case involving a polyamorous family.

British Columbia

In British Columbia the primary body of law pertaining to polygamous families is the *Family Law Act* (Boyd, 2017a, p.39). The definition of spouse is encompassing of “marriage like relationship for two years and is not limited to marriage (Boyd, 2017a, p.39). Unique to British Columbia when one of the members of a polyamorous family has a child they are able to appoint some or all of the household members as guardians to the child. However, this requires an appointment by the Court where’s the parents provide affidavit, vulnerable sector criminal records check, child protection records, and a protection order registry check to the court per person seeking to be deemed a guardian of a child (Boyd, 2017a, p.40). This can be a lengthy and costly process, which may be unattainable for many. With this in place children are then entitled to support from all parents/ guardians in the event of a relationships breakdown.

In addition to child protections, spouses and addition partners may be entitled to spousal support under the *Family Law Act*. The *Act* sees spouses are two people however, they can be in multiple spousal relationships at the same time considering “firstly, with a husband or wife, from whom they were separated but not yet divorced; and, secondly, with a partner, with whom they had lived for the requisite minimum two-year period after separation” (Boyd, 2017a, p.42). This notion can be extended up to two valid married relationships among relationships members. Which means that “where a party to a polyamorous relationship is found to be entitled to receive spousal support, all other persons qualifying as a spouse of that person may be obliged to pay it” (Boyd, 2017a,

p.44). Where's property division is only provided based on a single set of dyadic partners.

Ontario

Children's Law Reform Act and the *Family Law Act* of Ontario are applicable to polyamorous people living in this province. In Ontario spouse refers to two people who are married as well as those who have cohabitated for a minimum three years. Whereas a parent, similar to Newfoundland, is anyone who has demonstrated an intention to treat a child as his or her own (Boyd, 2017a, p.63). With regards to children parents can apply to appoint additional custody or access orders however, they must submit the same legal documents as British Columbia. This again is a costly and lengthy court proceeding, which may not be attainable to everyone. For those in a polyamorous relationships it seems in Ontario law that those outside of the dyadic couple may apply for spousal or child support. However, they are not entitled to property rights.

Newfoundland and Labrador

In June 2018, for the first time, a polyamorous family was legally recognized by the Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador. The family composed of one woman in a relationship with two men, who gave birth to a child in 2017 and turned to the courts to have the three parents legally recognized on the birth certificate of the child. The family had decided not to determine which man was the biological father to allow both men parentage to the child. Justice Fowler of the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court's family division deemed that the three parents who had been living as a family unit for three years was a loving, nurturing, stable home recognizing that the *Children's Law Act* was outdated and does not reflect the changes in family composition as it was written over thirty years ago (MacDonald, 2018; Hodder 2018). Justice Fowler based his decision to allow all parents to be designated as such based on the best interests of the child. This ruling has now set a precedent and case law to promote the rights of polyamorous families in other provinces and territories.

In conclusion due to the provincial control of family law there are many differences and some similarities between them. All provinces other than Alberta and Manitoba allow parents to provide additional parents or guardians to parents outside of the dyad. Only British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan allow individuals outside of the dyad to claim property rights. Unique to Ontario and Prince Edward Island they allow those from polygamous marriages, which have been formalized outside of Canada to remain recognized (Boyd, 2017a, p.71).

IV. Literature Review

Academic literature on polyamory and topics related to nonmonogamy as an alternative lifestyle choice is somewhat limited. To date, the vast majority of information on polyamory is in the form of self-help books written by individuals who identify as polyamorous, which in turn makes it difficult to narrow down exact definitions or terminology that is widely accepted when discussing the topic. These writings seek to provide new language and ethical guidelines for individuals searching for entry and guidance into the world of polyamory and often cover topics including gender, sexuality, race and intersectionality. A common theme in all the extant literature is to openly challenge the notion of compulsory monogamy (Haritaworn et al, 2006, p. 518) and to build a culture of sex positivity and radical inclusion. As a point of clarification, the literature review included in this chapter has been limited exclusively to scientific studies.

A. Overview of Findings

Schippers' *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities* examines the extant heterosexual culture of monogamy and seeks to understand the effect polyamorous relationships have within society. Her primary research focuses a spotlight on the ways society pathologizes non-monogamous relationships while privileging monogamy. She criticizes the use of normalization as a strategy to gain acceptance of polyamory, pointing out that simply normalizing polyamory does not go far enough in critiquing the institution of marriage and its long

history as a tool of enforced patriarchal hierarchy. Eleanor Wilkinson (2010) critiques polyamory in much the same way. She sees that polyamory offers alternative forms of relating by challenging hetero and mono-normativity, but similarly to Schippers believes it is the differences between polyamory and monogamy which challenge norms upheld by the institution of monogamous marriage systems and that simply seeking to normalize polyamory does not go far enough (Schippers, 2016, p.20).

Elizabeth Sheff has conducted ethnographic research on polyamorous families over a span of fifteen years; the *Polyamorists Next Door* (2015) is the result of her longitudinal study and the data from this work has been used for in a number of other publications. In her research, Sheff suggests that openly polyamorous communities in the United States (where she conducted her research) were mostly comprised of white, upper-middle class, highly educated people with professional employment who tend to be cis-gender and are not transgendered or intersexed (Sheff 2015). The polyamorists in her study were often able to use their social and monogamous privileges as a shield against stigma.

It is important to note that at the time of this writing there has been only one publishing on polyamory from an African American perspective, which is Kevin Patterson's *Love's Not Color Blind* (2018). Patterson discusses the intersectionality of race and class, examining the ways in which people of colour can create their own communities, additionally providing strategies for leaders of polyamorous groups to promote diversity and inclusion. At the time of writing there are no academic resources looking at Indigenous polyamory. However, the Indigenous voice is not missing from the conversation entirely; *The Critical Polyamorists* is a popular blog discussing non-monogamous relationships from an Indigenous perspective.

Academic research examining polyamory in Canada is currently very limited. *Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada* (2017) is a quantitative study involving self-identified polyamorists from across the country. *Penguins and Polyamory* is a broad overview of pertinent case law and the ways it has been shaped by Canadian media. The

literature review conducted by this work's author yielded no qualitative studies about the lived experiences of polyamorous families in Canada. The following segments of this chapter will discuss what the literature has found with regards to polyamory and gender, sexuality, stigma, and global trends, followed by a critique of current literature.

B. Polyamory and Gender

Polyamory views all people regardless of gender as being equal, a concept known as egalitarianism. Put into terms of binary genders women are equal to men, and in some instances have greater power than their monogamous counterparts. This can be partially attributed to the observed trend of individuals with higher education and income being more likely than less privileged people from openly identifying as polyamorous, and for the unique security polyamory provides for women to seek out multiple people to help meet their needs and the needs of their children instead of relying on a single monogamous relationship (Sheff, 2015).

Research focusing on gender in polyamorous relationships found most men in polyamorous relationships support and practice gender egalitarianism (Schippers, 2016, p.23). Boyd's (2017) study on *Perceptions of Polyamory* surveyed the respondents asking how frequently they believed that people in polyamorous relationships should be treated equally and found "74.4% of respondents strongly agreed" (p.59). Sheff (2015) points out that in her study many polyamorous families maintain conformity to gender norms, noting that women were more likely than men to stay home and care for children while men were more likely to work. Her (2005) research she found that a small but significant minority of women changed their gender roles based on the newfound freedom they experienced when adopting a polyamorous lifestyle.

C. Sexuality

Sexuality is an important aspect of the human experience. Recent decades (beginning in the 1960's) have seen growing acceptance and recognition for LGBTQI2 communities and with it has come a framework for recognizing family life that doesn't fit easily into the established boundaries of monogamous coupling. Due to a deep history of rejection at the hands of family members and society at large, queer communities have long had to find different ways to build relationships and family connections, with forms of nonmonogamy becoming closely linked to the queer experience. Gay male sexual culture especially has developed rich and in-depth means of non-monogamy. Many sexual subcultures create and support multiple forms of non-monogamy for erotic play and for exploring sexuality and fetishes (Haritaworn et al, 2006, p. 518).

Bisexuality and polyamory seem to be strongly correlated in their rebellion against monogamy (Mint, 2004, p.68). Bisexuality can be seen as wanting more than one relationship to satisfy different needs and desires. Haritaworn's (2006) research has shown that bisexuals develop intimate relationships with different people of different genders simultaneously and at different times in life. Bisexuality within the LGBTQI2 communities is often stigmatized, as each community pressures them to choose to be either straight or gay (but not both) in order to conform to cultural norms. This results in bisexuals experiencing marginalization even from other communities that experience marginalization themselves. Mint goes so far as to suggest that polyamory was created specifically for the needs of bisexuality and by extension that polyamory activism is synonymous with bisexual activism (Mint, 2004, p.69).

D. Stigma

Social stigma places polyamorous people at a disadvantage in line with Goffman's theory about individuals who experience "discredited status" due to their non monogamous relationships and perceived sexual deviance (Sheff, 2015, p.284). Once one is 'discredited' based on a social belief they become vulnerable. Polyamory faces

significant stigma within society consequently leaving polyamorous people open to discrimination, oppression, and no recourse to gain official recognition or protections.

Stigma encountered by polyamorous people often takes the form of strained or broken relationships with family, loss of friendships, housing eviction based on residential and property laws, job loss, and loss of child custody (Sheff, 2015, p. 53). Emens (2004) highlights the case of a triad living in The United States in 1999 where a woman in a relationship with two men was taken to court by the paternal grandmother who was outraged to learn about the mother's polyamorous lifestyle. The grandmother sought and was granted custody of the child as the judge deemed the mother's lifestyle immoral (p.28). Fearing loss of a child if a friend or family member disapproves of your partner is something that heteronormative families would never face; yet this is a very real fear for many polyamorous families today.

Lasting impacts of racism allow white people to act and do what they please with little consequence or worry, while Indigenous people and people of colour face stigma and are hypersexualized by society, thus any deviation from established norms may be viewed as a reinforcement of negative stereotyping (Sheff, 2015, p.54). In Sheff's (2015) small sample of people of colour, some reported they are hesitant to participate in mainstream polyamorous communities because of the risks of job loss and rejection from family and ethnic group for being in something society deems perverse.

