

THE STORY OF POLYAMORY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF A POLYCULE

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Couple and Family Therapy
School of Education and Human Development

2023

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Date: July 29, 2023

HAYES, LINDSAY (MA, COUPLE AND FAMILY THERAPY)

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Robert Allan

ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experience of polyamorous individuals in a unit (polycule) as a group and as individuals. The literature review investigated the extant research on polyamory and consensual non-monogamy while also highlighting the lack of information when compared with monogamous relationships. As non-monogamy becomes more common, research and scholarship must keep up with trends to help educators, therapists, social workers, and others understand the complexities of these relationships. This work provides an in-depth look at the nuances and issues faced by a polyamorous group and its' individuals. This narrative inquiry is comprised of one group activity and individual interviews with nine people in one polycule. Conclusions include a discussion of the polycule's sense of community and positive experience of interdependence.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Robert Allan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been surrounded by support from the CU Denver Couple and Therapy Program students, faculty, and instructors from day one. All of you, your kind words, empathy, and encouragement have meant so much. Dr. Allan has always been prompt with wise counsel and thoughtful questions. Dr. Sprott generously volunteered for the thesis committee and Dr. Gangamma was there for me in a pinch. I am so grateful to have had this sense of community. I am also deeply fortunate to have a husband who is brilliant and has kept us afloat for the last three years while dealing with a wife who spent many, many hours toiling away in the office. So many people in this program have lent me their enthusiasm and support to help get me to the finish line- Samantha, Talia, Taylor, Elena, Leya, Jolene, Erin, Jen, Kevin, Sara, and Meredith. Friends like Jacque, Steve, Amber, and my mom and dad, also provided support along the way. I was also fortunate to receive a small grant from the Polyamory Foundation in support of this research. And last, I am grateful for the Lovelies, who have made this research a joy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE STORY OF POLYAMORY

Approximately nine million people in the United States (US) have had or are currently in a consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationship (Sheff, 2014a). Interest in polyamory, a particular form of CNM in which a person has (or desires) multiple simultaneous romantic relationships (Sheff, 2020), is growing as indicated by increasing usage of the term in popular media and scholarly literature (Rubel & Burleigh, 2020). Rubel and Burleigh (2020) examined various definitions of polyamory with a survey of 972 individuals. After weighting the responses to approximate a representative sample of the US population, they made a conservative estimate that 0.6% of the adult population, or 1.44 million people, are polyamorous.

Given the substantial number of people practicing polyamory in the US, it is important that scholarship be carried out to explore the lived experience of individuals who are polyamorous and groups. As these relationships become more prevalent (or as more people become comfortable admitting to polyamory), research and scholarship must keep up with trends to help educators, therapists, social workers, and others understand the complexities of these relationships (Katz & Graham, 2020). Research and training on relationship styles often privilege monogamy and family psychology researchers have neglected to perform methodologically rigorous, large-scale studies of polyamorous relationships potentially furthering stigmatization of this population (Brewster et al., 2017).

This research provides an in-depth look at the lived experience of one polycule, or network of polyamorous individuals. A polycule is a “constellation” that encompasses all of the people linked through their relationships, usually romantic and/or sexual, to one or more members of a polyamorous group (Sheff, 2014b).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to beginning this study, relevant research literature was reviewed to determine what complexities and challenges exist for those practicing polyamory. Databases searched included PsychArticles, PsychInfo, EBSCO Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection, ProQuest Sociological Abstracts, and EBSCO Social Sciences Full Text. Terms used in the search included “polyamory,” “polyamorous,” “consensual nonmonogamy,” “ethically nonmonogamous,” and “open relationship.”

The search was not limited to “polyamory” for several reasons. First, individuals practicing CNM share a variety of relationship and interpersonal traits common to those practicing various types of nonmonogamy (Bauer, 2010). Second, those who engage in polyamory may use alternative identity labels while their relationship practices are similar and a review limited to polyamory research would exclude a diverse subset of individuals (Moors et al., 2013). Third, the boundaries between different types of CNM differ in books, blogs, and other popular resources for polyamory and CNM (Klesse, 2006). This lack of agreement in defining polyamory has led to confusion in therapeutic and lay communities (Girard & Brownlee, 2015) and therefore necessitates a wider range of search terms.