Sheff & Hammers (2011) note that "everyone involved in 'perverted' sex risks social censure...[and] people unprotected by social advantages are more vulnerable to the discriminatory impacts of this sexual stigma than are those shielded by racial and/or class privileges" (P.199). This suggests that those with greater social advantages have the ability to use their deviance from heteronormative society as a means to challenge social norms and stigmas while those experiencing greater intersectionality of oppression are burdened by racism, poverty, and a lack of educational and employment opportunities which prevent them from challenging the very same norms. People experiencing intersectional oppression are unable or unwilling expose themselves to further

stigmatization and ostracized. Their research indicates that polyamorous and BDSM communities in North America, Western Europe and Australia have not yet been able to escape the legacy of racism and classism which accompany white privilege (Sheff & Hammers, 2011, p. 209).

E. Critiques on Polyamorous Literature

Noël (2006) criticizes literature on polyamory and its lack of diversity in authorship, noting that most writers are well-educated upper class white women. This homogeneity creates inherent flaws as it gives voice only to the most privileged members of society and ignores the experiences of all others. To address homogeneity, polyamorous texts must undergo a thorough self-examination of its whiteness. Noël catalogues instances where language in polyamorous texts demonstrate a lack of regard for cultural and historical contexts, consequently negating the overall polyamorous message of radical inclusion (2006, p. 614). Noël acknowledges that literature to this point challenges heteronormative monogamy but lacks the ability to challenge race and class systems, preventing the formation of overarching coalitions to “transforms oppressive systematic relationships and family structures” (Noël, 2006, p. 615).

In summary, recent years have seen growth in the body of academic literature examining polyamory but overall information about the topic is currently limited. What little academic research there is lacks diversity and the same studies are referenced repeatedly in other works. More voices need to emerge from Black and Indigenous communities, as well as other regions of the world with perspectives outside of the Western experience. To advance the rights of polyamorous families there must be more research directly into the lived experiences of these families, and it is this very gap that is addressed by this work.

V. Theoretical Framework

As discussed in earlier sections practitioners of polyamory suggest that polyamory is inherently feminist with its emphasis on social justice and egalitarianism the following section will situate polyamory within feminist's critiques of monogamy. Followed by a critical analysis of polyamory within queer theory due to its innate connection to sexual minorities. To conclude the chapter a discussion on the critiques and intersectionality of polyamory will occur.

A. Modern Polyamory's Roots as a Feminist Critique of Monogamy

One important way that polyamory differentiates itself from polygamy and other unethical forms of nonmonogamy is the way that power is distributed in the relationships. Both polyamorists and society view polygamy as being inherently harmful to women and children, and a practice that ultimately promotes patriarchy. In polygamy power rests with the male who is able to take multiple partners while the women must remain monogamous to him. Polyamory on the other hand emphasizes radical egalitarianism where each partner is free to pursue relationships that fit their own personal needs.

Western European colonialism has been one of the key drivers behind the normalization of monogamy as a societal default worldwide. European social hierarchies historically have been based on the notion that men are inherently superior to women, with dynastic power and inheritance rights almost invariably following patriarchal bloodlines. These deeply rooted power dynamics metastasized and coalesced into the subjugation and exploitation of "...women, Black and third World people, working-class people, [and] older people" (Lorde, 1984,p. 114) but throughout it all there has been a constant undercurrent of patriarchy. Western empire-building and colonial appetites entrenched this notion of feminine inferiority in each new occupied territory, using heterosexual monogamy as a weapon to ensure that women are always subservient to the whims of their husbands.

In prototypical European societies there exists a mythical norm; male, white, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure (Lorde, 1984, p. 116), and all those who lie outside of this have historically been treated as deviant others. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or individuals identifying as anything other than heterosexual have been disenfranchised and treated as subhuman. The fight for marriage equality has inadvertently supported and legitimized this notion of monogamy being the default form of relationship, and even though the box of who can get married has grown larger there are still many forms of relationship that still fall outside of its purview. Truly radical inclusion and egalitarianism must make room for individuals to define familial relationships for themselves, and to achieve this the patriarchal roots underpinning the notion of marriage and family must be challenged.

Polyamory often used is a blanket term that covers many different relationship models and approaches to ethical non-monogamy. Built on the principles of social justice, honesty, communication, and radical egalitarianism, polyamory's proponents see the core of the lifestyle as an extension of feminism. However, polyamory is often conflated with several unethical models of nonmonogamy which actively reinforce patriarchal gender roles and power structures. For example, some cultures and relationship models have a "one-penis-policy" where a man and a bisexual woman are both allowed to pursue additional female partners, but the woman is prevented from finding any additional male partners, an arrangement that has some echoes of polygamy. Polygamy and polyandry are two forms of nonmonogamy that polyamorists consider to be unethical due to the inherent imbalance of power and vector for oppression that is built into those relationship models. Oppression is a means of corruption used to distort the power from the individual and demanding energy from those who are oppressed; feminism puts a spotlight on all the ways that social constructs constantly drain women energy in ways that men are never exposed to, and polyamory seeks to challenge this by restructuring the way society views relationships.

Trapped within the confounds of a heteronormative, mono-normative society where women are idealized as docile keepers of the home. Women (especially those facing intersectional discrimination) are prevented from connecting with their inner erotic selves, which Lorde (2007,p.104) describes as a means of self replenishment and a provocative force. Lorde theorizes that erotically connected individuals feel empowered, satisfied and capable of effecting change, and thus are a direct threat to patriarchy. Lorde further argues that humans need to have deep, meaningful connections built on physical and emotional bonds through passionate and loving interactions. This builds bridges and connections between one another, further threatening the patriarchal control which seeks to isolate power in the hands of the elites. For Lorde (2007, p.109) the erotic is feared and contained to the bedroom alone because it enables us to question the society around us and demands a greater degree of satisfaction in life. Practitioners of polyamory seek to create a safe space for women (and individuals of all genders) to connect with their inner eroticism. Practitioners of polyamory do not limit intimate relationships only to defined partners; rather they encourage deeper connections to friends and family promoting wide networks of connections.

Lorde's notion of the erotic is at odds with society's belief in dyadic monogamous coupling. Monogamous coupling results in women pouring time, financial, physical and emotional resources into a singular relationship, typically with a man who has no social pressure to reciprocate the same level of attention and energy into the relationship. This fundamental imbalance leaves women drained of their resources and consequently subserviently reliant upon their monogamous counterpart for support and care. Such imbalanced dyadic monogamous coupling encourages the isolation of women, cutting them off from forming deep relationships with friends, family, and other women who could provide comradery and support. Polyamory seeks to provide an alternative where instead of fearing the development of deep bonds or increased sexual connection women instead are encouraged to connect with others. These connections are allowed to form and grow organically, regardless of the level of eroticism. Proponents of the polyamorous lifestyle believe this radical egalitarianism allows for deep human connections and increased respect for all people at all levels of eroticism.

B. Polyamory from Queer Theory Perspective

The term queer tends to function as an overarching term to describe people who fall outside of the heterosexual norm. Queer labeling questions norms around gender, sexuality, and relationships (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 7). Queerness can also be seen as a way to think outside of the box of whiteness and the comforts of the familiar, providing an opportunity to release assumptions about what we are and who we might become (Willey, 2016, p. 122). Using queer theory as a framework to examine and question the heterosexual norm provides a unique avenue for the analysis of polyamory.

Research done by Weston (1991) found that many lesbian and gay individuals have historically created families that fall outside of the monogamous norm. In the 1960's and 1970's people who were queer and out were often ostracized from their family and community, leading many to question traditional notions of community and kinship. Lesbian and gay families formed within the context of this need for connection after being rejected by society, and often were built from close friendships, strong social ties and community engagement instead of biological relation or ethno-religious background. Being rejected by patriarchal, mono-normative society allowed these families complete freedom to redefine kinship as they saw fit, leading to the birth of the modern polyamory movement as an alternative to monogamy.

The extant research on polyamory in modern society is limited, and to date the majority of participants in any studies have been well-educated Caucasian men and women. De Beauvoir created a framework that is useful in examining why this is, theorizing that people are born with certain socially imposed constraints and freedoms. As such, they are not born monogamous or polyamorous as a default but rather those who have more privilege and social freedom will choose alternative relationship styles when they don't feel limited by the constraints they were born into. Therefore, the individuals with the greatest amounts of social freedom are the ones most able to openly practice a relationship form challenging mononormativity without fearing adverse social backlash. As De Beauvoir notes, in Western societies wealthy white men have the greatest social

freedom and least social restraints at birth while the least privileged people are nonwhite and poor women (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 35), thus explaining the extremely limited data on Indigenous and nonwhite polyamorous individuals.

Queer theory has often critiqued the same sex marriage movement in that it excludes those who do not define as explicitly gay or lesbian, and its exclusion of other forms of relationships within queer and LGBTQI2 communities. Queer theory contends that assimilation strategies or means to make outside groups look the same or similar to the dominant creates fractures in the queer spectrum, noting that assimilation strategies tend to promote the rights of white educated, middle class gay and lesbian people, leaving the intersectional others outside once again (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 26). In this light, modern polyamory in its idealized form is simply queer theory expanded to include relationship structures that don't adhere to societal norms – the principles of radical inclusion and egalitarianism are rooted in feminist and queer theory.

According to Sheff (2011), lesbian and gay polyamorous families formed primarily to challenge the heteronormative and as a means of forming kinship amongst stigmatized sexual minorities in a time of intense social paranoia where any erosion of traditional Christian values was seen as steps down a 'slippery slope' ending in bestiality, pedophilia and incest, and other horrific taboo acts. Polyamory has been a means for sexual minorities to build and create families, which meet their unique needs while providing an alternative to monogamy. However, divides remain as even within the queer spectrum there is still discrimination, especially against transgendered and bisexual individuals. Many polyamorous individuals choose to label themselves as bisexual or another similarly inclusive term to denote that they are open to forming close connections with people regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

Adrienne Rich suggests that society's need to make heterosexuality compulsory reveals how unstable it is; if heterosexuality was "normal" governments around the world would not need to work so hard to protect and enforce it (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 35). This can be said for mononormativity as well in that society goes to great extents to

ensure that monogamy maintains a central pillar supporting social power structures. This view fits within the overall context of existentialist philosophy, which holds that humans do not have a fixed or fundamental way of being and that gender and sexuality are not fully a product of biological essentialism or social essentialism alone, but rather a confluence of the two (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 33). Much of polyamorous philosophy is couched in similarly existentialist terms.

Sheff's continuing research (2011, 2015) suggests that those who are polyamorous are not necessarily seeking plural marriage, which is an institution shaped and moulded by a history of patriarchal control. Instead, polyamorists seek to gain legal and social legitimacy for their relationships and the ability to define family on their own terms instead of fitting into a box dictated by an impersonal governing body. Rights and benefits currently provided via marriage should instead be provided based on individual merits. This is fundamentally in line with queer theory in that it seeks to challenge the way society functions in order to include those who have been marginalized and excluded.

Foucault provides another philosophical lens through which polyamory can be evaluated. Foucault focuses on how people define and see themselves as normal. He sees society as a means for individuals to scrutinize and judge themselves. They must act, behave, and look in a manner that is in line with the societal norm in order to be successful and happy (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 66). Society tends to reward those who fall into what is defined as normal and punish those who fall outside of the normal. He goes on to suggest that the global capitalist environment places problems and solutions on to the individual rather than society. In the case of non-monogamy, society dictates that it is inherently harmful and dangerous; the solution must come from individuals by conforming monogamy, either by choice or forced coercion. To be non-monogamous is in effect challenging society as a whole to reconsider the ideologies, which promote and maintain monogamy.

Judith Butler builds on the notion of power in relation to feminism. She argues that by allowing oneself to be specifically categorized (such as identifying as a “woman”) one is implicitly supporting stereotyping and discrimination against those who do not neatly fit into any of the available categories (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 75). Black Feminist critics of the feminist movement argue that white middle class women were solely advocating for the rights of their group by excluding and diminishing the lived experiences of non-white, non- middle class women. Ultimately this indirectly led to white feminists supporting the very institutions responsible for the inequality and oppression they said they opposed. They argue that in order for feminism to succeed, any and all structural discrimination must be addressed, it is pointless to make any gains if it comes at the cost of repressing other people. This is fundamentally in line with polyamorist and queer philosophies of inclusion.

C. Critiques of Modern Polyamory

Both the scientific and popular literature examining modern polyamory are unabashedly attempting to promote the benefits of adopting this lifestyle, making scientific critiques difficult. However, by reading between the lines in some of the answers given by survey respondents a few key trends and complaints emerge. Polyamory, like any other form of relationship, has merits and weaknesses and is susceptible to the same issues and concerns as monogamy perhaps on a magnified scale.

One negative trait that is universally associated with non-monogamous relationships is jealousy. Coming up with coping strategies and ways to combat jealousy is the topic that dominates the vast majority of self-help books relating to non-monogamy and is absolutely an issue worth considering. No studies have specifically examined the impacts of polyamory (and by extension, jealousy) on mental health, but this is a topic that should be investigated much more thoroughly. Another area that warrants further study and attention is the impact that polyamory has on domestic violence. Idealized polyamory spreads a message of absolute egalitarianism, but data is lacking to determine if women and children are safer, as safe, or more at risk in non-monogamous households.

A much more nuanced critique of the current state of modern polyamory must include an examination of the role that privilege plays in being able to be out and polyamorous. Peggy McIntosh's theory of straight privilege builds on the notions of male privilege and white privilege, observing that those who seem or appear straight are given greater advantages in life such as access to education and career advancement. Polyamorists who belong to the white middle class are frequently able to use straight privilege and mononormativity to their advantage to hide from social stigma. Depending on their individual structures, polyamorous relationships on the surface can appear heteronormative and monogamous. Those who are out as polyamorous often have various privileges to fall back on such as their whiteness and wealth or career stability, which reduces and protects them from stigmas and oppressions unlike those who were already marginalized and oppressed. Relationship privilege can exist within polyamorous groupings when two or more people in a polycule (a polycule is comprised of all of the individuals involved in a polyamorous relationship) create a hierarchical structure, which values certain relationships above others which in turn is exploited as a means to gain time or emotional resources and manipulate their partners.

Another important consideration within queer theory (and polyamory by extension) is society's seemingly utter lack of awareness about bisexuality. Within queer and gay communities bisexuals often experience biphobia and discrimination. Terms like "gold star" within the gay and lesbian community to denote people who have never had heterosexual partners exclude and other individuals who don't fit neatly into a homosexual box. Queer theory's lack of attention to bisexuality continues to promote the exclusion of its members (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 137). The extant literature on polyamory largely involves women who self-identify as bisexual, yet statistics on the incidence of male bisexuality in polyamory is currently lacking. Oversights like this must be addressed for polyamory to live up to its purportedly open and inclusive invitation to all.

In summary, much more research needs to be done before the idealistic claims of polyamory can be fully evaluated. These studies must strive to give voice to more than the prototypical white and wealthy individuals who have been studied so far and include a thorough examination of the relationship between, race, class, and the social freedom to pursue nontraditional lifestyles.

D. Intersectionality – A Potential Blindspot for Modern Polyamorists

The primary idea in Critical Race Theory is the analysis of relationships between societal norms and life experiences. Intersectionality seeks to understand the interactions between self-identities and social power gained from privilege, entitlement, and oppression (Barker & Scheele, 2016; Patterson, 2108). The overlapping of multiple identities result in overlapping social influences. For example, women experience misogyny, people of colour experience racism, queer people experience homophobia, and a woman of colour who identifies as queer experiences intersecting discrimination on all three levels. Extending this to polyamory, someone may experience intersectional discrimination at four levels; sexuality, gender, race, and mononormativity.

To date, most research on polyamory has been completed by white, middle class, educated women, with participants being white, middle class, cisgender men and cisgender or bisexual women. Polyamory is lacking a critical look at intersections of race and class. In both Canada and the United States of America, voices from Indigenous and Black communities is missing. One reason for this could be the class and ethnicity of the researchers preventing their interactions with other communities due to historical mistrust and the extremely personal nature of the topic. To address this shortcoming and to live up to polyamory's standard of radical inclusion, it will become increasingly important for polyamory research to come from within Indigenous and Black communities. However, it is easy for both communities to disengage due to lack of representation.

Black Americans and Indigenous Canadians share similar experiences of oppression and marginalization. In both instances the effects of generational oppression and marginalization by limiting access to financial services, housing, mental health care, education, and employment have created layers of oppression that must be addressed. White middle class polyamorists are privileged in having time, energy, emotional availability, housing, disposable income, and education that are simply not available to marginalized peoples. To live up to its core values of radical inclusion and egalitarianism, polyamorists by definition must also fight for equality at all levels of society.

Indigenous peoples of Canada and the United States have been systemically dominated by white Eurocentric assimilation tactics. Marriage has been used as a means to destroy the traditional notion of family by “restraining [individuals] both conceptually and physically inside colonial borders and institutions that included reservations/reserves, residential schools, and churches and missions all designed to kill the Indian” (TallBear, 2014). Part of this coerced assimilation was to force the institution of monogamous coupling and nuclear family life upon groups of people who defined family very differently. Prior to European conquests, Indigenous families were made up of tribes comprised of large extended family networks and plural marriages. Reserves were and continue to be pieces of land designated by the European conquerors where Indigenous people are forced to live. Much like the practice of redlining, reserve life is characterized by poverty, a lack of access to health care, education, unemployment, and other social services.

Haritaworn points out that practitioners of polyamory often fail to recognize how gender, class, and race interconnect, and that focusing solely on the role of mononormativity in creating oppression is counterintuitive (Haritaworn et al, 2006, p. 516). Within queer theory little has been done to discuss how people in non-monogamous relationships live at the confluence of multiple axes of oppression, neglecting issues like racism, transphobia, biphobia, and ableism within its own community. Contributing to the lack of intersectional awareness is the fact that much of the extant literature on

polyamory is “self help” books that do not have the scope to tackle issues like race, class, and gender. Normativity is built into the extant body of polyamory literature and is sorely lacking a critical review of the role of power structures, race and ethnicity, gender, and class, inadvertently portraying white, privileged people as being the most sexually and emotionally advanced (Haritaworn et al, 2006, p. 519).

Some polyamory advocates (and popular authors) claim it is a superior form of relationship, and that practitioners put in significant labour to maintain the complex emotional understanding and ability to communicate, therefore true polyamory is above and beyond other forms of non-monogamy. However, this very idea is antithetical to the core value of radical inclusion in polyamory, which states that people should feel free to be and love whoever they want. It also neglects all the ways that polyamory borrows and builds upon existing traditions and philosophies. Radical inclusion leaves no room for superiority complexes.

To build inclusive polyamorous communities, advocates must seek to support those who have experienced racism, trans phobia, ableism and other forms of oppression to truly claim inclusiveness. Sexual empowerment and liberation is often a privilege only available to those who have experienced the least amount of oppression themselves and should never be taken for granted (Haritaworn et al, 2006, p. 523).

Many polyamorous individuals will experience forced ambassadorship, where they are the only or one of a few polyamorous people monogamous friends and family interact with. Due to these interactions, the individual becomes a de facto advocate of polyamory and others form their beliefs and impressions based on the individual's actions. This notion of forced ambassadorship is not limited to polyamory, and occurs within many marginalized communities. Within polyamory those who are Black or Indigenous often become forced ambassadors in a predominantly white community. Patterson (2018) notes that forced ambassadorship leads to othering, creating barriers of entry keeping especially nonwhite individuals excluded from white polyamory spaces.

By avoiding othering in polyamorous communities and instead fostering dialogue and understanding of more than one perspective will ultimately strengthen communities.