It is also notable that polyamory has been interpreted by researchers as an orientation and identity (Klesse, 2014). Law professor Ann Tweedy (2011) argued that classifying polyamory as a sexual orientation would be a reasonable expansion and could reduce discrimination that polyamorists face. Anapol (2012) refers to polyamory as a relationship orientation. Brunning (2018) conceptualized polyamory as a philosophy of life that challenges one’s assumed desires, emotions, and social world thereby prompting interpersonal and emotional work that can foster

meaningful relationships with others and oneself. Aguilar (2013) examined the philosophical links between feminism and polyamory, commenting that both ways of thinking connect monogamy and patriarchal ownership of women while also privileging women's sexual agency and freedom. It is important to include those who are polyamorous by practice, identity, and/or philosophy because of the shared belief in the legitimacy of multiple simultaneous romantic and/or sexual relationships.

The Landscape of Polyamory Research

Scholarship and research on polyamorous relationships has increased in recent years after receiving little attention from researchers prior to 2010. In 2017, Brewster and colleagues performed a content analysis of CNM research to highlight the lack of such research in the face of numerous articles and studies on monogamous relationships. Findings suggested that those practicing all forms of CNM, including polyamory, are underserved and understudied, potentially further perpetuating stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization (Brewster et al., 2017).

Terminology

Polyamorous people have frequently created terms to describe relationship structures, styles, and other norms because of the lack of terminology (Ritchie & Barker, 2016). Ritchie and Barker (2016) argue that existing language does not account for polyamorous experiences and how those in polyamorous communities have subverted or rewritten the language surrounding polyamory. Many of these terms are a reaction to and navigation around *mononormativity*. Pieper and Bauer (2005) coined the term mononormativity to refer to assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy. The following is a brief overview of research on terms commonly used in and around polyamorous relationships.

Relationship Categories and Types

While *monogamy* clearly defines one type of relationship, *nonmonogamy* has been subcategorized to describe a variety of practices. Polyamory falls under the terms *ethical nonmonogamy* (ENM) or *consensual non-monogamy* (CNM), relationships that are sexually and/or emotionally non-monogamous (Sheff, 2020). The broadest sub-category is the *open relationship*, which has little information about the specifics of relationship agreements beyond the fact that those in the relationship have agreed to be nonmonogamous (Sheff, 2020). *Swinging* refers to the occurrence of extradyadic sex while retaining emotional intimacy exclusively within the primary relationship (Hutzler et al., 2015). By contrast, polyamory allows for emotional intimacy with more than one partner at a time.

It must be noted that researchers sometimes investigate CNM without the subcategories of polyamory, swinging, and open relationships (Balzarini et al., 2018). When investigating the severity of the stigma attached to non-normative relationships, researchers found that intensity or stigma varied depending on whether the relationship was open, polyamorous, or swinging, leading the authors to suggest that researchers need to separate “categories” of CNM (Balzarini et al., 2018). Blaney and Sinclair (2013) further debated the generalizability of the results of Balzarini and colleagues (2018) based on the vagueness of the definition and terms used. Researcher’s ambiguous use of terminology has created some confusion, highlighting the need for further investigation and codification.

Descriptive Terms

In addition to the term *polycule*, several other terms are specific to polyamory or CNM. One such term is *metamour*, the partner of one’s partner (e.g. your boyfriend’s wife with whom you are not romantically involved), which would typically be included on one’s *polycule* (Sheff,

2014b). *Triads* consisting of three partners and *quads* consisting of four partners (all of whom may or may not be directly involved with each other) are also common terms while larger groups are typically included under the *polycule* umbrella (Ritchie & Barker, 2016). *Nesting partner* is sometimes used to differentiate between a partner one lives with and other partners (Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Some polyamorous relationships are *polyfidelitous*, meaning that those in the polycule or relationship have agreed not to have sexual relationships outside that relationship structure (Veaux & Rickert, 2014).