In conclusion to truly challenge mononormativity and historical power structures it's imperative that polyamory advocates recognize that being inclusive is a benefit and that lacking in diversity is a harmful detriment (Patterson, 2018). White polyamorous communities must acknowledge their role in continuing cycles of oppression and racism and always strive to be radically inclusive. Only through building robust diversity in communities and doing the work to always be inclusive of different ethnicities, cultures, belief systems, sexualities, genders, and abilities, community leaders and advocates can affect the changes they seek. Polyamory advocacy must incorporate a thorough understanding of intersectionality and feminism, and build bridges to any oppressed groups, whether that be LGBTQI2, BDSM, Black and Polyamorous, Indigenous communities, or anyone else who has historically been excluded. Radical inclusion means there is room for everyone no matter their background.

VI. Methods

A. Hypothesis

This thesis aims to explore the ways in which heteronormativity in Canadian society and its active promotion of monogamous relationships within familial structures impacts families who do not fit the traditional monogamous depiction of family life. Specifically, polyamory is not recognized as a legitimate form of family and consequently those who practice lack the social support and safety nets, which are readily available to monogamous, married couples.

B. Research Questions

The primary research question the thesis aims to answer is: What are the lived experiences of polyamorous Canadian families existing on the fringes of legality? In particular: The background and evolution of their polyamorous family. The choices and

decisions individuals made leading to practicing polyamory. What struggles have they faced as a family and individually? And How would they like to have their family Recognized legally?

C. Methods

Narrative inquiry as a means of research will be the primary means of data collection to deepen social work's understanding of polyamorous families. The researcher used semi-structured face-to-face interviews as frequently as possible while maintaining flexibility to meet the needs of research participants. In order to gather the narratives, which became the data points used to plot trends to reveal insights and give meaningful context on micro, macro, and mezzo levels of society.

D. Participant Recruitment

Due to time constraints and the limited scope of a Master's thesis, narratives were collected from five families with eight participants. The primary means of participant recruitment was through the use of the snowball technique. The snowball technique was selected because through network utilization the researcher is better able to have inferred trust and building blocks to "being in relation" (Caine et al, 2013, p.583) with the participants, which is critical for collecting accurate narratives. The researcher had hoped to have a greater number of participants to provide adequate saturation of data however, was challenged by many blockades in participant recruitment. Participants were all nineteen years of age and older; the youngest participant had grown up in a polyamorous family. Participants had been involved in their polyamorous relationships for at minimum six months at the time of the interview. Participants were all Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada, as this ensured they were situated within the context of Canadian society and law.

E. Narrative Collection

Narrative collection attempted to be as flexible as possible to meet the needs of the families involved in the research participation. The initial aim of the research was to conduct in person interviews with the polyamorous family unit with follow up individual interviews. However, this format did not work for many of the research participants. The research conducted an in person interview with a polyamorous family of three. The researcher, conducted an interview over the telephone as the participant did not have regular Internet access to conduct a Skype interview. Another interview was conducted over Skype. The third family interview composed of a mother and adult son was conducted over Facetime. For the four family interviews lasted between ninety minutes to three hours.

The final participant felt more comfortable in having the research questions provided to her to allow her to provide written descriptions of her responses. The participant suggested creating a Google document to allow her to work on the questions over time in support of her mental health, while allowing the researcher to ask additional questions based on the participants responses. The researcher felt it was important to support the participant in any way possible to ensure her comfort in taking part in the study as she was very eager to have her voice heard.

F. Analysis of Data – Qualitative Content Analysis

The aim of this methodology is to utilize content analysis to provide rich, in-depth knowledge of polyamory based on the narratives of those who participated. The analysis was to identify, compare, and contrast overarching themes and parallel topics. The analysis took various excerpts from the participant families and weaved them together into a cohesive narrative to demonstrate the commonalities and differences between their experiences. Quotations and excerpts from the narratives were used to demonstrate trustworthiness and accuracy by demonstrating direct connections to the categories of analysis (Elo Et Al, 2014, p. 6). Participants had the opportunity to review any excerpts

were used to ensure the accuracy of their narratives. The critical narrative analysis placed the themes within the context of social institutions and power realms, ultimately weaving together a narrative of polyamorous familial experience at the micro, mezzo, and macro spheres of society (Souto-Manning, 2012, p.163). Specifically the analysis set the narratives in the context of Canadian law to demonstrate the need for polyamorous and nontraditional families to be legitimized under law with the ultimate aim for this research project to be used as a tool for advocacy.

G. Ethics

The use of narrative analysis as a form of inquiry must first and foremost begin with an awareness of the researcher's responsibility and obligations toward those whose stories are lived, told and used as data (Caine et al, 2013, p.576). Due to the sensitive nature of the project the primary ethical consideration was the anonymity of participant and the confidentiality of their narrative. Each participant was enabled to choose an alias however, some chose to have their real name used. To ensure informed consent every participant was provided consent to participate document along with detailed information on the study. Each participant had the right to be removed from the study at any time.

VII. Research Findings

Narratives from five polyamorous Canadian families were collected in order to understand their experiences living on the fringes of legality. The narratives collected attempt to provide insight into the choices, decisions, and belief systems which lead to the creation of their polyamorous families and to gain a better understanding of any stigma and challenges (with a special focus on legal implications) they face living in a monogamous world.

A. Demographics of Family Participants

The research study consists of five self-identified polyamorous families with a total of eight participants, all of whom reside in either Ontario or British Columbia. Six of the participants are Canadian citizens and two are citizens of the United States with one having a permanent Canadian residence visa. The ages of participants ranged from nineteen to forty eight years of age. Educational levels varied greatly, including completion of some high school, trade schooling, completion of college, and postgraduate studies. Household incomes varied from ten thousand to thirty thousand Canadian dollars yearly with one family earning two hundred thousand dollars yearly. One household was completely dependent on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which provides income support to those who have been deemed unable to work due to a disability, with another family receiving partial income from ODSP. The legal marital status of the participants are as follows: three whom are legally married, two identified as common law, and the remainder legally single. Seven of the participants identified as Caucasian with Western European heritage while one participant identified as First Nation. Three of the participants indicated having no religious inclination, three identified as being spiritual but not religious, and one follows First Nation beliefs.

B. Gender, Sexuality and Polyamorous Identity

Participants were asked about gender identities; two participants identified as male, five identified as female, and one participant identified as gender fluid. Sexuality varied with participants identifying as straight, bisexual, heteroflexible, demisexual, asexual, and pansexual. Some participants indicated that polyamory was an avenue for increased sexual exploration, while others viewed polyamory as a means of fostering romantic attachments without a need for sex at all. Brianna's experiences of being asexual suggest that polyamory allows her to have her emotional and non-sexual physical needs met while permitting any of her romantic partners to seek sex if they do not also share the asexual identity. While participants Angela, Joni, and Owen sought out polyamory as an

avenue to explore new sexual experiences, particularly within the context of kink and BDSM.

Participants were asked if they consider polyamory an identity, orientation, or lifestyle choice. Many considered polyamory an identity; among this group a common belief that people are socially conditioned to be monogamous but that monogamy is not a natural default for everyone emerged. Some participants indicated that they formed their identity as a protest against the norm of monogamy. Joni placed a lot of emphasis of the power of free will, saying “I made the choice I was not going to have children, I also made the choice I didn’t want to be with one person from the rest of my life”. She indicated that her upbringing, which, emphasized always keeping an open mind, has been critical in her ability to form the relationships she has chosen. For Phillip, the idea of having to choose an identity feels like he has to fit in predetermined societal boxes, a concept which he fundamentally disagrees with.

C. Definitions of Polyamory and Family

Each group in the study differed slightly in the way they chose to define polyamory and family, but several common themes emerged. The participants indicated that chosen family can include friends, roommates, partners, pets, and anyone who is kind, loving, consistent presence in their life that works for the betterment of everyone they are involved with. The participants agreed that for them family is anyone who meaningfully contributes to providing care for one another. Above all, they were unified in a belief that it is critical for them to be able to freely choose their family members.

All participants noted various ways their definition of family falls outside of the mono-normative definitions upon which current Canadian law and Western society are based. Christine noted that the notion of nuclear family is extremely limiting and excludes a variety of family forms. Many participants expressed that they feel much closer and more connected to their polyamorous family than they are to their biological families, with Owen giving the example that he chooses to spend holidays that are

traditionally associated with family togetherness (such as Thanksgiving) with polyamorous family members and friends instead of biological family.

Participants defined polyamory in terms of their own experiences, collectively leading to an expansive definition. All agreed that polyamory is the practice of ethical non-monogamy. It may involve multiple romantic relationships (which may or may not be sexual), built upon deep intimate emotional connections which are flexible in nature and able to be adapted for different needs and desires. Each polyamorous relationship has the potential to present radically different structures, beliefs, and practices uniquely shaped by the value systems of the participating members.

One family in the study chose individuals they co-parent with as their polyamorous family. Emily describes how she shares a deeply spiritual and emotional (but not sexual) connection with her polyamorous family based on collectively raising their children together. Her biological family has embraced her co-parenting family and children creating a large network of kinship. Marie sees polyamory as a way to maintain lifelong relationships that can ebb and flow as time and circumstance allows. She rejects the monogamous notion of the “relationship escalator” where you meet someone, get married, have children, grow old and eventually end the relationship when one partner dies.

Emily sees polyamory as “the practice of taking each relationship where it naturally wants to land whether it includes sex or not”. In her view, love is not diminished by her partner loving others. She sees most people as being inherently polyamorous in that it is readily accepted that adding additional children or friendships to one’s life does not diminish any of the love that already exists, and that this logic can naturally be extended to additional relationships and family structures.

D. Ethics

Just like all forms of relationships, the participants discussed ways that the practice of non-monogamy can be ethical or unethical. A relationship being polyamorous (ethically non-monogamous) is entirely reliant on the participating individuals and the choices they make. For Brianne, the foundation of ethics in polyamory is a notion of fairness. Expectations must be egalitarian for all involved in the relationship. She gave the example of if her partner started seeing someone new she is also entitled to seek out a new partner for herself; anything her partner can do she is also free to do if she so chooses. Key values mentioned by participants throughout the study included honesty, integrity, managing jealousy, preventing relationship hierarchies from forming, emotional intelligence, autonomy, independence, fostering communication to ensure all members have their needs met, and prioritizing personal development and health.

E. Polyamory as an Identity

In the early years of the modern polyamory movement resources about the lifestyle were very limited. More recently, groups on social networking websites like *Facebook* and *Fetlife* have fueled the development of other types of informative media like podcasts, Youtube channels, and blogs which in turn has led to several popular books being written about the subject. Many of the participants discussed seeking out information about polyamory prior to entering the lifestyle while others learned through lived experiences or joining existing polyamorous relationships.

Participants chose to label themselves as polyamorous for various reasons. The most common theme was a feeling that monogamy was not for them. Most expressed negative experiences with ‘cheating’ in monogamous relationships or that they found it impossible to provide for every need another person may have. Those identifying as bisexual indicated polyamory is a logical way to explore their sexual interests as it is impossible for one individual to meet their needs. Marie shared how polyamory enables her to have long distance relationships with people she may not want to live with but

loves nonetheless. Emily identifies as polyamorous because she does not believe in hierarchy and the implication of ownership that comes with being in a monogamous relationship. She places equal importance on all of her relationships whether they cohabit or not.

F. Benefits of Polyamory

All of the participants discussed benefits to being polyamorous, but the overall consensus is that the primary benefit is being free to give and receive more love. Participants also noted that having multiple incomes in a family eases everyday financial burdens. Participants raising children noted that having multiple adults available to provide care and support is of enormous value, and Philip (who was raised by a polyamorous family) felt he had a totally “normal” and natural upbringing. Participants who cohabited with multiple partners described how having more adults in the household to take care of domestic work also led to greater quality of life for everyone involved. Some participants felt that by having extra partners they felt less pressure to do things they did not want to do; sex and housework were two activities that were repeatedly mentioned in this context. All agreed that having additional partners provides more emotional support.

The relationship between Joni and Christine allows both to have “girl time” where they are able to explore being feminine together. Joni enjoyed the fact that they are able to have a bigger family and attend family events together, mentioning how important it was that her polyamorous family was able to join her biological family for Solidarity Day (also known as National Aboriginal Day) to celebrate her cultural heritage.

Living a polyamorous lifestyle enabled Marie to pursue union work, which took a great deal of time outside of regular office hours. By relying on multiple partners for child care, domestic work, and support with other mundane life events she was able to build a successful career, something she feels would have been impossible if she lived in a more traditional monogamous relationship. She believes that a major benefit of

polyamory is the way earning income and performing domestic tasks can be split between multiple adults, leaving more time for self-care and connecting with others.

Above all, the primary trend to emerge from this study is that the participants feel that their polyamorous lifestyle is a source of empowerment, both in personal and professional contexts. Participants see their partners as a source of stability and support, with benefits ranging from providing emotional and physical intimacy to reducing domestic workloads.

G. Relationship Structures

None of participating families had identical structures, although some had similarities. Each family formed and added partners in order to meet the individual needs of all who are involved, leading to very diverse outcomes. Owen and Joni are married, and along with Christine and another male partner (who was not part of the interview) form a quad. Each individual is connected to everyone else with varying degrees of physical and emotional intimacy. Brianne and Angela have vee relationships with a male partner at the center, but Angela's structure is strongly hierarchical while Brianne considers all partners to be equal. Marie has identified as being polyamorous since she was eighteen and has a family composed of her long-term male partner and her wife. Within this triangle, each individual shares equal sexual and emotional relationships with one another. Emily lives in a small land co-operative community made up of several families. Her polyamorous relationship is comprised of her partner and father to her child, her child, her co-parents, and the other members of the land co-operative.

H. Parenting and Children

Marie and Emily are the only participants in this study to have children. All other participants stated that they do not want children. Emily has one biological child and is a co-parent to two children. Raising her children in an environment where the children have access to multiple parental (and grand-parental) figures is something she considers a

“blessing” that is beneficial to the wellbeing of all involved. She noted that it took some work with her fellow co-parents to learn how to address issues such as conflict resolution and boundary negotiation, but that the benefits of developing deep levels of trust with each other was well worth the effort.

Marie is the mother of two children, an adult son Phillip and an adult daughter who did not participate in the interview process. Both children grew up in Marie’s polyamorous family. She specifically mentioned a philosophy heavily based on a notion of kindness. She requires any friends, partners, family, or lovers to be kind to her children if they want to be included in her life to any degree. Both children have different biological fathers, and she has consciously chosen to act as a single parent. She chose to be the primary parent in order to provide guidance, discipline and financial commitment to the children. Marie considers her polyamory to be largely irrelevant to the upbringing of her children, wryly noting that “kids don’t see you having sex, they don’t care, in fact they would rather not think about it generally”. As long as partners adhered to Marie’s mantra of kindness above all, she was satisfied. Marie specified that she used age-appropriate boundaries and information sharing to describe relationships when her children asked, but she also noted that this topic was rarely brought up. Philip indicated that their family makeup seemed entirely normal to him when he was growing up. He identifies Marie as his primary parent and expressed that he has found friendship and support from his mother’s partners.

Marie eloquently stated that for her “all happy families are happy in the same way, but all unhappy families are unhappy in the same way”. For both Marie and Emily, healthy family life is based on a foundation of kindness, love, and support within the family dynamic, something both indicated is essential in any type of relationship, be it monogamous or polyamorous.

I. Polyamory, Care for Disabled Individuals, and Mental Health Implications

Relationships have a significant impact on health, both mentally and physically; healthy relationships tend to have a healthy impact while unhealthy relationships can cause tremendous harm. Many proponents of polyamory specifically mention how having multiple potential caregivers can have positive impacts on caring for individuals with disabilities, chronic health conditions, and mental illness, and this study included questions seeking data to investigate this claim.

Angela and Joni both receive benefits from the Ontario Disability Support Program, as they are unable to work due to mental health diagnoses, which include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Joni sees polyamory as a “security blanket around her” which makes coping with her mental health easier, noting that she has multiple people to rely on when in crisis. For Owen, having additional people to help care for Joni has taken a lot of stress and pressure away from him and he no longer feels like he has to cope with it alone. Angela has noticed an improvement in her mental health she attributes to having “stellar communication” based on radical honesty. Christine feels polyamory helps combat depression, noting she has not experienced any depressive episodes since joining the quad.

J. Emotional Intimacy

Emotional intimacy, communication, and sharing feelings are a normal part of all relationships. By adding more than two people into the mix, polyamorous lifestyles amplify the need for thoughtful communication and emotional awareness, topics which came up repeatedly throughout the interview process. Feeling and emotions are part of everyday life and for Christine having more people to turn to for support is “amazing.” When one member of her family isn’t feeling emotionally available she has other people to turn to, which she contrasted with the experience of monogamous couples where emotional distance from one partner means instant isolation for the other. Joni talked

about how polyamory has helped teach her to express her emotions rather than bottling them up.

Jealousy is a common topic when discussing any form of non-monogamy, and this is especially true for individuals living a polyamorous lifestyle where having time to give to a partner is considered one of the most valuable resources. Participants in this research broadly consider jealousy (like any other feeling) to be normal and not inherently negative, noting that what really matters is how individuals respond when they feel jealous or threatened. Many participants talked about ways they have learned to manage these feelings. Participants indicated that discussing feelings thoroughly and ensuring that each partner feels heard, understood and supported was only part of this process, and that the real work comes from deep introspection to find the root cause that is triggering such feelings. The aim is to deal with the root of any jealous feelings and to generally work towards achieving Compersion. In addition to speaking with their, participants in this study also mentioned times they've reached out to others within polyamorous communities for support and empathy and have been encouraged to hear that their feelings are normal.

This research also investigated how polyamorous individuals view commitment within relationships as the vast majority are not able to have a legally binding marriage unless it is done within the context of a dyadic pairing, which would by definition leave additional partners excluded. Commitment was generally defined as a long term promise one makes to another based on doing the best they can. Marie has a "one year's notice" commitment, which she uses to create a safe environment to resolve conflict or other long-term relationship issues. Within this framework, she and her partner(s) can invoke the "notice" at any time signifying that some issue needs to be addressed or else the relationship will be jeopardized. Once this process has begun, her and any partner involved in the issue have a time period of one year to address the issue and fix their relationship before she moves out. Other examples of commitment mentioned by participants included: fluid bonding, making time for one another, planning trips and adventures, and private (and legally unrecognized) ceremonies such as a Handfasting.

Joni in particular lamented not being able to legally commit to the other members of her quad.

K. Communication

Each participant considered effective communication to be the most critical component enabling their relationships to work. The need for open, assertive, radically honest communication while avoiding blame or shame was echoed by all. Two families specifically mentioned studying different forms of communication strategies, saying this helped prepare them for healthy conflict resolution. Participants singled out compassion and emotional intelligence as being critical traits to enable effective communication. Technology also plays an important role, with participants who have long-distance relationships describing texting, calling, and the use of group chats in Whatsapp and Facebook being tools they use to maintain connection. Another recurring theme is the need for timely communication of feelings and thoughts. As Owen put it, “you gotta talk about it. The second it’s in your head, talk about it. Don’t keep it for a month and then talk about it when it’s the goddamn end of the world”. The participants agreed that it is important to recognize that not everyone will be ready to communicate at the same time, and that waiting for a ‘perfect’ moment is unrealistic, it’s usually better to just start talking and work through the issues right away.

L. Boundaries

Boundaries in all relationships are critical, providing a means to maintain emotional safety and security. Marie believes that boundaries are fluid and will inevitably change over time as individual needs evolve. Emily uses a strategy in which the person with the “lowest risk tolerance” sets the boundaries that others adhere to. Some of the most frequently mentioned boundaries include dealing with the way that time is spent both individually and as a group, respecting individuality, allowing for autonomy, and always respecting the limitations of others. One boundary all participants discussed was

the need for safer sex practices and regular STI testing, particularly when new partners or new sexual experiences were involved.

M. Marriage, Monogamy and Cheating

Participants in this research project held generally pragmatic views about marriage, and this view was echoed by the three participants who are legally married. In broad terms, all participants view marriage as a legal tool which allows for accessing additional benefits at all levels of society. Specifically, participants mentioned gaining benefits from employers, favorable tax consideration, immigration status, and legal kinship for hospital visitation and property inheritance. The participants who are married struggle with not being able to share those benefits with the other members of their polyamorous family who are not legally recognized.