Another term common in polyamory is *compersion*, meaning feeling happy about the joy your partner generates with their (other) partner(s) (Ritchie & Barker, 2016). Mogilski and colleagues (2019) surveyed 159 individuals in CNM relationships and asked about feelings of compersion. Based on their results, compersion was conceptualized as the satisfaction of providing “a desirable resource to a valuable mate” (p. 1823) rather than the opposite of jealousy as it is sometimes thought of in the CNM community (Ritchie & Barker, 2016). *Polysaturated* is a feeling that occurs when one cannot make time for and/or does not want any additional partners (Fern, 2020).

Relationship Structures

Polyamorous individuals have also given new, relationship-specific meanings to some words. A *hierarchical relationship* is one in which a person has two or more romantic relationships of unequal weight (Ritchie & Barker, 2016). One example might be someone who lives with their spouse, or *nesting partner*, and has another significant other they see occasionally but do not share similar levels of commitment and life intertwinement with that person. In this example, the spouse might be referred to as their *primary* and their other significant other as their *secondary*. *Nonhierarchical relationships* are sometimes called *relationship anarchy*, meaning

no one partner is more important than another (Katz & Graham, 2020). It is important to understand these terms when interacting with polyamorous people as these are used in everyday parlance.

Polyamorous Relationships from Within

As this section illustrates, some researchers have investigated healthy outcomes of CNM and polyamorous relationships. Many of these researchers have stated that the work is aimed at overtly or covertly speaking to the negative perceptions and stigma around nonmonogamy.

Relationship Quality

One reason for the stigma against polyamory and nonmonogamy is the perceived higher quality of monogamous relationships when it comes to aspects such as a better sex life, higher relationship quality, and a lower risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (Conley et al., 2012). Séguin and colleagues (2017) used a sample of 3463 participants of sexually diverse Canadians to examine relationship quality in monogamous, open, and polyamorous relationships. Participants reported high levels of relationship quality regardless of sex, sexual orientation, and type of relationship agreement, discrediting the common belief that sexual and romantic exclusivity inevitably leads to higher levels of relationship quality (Séguin, 2017). Rubel and Bogaert (2015) examined over 30 published studies to conclude that general trends in the research suggest that those practicing CNM have similar psychological well-being and relationship quality correlates when compared with monogamists.

The perception that dyadic partnering is invariably optimal may have limited our understanding of intimate relationships. In particular, we may lack an understanding of the complexities of attachment processes (Moors et al., 2019). Moors and colleagues (2019) expanded our understanding of both attachment theory and polyamory by showing that an

individual's orientation (with regards to attachment theory's conception of anxiety and avoidance) toward multiple partnerships may be a good indication of how that individual might approach all romantic relationships.

Other researchers felt it was important to explore relational maintenance behaviors as a means of helping polyamorous individuals and their counselors to better navigate and mitigate identity-laden stressors that come with a marginalized identity (Rubinsky, 2019). Repeated use of maintenance behaviors such as giving assurances, openness, positivity, conflict management, shared tasks, and having a social network bolstered relational satisfaction and resilience in polyamorous relationships, much as they do in monogamous relationships (Rubinsky, 2019).

Research has also been conducted on CNM and quality of life for older US adults. Fleckenstein and Cox (2015) surveyed 502 US adults over 55 years of age and compared them with the 2012 US General Social Survey. Findings were that those engaged in CNM and polyamorous relationships reported being significantly happier than the general population and that engagement in or desire for CNM relationships was correlated with better overall health (Fleckenstein & Cox, 2015).

Taken together, the research indicates that the quality of CNM or polyamorous relationships is not by default lower than monogamous relationships. This evidence may aid in reducing the stigma associated with CNM and polyamory.