For Marie, marriage is a legal tool that is simply an agreement between two people and the state; she considers emotional commitment to be completely separate from this process. She has been married three times and uses marriage as a tool to attain specific benefits. She married the first time in order to be stationed in the same place as her partner when they volunteered for the Peace Corps, this would not have been impossible if they hadn't married. After completing their service with the Peace Corps, they returned home and amicably divorced. Her second marriage was to Phillip's father in order to get health insurance. At the time of their marriage they had very limited spiritual and sexual partnership, and this distance was maintained throughout their marriage. After another amicable divorce, Marie married Cindy in order to help her attain Canadian citizenship. They plan to stay married until Marie has attained full citizenship, and then will once again amicably divorce. Their triad has already begun discussing having Cindy then marry Joe (after she divorces Marie) to enable him to have Canadian citizenship as well, with the ultimate goal being everyone in their family having legal rights to live in the same country as one another. If there were other tools to use to define kinship aside from marriage, it is unlikely that any of these marriages would have taken place. Proponents of polyamory may consider this an excellent example of why

simply expanding the definition of marriage might not be a solution that fits the diverse needs of polyamorous families.

In monogamous culture cheating has become normalized to an extent where it is almost an expected occurrence the longer a relationship persists. The concept of cheating within the context of polyamory largely depends on the agreements that have been made between all the individuals involved, and may not necessarily involve sexual infidelity. The participants in this study agreed that lying is cheating - if you are unwilling to tell your partner something then that can be considered a breach of trust that feels like cheating. They also agreed that polyamory does not prevent cheating, but rather provides a safe space to talk about their needs and desires openly. Many of the participants expressed that they insecure and anxious in monogamous relationships because of cheating culture, and that the open and honest communication they found within polyamory helped them to regain a sense of security. Within the context of monogamous relationships, Angela reported often feeling horrible about certain friendships because they were so affectionate, and that she felt as if she needed to pull away from these people in order to remain emotionally faithful to her partner. She felt that she lost friendships due to monogamous norms. In short, polyamorous people are not immune to cheating, and the very definition of cheating can vary drastically from one relationship to the next. By constantly working to improve communication and creating a safe space for radical self-expression, these polyamorists feel like they have found more security and stability than they experienced when living within the monogamous norm.

N. Being Out as Polyamorous

Canada has been taking steps to be more inclusive of (and actively protecting and supporting via legislation) LGBTI2 individuals, leading to a culture where people are feeling increasingly comfortable being out and open about who they are. To a certain extent this feeling of freedom was echoed by participants in this study, many of them said they are not trying to hide their polyamory but also not actively advertising it either. Unlike LGBTI2 individuals, polyamorists have no legal status or protection which means

it would be technically legal for someone to discriminate against them if they disagree with their lifestyle choices. Many are out as polyamorous to their immediate (biological) families, and they reported family reactions to coming out ranging from absolute rejection and ostracization to complete acceptance of them and their chosen family as well. The degree to which they are out to their biological family also varied greatly depending on the relationships they have with individual biological family members. Those with already strained relationships with their biological family tended to provide less information while those who maintained stronger relationships with biological family members tended to be much more open about their polyamorous life. Phillip grew up in polyamorous household and it feels completely normal to him. Most of his friends know that he lives in a family with multiple adults but they don't think anything of it. His experiences with polyamory have been normalized from such a young age that to him monogamy feels like the exception and polyamory feels like the natural default.

Some participants described feeling very comfortable being out in their communities, especially those who have established connections within existing kink and BDSM communities. Angela, Joni, and Owen all talked about how they feel comfortable being open about their polyamory when they go to kink events or are around friends they've met through BDSM groups. Emily feels free to be openly out in her land cooperative community which is queer and gender diverse and provides a lot of empathy and support, while Christine's experience has been shaped by a colleague who is openly out about being polyamorous in their work place. Owen is also open about being polyamorous in his workplace and feels he has nothing to hide.

O. Stigma

Participants in this study repeatedly mentioned that they are careful about who they talk to about polyamory. Emily mentioned that some people can see polyamory as a way of "...legitimately slutting it up" and that oftentimes disclosing her lifestyle is accompanied by a barrage of questions. Other participants also mentioned being frequently asked to answer questions such as "...do they know about each other? are they

friends? Who has sex with who?”. While the subject of repeated or intrusive questioning came up in several interviews, participants largely didn’t consider any of their experiences as being stigmatizing and instead attributed this to natural curiosity.

Marie discussed a time where she feared losing her job as a teacher if parents found out about her lesbian relationship with another teacher in the same district as there were no protections for same-sex relationships in the United States at that time. She also didn’t disclose her polyamorous lifestyle, but her fears were more about being stigmatized for her sexuality rather than polyamory. Joni mentioned that sometimes when the quad is out in public together people will stare or give them strange looks. She said that they act just as monogamous couples might act, specifically mentioning holding hands and sharing kisses.

P. Privilege

Privilege was a common theme discussed by the participants. Many directly acknowledged their privileges around ethnicity, class, and education. Marie feels privileged to be able to lead the life style of her choosing, noting that in many countries she would not be able to do so. She attributes being white, educated, and middle class as giving her enough privilege to enable a life where she is not reliant on another partner providing for her. She also acknowledges that she feels privileged to have enough time available to maintain multiple relationships. Marie feels that maintaining financial independence and never having to rely on a partner for support enables her to maintain the level personal freedom she needs to thrive. These sentiments were echoed in other interviews, where topics like finances and flexible work schedules were also mentioned as being privileges that enable supporting multiple relationships.

Q. Legal Concerns

Many of the participants discussed legal issues surrounding their polyamorous lifestyle, with struggles adding additional family members to medical or work benefits and hospital visitation rights coming up in most interviews. Joni and Owen wish they could share their current benefits with the other members of their family but currently are unable to do so. Christine suggests that benefits should be able to be split between multiple people. Owen points out that the definition of family is limited and too much emphasis is placed on marriage, giving the example of his aunt and grandmother who lived together for fifty years but despite repeated attempts his aunt was never able to add his grandmother as a beneficiary of her medical benefits from work. In this case being biological family wasn't enough to prove kinship. Participants who receive benefits through the Ontario Disability Support Program chose not to reveal any information about their polyamorous partners, fearing that if the program knew of their additional relationships they would lose their income as well as additional benefits.

Emily and Marie consulted with a lawyer to draft a legally binding will to ensure that if anything happened to them their children would be raised by family of their choosing, not their biological relatives, but they also noted that this was a large financial strain. All participants acknowledged that the expense of hiring legal representation is a barrier that prevents most polyamorous people from seeking additional protection. Owen laments the fact that legal benefits and protections are freely available to monogamous couples but polyamorous people have to go to costly lengths to get a small fraction of the same protections.

Emily believes that it is important to make the law work for you as best as you can and to make it a financial priority to hire legal representation, but also acknowledged that she feels like current laws are out of touch with what people need and want in modern society. She provided the example of three people living together who all have a conjugal relationship; because they are three they cannot be considered common law despite meeting all the other criteria.

Marie focuses on the way that citizenship can impact polyamorous families, believing that if everyone shares the same nationality they are safer, especially when children are involved. Currently Marie, Joe, Phillip, and her daughter are American citizens with only herself and her daughter having permanent residence status in Canada. When she began the process to marry Marie, the Canadian government required her to sign a legal declaration that she no longer has a conjugal relationship with her ex-husband. She noted that it seems ridiculous that the government should be concerned who she has sex with when their overall goal is to figure out who can be taxed and how to protect their boarder. Whenever the family crosses the border together they use heteronormativity to protect themselves - when questioned Phillip will refer to Joe as his stepfather to ease the process.

R. Social Change

A recurring theme between participants was that if more people were out and open about being polyamorous then it would over time become more socially acceptable. Many participants were critical of using marriage to determine who can receive benefits, noting that no matter how much the definition of marriage is expanded there will still be family types that fall through the cracks. They also challenged the notion that the government should play a role in determining who can or cannot be considered family. However, not all agree that drastic change should happen quickly. Marie cautions that if definitions of family are changed there needs to be a system in place to be able to prove kinship.

Christine points out that education is another tool that can help to shape perspective. She specifically noted how a recent update to the Ontario sex education curriculum does a really good job of starting to talk about consent culture and normalizing individuals with different sexual identities. It should be noted that at the time of this writing Douglas Ford, a conservative politician and Premier of Ontario unilaterally

revoked this curriculum and reinstated a curriculum from 1998 that does not talk about consent or sexuality outside of a monogamous heterosexual context.

S. Critiques of Polyamory from Families

The participants in this research were unabashed proponents of polyamory, but they still provided some thoughtful critiques about the lifestyle that they feel are important to consider for anyone thinking about becoming polyamorous. Brianne believes it is crucial for individuals to have a strong and robust network of family and friends outside of the polyamorous dynamic to ensure support in case the relationships deteriorate. Having multiple support structures means more safety and security during times of crisis. Marie wryly noted that many of the polyamorous relationships she has seen were “fucked up” later clarifying that in her opinion “...relationships almost never work regardless [of whether they are polyamorous or monogamous].” In her view, dysfunction and relationship breakdown are more attributable to individual personalities and choices than to the structure of the relationships themselves.

The role that hierarchy plays in polyamorous relationships is a topic of some contention as well. Many of the participants believe that hierarchy can be toxic and by its very nature excludes people. Others find comfort in knowing their place within a hierarchical structure, with Angela talking about organizing partners into a hierarchical “totem pole” that helps her define boundaries and allocate time accordingly. If one of the core beliefs of the polyamorous lifestyle is egalitarianism it is absolutely crucial to consider the role of hierarchy within any polyamorous dynamic.

In summary the five families are diverse and comprised of unique individuals with their own beliefs about how to best integrate structure, dynamics, and communication into their relationships. They all have nuanced opinions on the role of hierarchy within a relationship, whether polyamory is a lifestyle choice or an innate identity, and what could be considered “best practices” for polyamorous life. For all their differences, they share many similarities in the way they define polyamory, emphasizing

its egalitarian and inclusive nature. They have shared concerns about a lack of legal recognition when it comes to allocating benefits while simultaneously feeling very fortunate to have largely avoided any negative social stigma from their lifestyle choices. Each participant has identified polyamory as being a positive influence in their life, especially talking about how much it has helped them to improve their self-awareness and communication skills, even when discussing painful topics. They feel very aware of their privilege and seek to affect positive change in the world by living their lives fairly openly.

The diversity of individuals and opinions expressed in this study provides a snapshot into polyamorous life in Canada today – it is very much undergoing a phase of growth and integration into the broader fabric of society. It is beginning to attract an increasingly diverse group of people, and with that the very nature of polyamory will grow and evolve.

VIII. Discussion

The following section seeks to synthesize and discuss findings from this study and to place them within the context of extant polyamory research, beginning with a demographic summary, touching on subjects such as personal definitions of polyamory, benefits and criticisms of the lifestyle, and possible policy proposals that are in line with the needs expressed by the study's participants. The section concludes with some best practices social workers can adopt to better serve the needs of polyamorous clients and an examination of the limitations of this study.

A. Demographics

The demographics of the research participants in this study generally align with studies completed by Sheff and Boyd; the majority are of Caucasian ethnicity, younger in age and highly educated compared to national averages. Income ranges of participants in this study are also similar to what Boyd (2017b) observed. Most of the individuals reported annual income of less than CAD \$40,000; two families in this study were either

completely or partially dependent on the Ontario Disability Support Program to provide income. One family has an annual income of CAD \$200,000 with all members of the family being employed full-time, showing the potential power of pooled income when multiple adults can contribute to family finances. This research also had participants from the same provinces Boyd surveyed (Ontario and British Columbia) which is hardly surprising given that this is where the bulk of the Canadian population is located. With the exception of one individual in this study who identified as being First Nation, the demographic makeup of participants in this study are largely in line with previous studies.

B. Gender, Sexuality, Polyamorous Identity

This research interview asked participants to identify their gender. Two participants identified as male, five identified as female, and one participant identified as being gender fluid, again largely matching Boyd's (2017b) demographics. Sexuality varied with participants identifying as straight, bisexual, heteroflexible, demisexual, asexual, and pansexual. This again is in line with the findings of Boyd (2017b) who observed that polyamory is inherently gender diverse and inclusive of a wide range of sexualities. The results of this study support Sheff's (2005) arguments that polyamory allows women to explore their sexuality and connectedness to other women, exemplified in the relationship between Joni and Christine. They both found that polyamory allows them to explore their sexuality while building deeply intimate connections and emotional bonds.

C. Definitions of Polyamory and Family

In Weston's (1991) research with gay and lesbian families, all of the individuals who participated indicated that they have very expansive and liberal definitions of who can be considered family members. A common theme in Weston's research was participants talking about how they felt free to choose friends, their multiple partners, extended biological family of partners, and accepting members of their community to

define family. This notion of incorporating community into family and not just sexual partners is reflected in Emily's relationship with her land co-operative community. Just as Weston observed an expansive definition of family, each participant in this study also defined family in ways that challenge the established patriarchal, monogamous norm, instead emphasizing that family are the people you choose and are not limited to blood relatives or people with whom you share legal connections.

Participants in this study also had expansive definitions of polyamory, saying it can incorporate elements of ethical non-monogamy, involve maintaining multiple simultaneous romantic relationships, allow for the development of deep emotional connections between partners, and to enable exploration of sexual diversity. Their individual definitions of polyamory slightly differed from those of Brunning, 2016; Haritaworn et al, 2006; Shannon & Willis, 2010; Emens, 2004; Schippers, 2016; and Sheff 2015, however, the core message that polyamory means being able to give and receive more love is absolutely in line with all of the existing research. This highlights the diversity within polyamory and what polyamory and family means to people while revealing the core principle that defines the lifestyle.

D. Polyamory as an Identity

Participants in this study broadly agreed that they consider polyamory to be an identity, supporting research by Klesse (2014) and Barker (2005) who found that people tended to identify as polyamorous because it is a natural feeling and a part of who they are, born out of an unwillingness to meet society's demands for monogamy. Klesse (2014) argued that to advance the rights of polyamory advocates should steer away from defining polyamory as a sexual identity, a sentiment that was shared by the participants in this research, none of whom identified polyamory as a sexual preference. One individual in this study indicated that polyamory for her is a means to forming close emotional connections with others without having any sexual component at all, further supporting Klesse's assertion that polyamory cannot simply be defined as a sexual practice.

E. Relationship Structures

The results of this research show a great deal of diversity in polyamorous relationship structures; none of the families interviewed had quite the same structure. This is in line with research completed by Brunning (2016), Shannon & Willis (2010), Sheff (2015), and Klesse (2011) who all observed that polyamory's inclusive nature means each family will be uniquely shaped by the individuals who form it. Participants in this research note that it is becoming increasingly important to change the way family is defined to ensure no one is excluded. The current, narrow definitions of family have negative impacts on polyamorous families, chosen families, platonic families, and (as Owen pointed out in his story about his grandmother and aunt) even biological families in some cases. By attaching the allocation of certain benefits and property rights to marriage, there will always be people excluded no matter how much the definition of marriage is expanded. Many of the participants expressed a desire to decouple property rights and benefit allocation from marriage altogether and instead attach it to family members of their choosing.

This study had one particularly notable result that differed from the findings of Sheff (2015) and Schippers (2016). Their earlier research found that two men in a vee formation with a woman in the middle was the most common polyamorous formation amongst their participants, and they even went so far as to suggest this may be the most stable formation for maintaining long-term familial connections. Contrasting with their results, in this study the polyamorous families who maintained the longest-lasting relationships consisted of two women and one-man in a triad and a quad of two women and two men. More than anything else, this contrasting result shows the need for more thorough quantitative research into polyamorous families, and also indicates the need for extreme caution before making any sweeping pronouncements about the superiority of any particular relationship structure. As the participants in this research point out, each relationship structure is potentially unique and is shaped by the individuals who participate in it.

F. Health Benefits of Polyamory

In her 2015 research, Sheff suggested that polyamory may be particularly beneficial for individuals living with mental health issues or long term disabilities because there are multiple adults available to provide support. The results of this study directly support these claims. In this research, all respondents who reported suffering from mental health issues also said they have seen significant improvements in their well-being because of their polyamorous lifestyle, specifically noting how it has allowed them to have multiple deeply connected relationships to turn to when in need of support. Moors et al (2014) conducted research that indicates polyamorous individuals who value emotional intimacy and radically open communication exhibit lower levels of avoidance and anxiety than their monogamous counterparts (Moors et al, 2014, p.234). These findings are further reinforced by this study, as participants frequently talked about a need for emotional intimacy and radically open and honest communication being cornerstones for maintaining healthy polyamorous relationships. This study goes a step further, with participants indicating that in addition to intimacy and open communication it is essential to set and maintain appropriate boundaries to ensure the wellbeing of everyone in the family.

G. Parenting and Children

Conservative politicians often argue that by limiting sexual freedom they are protecting the notion of the core family (usually taking the form of a heterosexual monogamous couple) which they believe is the best environment to raise children (Yi, 2013, p.500). However, the vast majority of extant research has been focused on monogamous family life, with only a few small studies (this research included) beginning to address the question of how non-monogamy and other forms of nontraditional upbringings can impact childhood development. Brunning's (2016) research indicates that the emotional work of maintaining polyamorous relationships uniquely equips parents to communicate and work through negative emotions together in ways that are not frequently observed in monogamous families. This enables polyamorous parents to

better set and discuss boundaries and emotional norms which in turn creates an environment of safety that insulates children from the trauma of external shocks including illness, breakup and income changes that can be so devastating to other children (Brunning, 2016, p.14). This in turn has positive impacts on the psychological development of children, and Brunning even goes so far as to posit that this in turn may lead to improved physiological development as well.

This study had two participant families that raised children within a polyamorous dynamic. Both families agreed that having a larger network of adults to provide care and support was absolutely beneficial for their children. Both of these families had at all times a minimum of three adult figures supporting the growth and development of their children. Philip, one of the children raised in a participant family, indicated that he views his upbringing as entirely “normal” and that he sees no ill-effects from growing up with multiple parental figures. This supports Moors et al’s (2014) notion that adults who have healthy, stable attachment in consensual non-monogamy are to model this behavior to children which in turn teaches them to form healthy, normal attachments with multiple adults/parental figures. As participants in this study also noted, having multiple adults to share household chores leaves more time for personal care and development, which can result in increased energy and attention when spending time with children. When it comes to childcare, polyamory is the embodiment of the philosophy that it takes a village to raise a child.

H. Marriage, Monogamy and Cheating

Mint’s (2004) notion that cheating is the “expected failure” of monogamous relationships is directly supported by this study, as four participants cited cheating in monogamous relationships as one of the direct causes of their becoming polyamorous. Lorde’s (1984) theory that monogamous coupling results in women pouring time, financial, physical and emotional resources into a singular relationship leaving them robbed of any energy for the personal or erotic development is closely aligned with

Brianne's guiding principles for polyamory, where she explicitly requires her partners to put the same level of attention and energy into the relationship as she invests.

Each participant in this research to varying degrees talked about how keeping certain benefits tied to monogamous marriage is an imperfect system that excludes many people. Marie talked about how she married her son's biological father so that his medical insurance could cover the birth and follow-up care over the next few years. In this case she was able to strategically use monogamous norms to secure social rights, but she points out that to her marriage is simply a social contract that has nothing whatsoever to do with emotional attachment. By extension, many of the participants believe if marriages are simple social contracts to create familial connection in the eyes of the state (regardless of the existence of a deeper emotional commitment) there is no rational reason why it shouldn't be available to more than just married couples. Marie and Emily's family formations are direct challenges to the current monogamous and patriarchal model of monogamous marriage, and all indications from this research is that raising children in a stable home with multiple caring adults can be beneficial to their development.