Need Fulfillment

One tenant of polyamorous relationships is that it is unnecessary (and perhaps inadvisable and/or impossible) to get all of one's interpersonal needs met by one person (Sheff, 2014b). Mitchell and colleagues (2014) examined how need fulfillment with two partners was related to relationship satisfaction and commitment with each partner. They reported that polyamorous

individuals' relationships with one partner tend to operate relatively independently of their relationship with another partner. Participants did not appear to compensate for low need fulfillment in one relationship by having another relationship. They also seem to be successful in meeting their interpersonal needs without doing so at the expense of their other relationship(s) (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Some researchers also found that need fulfillment via a support network was important. Gusmano (2018) found that non-normative communities, such as LGBTQ support groups, were a salient part of polyamorous participant's experience. Participation in a community that collectively understands what it means to be polyamorous ameliorates the harmful effects of living in a mononormative world (Gusmano, 2018).

Balzarini and colleagues (2017) looked at nuances between multiple relationships of polyamorous individuals. They asked participants to rate indices of relationship evaluation (e.g., acceptance, secrecy, investment size, satisfaction level, commitment level, relationship communication, and sexual frequency). Their findings indicate that people may be getting different things out of different relationships while successfully maintaining their current relationships. Researchers also found that individuals are more satisfied with and committed to primary relationships, countering the myth that polyamorists seek out alternative relationships due to a lack of satisfaction with the primary relationship (Balzarini et al., 2017).

Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning (2018) posit that it is polyamorous love's complexity that may result in increased happiness and need fulfillment. The researchers argue that interpersonal relationships form a vital part of sustaining and developing one's sense of self over time. Intimate romantic relationships provide additional intensity, intimacy, and proximity to others and additional romantic partners must provide additional opportunities for life-enhancing

relationships (Ben-Ze'ev & Brunning, 2018). This fits with the “self-expansion model” in which interpersonal relationships enable people to expand their perspectives, resources, and self-understanding (Aron & Aron, 2015).

In summary, need fulfillment in polyamorous relationships seems to function differently than in monogamous relationships. Further, these differences may be beneficial which contradicts some stigmatized beliefs about CNM and polyamory discussed in a later section.

Sexual Orientation and Polyamory

Prior to 2010, polyamory was frequently mentioned briefly as a byproduct in studies of bisexual, lesbian, and gay populations. In a 2004 study of bisexual individuals, the author states that this population deals with complex psychosocial obstacles including the pathologizing of polyamory (Guidry, 1999). In 2005, Diamond discussed polyamory as a lesbian sub-type. One study on bisexuality looked specifically at negotiations of nonmonogamy as a means of creating fulfilling relationships (McLean, 2004). More recent literature has documented the ways in which sexual orientations other than heterosexuality ameliorate the stigma against CNM. Moors and colleagues (2013) found that heterosexual participants perceived lesbian and gay CNM relationships higher in relationship quality when compared to heterosexual CNM relationships.

Manley and colleagues (2015) found that those espousing a polyamorous identity are more likely than monogamous individuals to identify their sexuality as something other than the binary of gay/straight. The same study also found that over the period of seven months, polyamorous individuals were far more likely than heterosexual people to experience changes in sexual identity and sexual attractions than their monogamous counterparts (Manley et al., 2015).

The conceptualization of CNM and polyamory as an LGBTQ-related phenomenon may negatively impact or limit our understanding of CNM and polyamorous practices. This could

lead practitioners and researchers to view heterosexual polyamorous relationships as less common or less legitimate than LGBTQ polyamorous relationships (Brewster et al., 2017).

Polyamory in Context

Stigma

The presence of cultural stigma against CNM and polyamory has been well documented (Brewster et al., 2017). Conley and colleagues (2013) gave compelling evidence of a stigma against CNM and a corresponding halo effect around monogamy. Perceptions of stability, closeness, companionship, reliability, trust, prevention of STIs, honesty, and other positive traits were higher for monogamy than CNM. These researchers suggest that an important area of research should be to assess whether the negative perceptions of CNM are accurate and warranted (Conley et al., 2013). The aforementioned studies on high levels of relationship quality and need fulfillment in CNM and polyamorous relationships seem to point to an answer of *not necessarily*.