I. Stigma and Privilege

None of the participants identified any definite cases where they faced discrimination or stigma as a direct result of being polyamorous, but several of them recounted experiences of facing hostility because of their sexual identity. Marie talked about a time she feared losing her employment because of a lesbian relationship she was in and Owen talked about facing discrimination because of his involvement in the BDSM community. This lack of stigmatization supports Sheff & Hammers' (2011) theories that privilege plays a large role in shielding individuals who participate in subcultures from discrimination and stigma, and as discussed earlier many of the participants are acutely aware of (and openly discuss) their privileges. Also of note, each of the families interviewed talked about how they are able to appear to fit within accepted cultural norms when necessary, exemplified by Marie's story about identifying one of her partners as her

child's "stepfather" when crossing borders. It is also entirely possible that participants have experienced greater forms of stigmatization but were unable to recognize it as such; some might argue that the necessity of hiring a lawyer just to ensure that child custody is handled in a way that are in line with a parent's wishes is a form of discrimination itself. It is absolutely clear that much more research is needed about polyamory within marginalized communities before any accurate conclusions about polyamory and stigma can be drawn.

J. Legal Concerns: Implications for Policy

A clear result of this study is further confirmation of Sheff's (2015) finding that polyamorists are not necessarily seeking plural marriage but rather want alternate ways of showing family connections, especially when it comes to allocating social benefits and property rights. Having alternate ways of showing family connections are not solely sought for pragmatic reasons, Joni spoke about feeling sad that she did not have a way to show legal connection to her other partners as well.

Polyamorous individuals in Canada currently live in a legal grey zone where protections and recognition is incredibly limited, and those who marry as a dyad within a polyamorous family have the most rights while others in their family are excluded. Many areas of concern remain. Throughout the interview process participants talked about things they 'wished' could be different, or how things 'should be' – some of the most frequently mentioned issues have been compiled here as potential action points for policy reform:

- Streamlining immigration processes and creating a system for non-monogamous families to be reunified across borders
- Redefine how social and employment benefits (such as Canadian pension plans) are allocated to allow for all family types to be included
- Allow individuals to choose who they want to be able to visit them and make decisions on their behalf at hospitals, remove the default assumption the

biological family is best suited to make these decisions

- Allow multiple individuals to be registered on birth certificates, and allow this to be amended over time to ensure that custody of children always goes to people the parent trusts
- Create a new standardized system to allow kinships between people without arbitrary restrictions

Another potential policy proposal comes from Boyd (2017a), who suggested creating formal relationship agreements as a way to create structure in the absence of legal clarity, noting that such agreements should contain: clarification of ownership of real and personal property, responsibilities for debts, groceries, utilities, rents/ mortgages and other bills associated with living within a home, division of domestic chores, partnering agreements, participation in social events and perceptions of the family outside the home, and boundaries that must be respected when adding new sexual relationships or members to the household (Boyd, 2017a, p.74). Boyd suggested that if such agreements were treated as seriously as marriage contracts in legal settings it could go a long way towards creating a more inclusive system that addresses many of the needs of polyamorists.

From this research it has become clear that one of the first (and most logical) policy steps is to expand the definition of common law to allow any cohabiting individuals in a caring relationship to gain recognition as family, without restrictions. This will allow many families who are currently unrecognized to gain legal status and protection. It will also help to change public perception about the nature of polyamory.

More immediately, the Canadian courts need to be open to receiving expert testimony and input when dealing with issues relating to non-monogamy, especially in high profile cases. Instances such as Justice Bauman's decision to ignore input from the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association has led to many Canadians associating all forms of non-monogamy with unethical, religiously motivated bigamy. For a more positive example, Newfoundland's supreme court decision to allow three members of a polyamorous family to jointly sign a birth certificate and share custody of their child

exemplifies how critical it is that members of the judicial system be open to input from experts within the community.

To see true, lasting change proponents of polyamory will need to progress on multiple fronts simultaneously. In the court systems there have been both setbacks and very recent triumphs, but much work remains to be done to change public perceptions about non-monogamy and the prevalence of non-traditional families in society. Researchers need to give voice to families like those interviewed for this study in order to inform policy decisions that benefit all Canadians, not just the ones who fit in the narrowly defined moulds of monogamy.

K. Social Change: Implications for Social Work

Little has been written specifically on social work and polyamory. Social Work textbooks and literature which discuss intimate relationships commonly address issues such as marriage, divorce, single living, cohabitation, and same-sex relationships but lack awareness of non-monogamous relationships and other types of non-traditional families (Williams & Prior, 2015, p. 268). Proponents of polyamory often attribute this to the deep entrenchment that mono-normativity has within society. Social workers who have not been exposed to alternative forms of relating may assume that monogamy is the healthiest form of relationship and by imposing their notions of legitimate family and relationships on clients may actively cause harm (Williams & Prior, 2015, p. 269). For this reason alone it's critical that social workers be exposed to the full spectrum of human relationships and sexual expression, which in turn will better equip them to relate to the needs of their clients. Social workers within family and child welfare or protection agencies have a special duty to educate themselves about the broadly diverse forms that healthy family life can take to ensure that they do not separate children from loving and nurturing homes simply because it doesn't fit a stereotypical model. To truly serve families best, these workers must understand the ways in which traditional and nontraditional families share the same struggles and the different approaches they may take to conflict resolution.

On a micro level, social workers must become aware of their own biases and be conscious of how societal messaging shapes perceptions of monogamy. In therapeutic settings, social workers could potentially use their knowledge of ethical non-monogamy to suggest healthy ways for clients to seek out fulfillment of their needs (Williams & Prior, 2015, p. 269). On a mezzo level, social workers can collaborate with community organizations to provide education about polyamory and other nontraditional forms of family life. Social workers are uniquely placed in society to be able to advocate and educate at the same time, and it is crucial that they remain open-minded and constantly seek new opportunities to educate themselves about all the different forms of human relationships. On the macro level social work can help shape and form policy based on the needs of polyamorous people and other nontraditional families who currently fall through the cracks. The Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association advocates for a national education to raise awareness about the polyamorous lifestyle and its current legal status, a sentiment which was echoed by participants in this study who broadly agree that the best way to affect societal change is through education.

L. Study Limitations

This study is primarily limited by the small number of participants. The narratives of five Canadian polyamorous families is by no means a comprehensive survey but rather an intimate and illuminating snapshot in a growing body of research. It should also be noted that not all the participant families were interviewed in their entirety – some families were missing one or more members due to scheduling conflicts or travel. The interviews were also conducted in a group setting and did not have individual follow-up sessions, so group dynamics and power structures may have influenced some of the answers. Despite its limitations, this study is an excellent example of the diversity in polyamorous family arrangements. The diversity in this snapshot will hopefully give future researchers looking to make broad pronouncements about the nature of polyamory pause, and remind them that the lived experiences of polyamorous families are going to be as diverse as the people shaping them. Above all else, this study concludes that further

research and exploration of polyamorous family life in Canada is needed to truly understand their concerns and ensure they receive adequate recognition and protection.

IX. Summary and Conclusions

Monogamy is a cultural construct built on exclusive dyadic relationships, and has come to be defined as the most natural and healthy form of relationship (Brunning, 2016; Moors Et al, 2014). Historically it has been used as a means to regulate individual relationships (and more importantly, property rights) and is seen as a critical tool for maintaining an orderly state. Recently, the polyamory movement, empowered by the advancement of feminism and the sexual revolution has begun to challenge the notion that monogamy is the only natural and healthy form of relationship. Over the past five years research into polyamory as a movement has grown considerably but has largely been limited to studies conducted in the United States. This thesis sought to create a snapshot of polyamory in Canada and to place the polyamory movement into the broader context of Canadian law.

This study was conducted by collecting the narratives of five polyamorous families from Ontario and British Columbia, with interviews involving eight participants. Due to scheduling constraints, not all families were represented in their entirety, and some families were represented by just one member speaking on behalf of everyone else. The study initially sought to have a larger participant pool but was constrained by the limited time and scope of a master's thesis coupled with the difficulty in finding participants in a community that remains largely underground. The study explored lived experiences leading up to the adoption of a polyamorous lifestyle, the formation of polyamorous families (including families with children), their experiences of stigma, and any legal concerns they have in order to gain a better understanding of how they function in the grey margins of Canadian legality. The study found many common themes mirroring results from previous studies and adds important narratives to help better understand the breadth and diversity of different relationship forms that are possible within the framework of polyamory.

One of the most notable findings of this study is that the participants generally are not pursuing an expansion of marriage rights, but rather seek an alternate way to have legally recognized family connections to people of their choosing. All of the families interviewed mentioned instances where they felt that pretending to be monogamous and lying about their relationship status in order to conform to societal expectations made their lives easier, and were aware of the ways that their privilege has also helped to shield them from stigmatization and discrimination. In their own way, each participant expressed frustration that mono-normative society has no way to recognize family life that doesn't fit neatly within its boundaries and wish to see a more inclusive world in the future.

On the policy side, participants were most concerned with finding ways to extend medical and social welfare benefits to all partners within their polyamorous family, not just to those who are legally married. Issues around hospital rights and whom they are able to classify as next of kin were also frequently brought up. Participants acknowledged that there are steps they can do to secure some of these protections legal via a patchwork of wills, power of attorney agreements, and creating limited liability corporations but also noted this requires a great deal of financial privilege and is an unrealistic solution for most Canadians today. Many of the participants view marriage (as it currently stands) as a pragmatic tool that can be leveraged to gain social benefits for whichever partner has the greatest need (or can provide the most benefit) at the time, but they largely rejected the notion that marriage needs to involve love or lifelong commitments.

At the time of writing, this study is the first academic work investigating the lives of Canadian polyamorous families. While the pool of participants is limited, it provides a compelling snapshot of their lived experiences and is an excellent example of the diverse nature of polyamorous relationship structures. No two families had quite the same structure, yet all shared common values of open communication, radical honesty, and increased emotional support. Above all, this study demonstrates that monogamous family life is not the norm for all Canadians, and that there are functional, loving families

living at the fringes of legality with minimal social protection and no way to prove their connections to one another. Much more research needs to be done to better understand their needs and how to ensure that all Canadians are able to access essential social and work benefits without falling through the cracks.

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Certificate of Authenticity

I, Charity Smith herewith certify that the above presented thesis is true and right to the best of my knowledge. I further certify that I have researched and written this thesis without any outside help. Should I have had assistance this is pointed out at the appropriate place within this thesis.

Signature

Place and Date of Signature