Grunt-Mejer and Campbell (2016) attempted to understand and analyze the social norms that are violated by different forms of CNM and the negative perceptions that result. Participants judged monogamists much more positively on relationship-related questions, cognitive ability, and morality items. Grunt-Mejer and Campbell assert that “moral judgments are not just an indicator of social norms; they are also an engine for social conformism because no one wants to be the recipient of negative opinions” (p. 52).

These “engines of social conformism” can affect those in the relationship. Balzarini and colleagues (2017) argued the negative effects of the marginalized state of polyamory may be harmful, particularly to secondary relationships. Secondary relationships are often kept secret and are frequently given less time and commitment, which may be due, in part, to the secrecy

some polyamorists feel is required. One sociological study synthesized seven years of participant observation and found that participants experience stigma challenges both within their families and from society (Sheff, 2005).

Hutzler and colleagues (2018) performed an experimental manipulation grounded in prejudice-reduction theory. Their research found that individuals reporting traditional traits such as political conservatism and Christian religiosity viewed polyamory more negatively and prior exposure to polyamory was positively correlated with more favorable attitudes towards these relationships. The study's experimental manipulation of providing additional information about polyamory or asking participants to consider advantages and limitations of the relationship category produced more positive attitudes. Hutzler and colleagues (2015) conclude that these two strategies for reducing stigma could help reduce systemic stigma in healthcare and institutional settings, thereby benefiting polyamorous individuals by reducing the harmful effects of misperception and prejudice.

Sheff (2020) writes about the *polyamorous possibility* as one reason for the stigma. The author argues that one might assume that perceived infidelity and sex for pleasure as the reasons for negative perception but discards these ideas because marital infidelity is somewhat common and America's acceptance of sex for pleasure as indicated by mainstream ads for Victoria's Secret or KY Lubricant. Instead, Sheff (2020) argues that the reason polyamory is so disturbing to conventional society is that it challenges the monolithic conception of monogamy as the only way to long-term happiness and cheating as the only way to achieve sexual variety.

Some research indicates that one reason some judge CNM and polyamory negatively is the presence of zero-sum thinking (Burleigh et al., 2017). Individuals who believe relationship resources are scarce, or that they are entitled to most of those resources perceive the allocation of

these resources to be a zero-sum phenomenon (Burleigh et al., 2017). Given this finding, the authors suggest that CNM prejudice may be reduced through interventions that target zero-sum thinking about romantic love.

Johnson and colleagues (2015) developed the Attitudes Towards Polyamory Scale, a brief, reliable measure of individual differences in attitudes towards a polyamorous relationship orientation. In one study using the scale, participants that identified as psychologists held generally favorable attitudes toward polyamory, indeed most participants in the study endorsed highly positive perspectives on polyamory (Herbert, 2020). Herbert found that older participants tended to have less favorable attitudes toward polyamory, possibly due to less experience with polyamory or shifting political and social values. Using the same scale, another sample of psychotherapists held more positive attitudes compared to negative attitudes (Stavinoha, 2018).

Disclosing Relationship Status

Through this process of othering, polyamorists and other consensual nonmonogamists can be marginalized, vilified, and disregarded, while monogamous individuals enjoy unearned privileges as a result of their relational orientation (Blumer, 2014). Those practicing CNM must choose between risking such prejudice and secrecy, which can cause tension in partnerships, one of the more frequent challenges reported by polyfamilies (Moors et al., 2013). Polyamorous individuals who reveal their relationship status to family, friends, and in the workplace might encounter feelings of exclusion (Sheff, 2011). If their relationship and/or their partners are not accepted, the partners can feel rejected (Moors et al., 2013).

Gusmano (2018) conducted a narrative study to gather stories of coming out as polyamorous and/or bisexual. Stories revealed the ways in which some came out while others lived in compulsory invisibility due to stigma. The presence of a non-normative community of

other bisexual and/or polyamorous individuals played a significant role in non-normative identity disclosure and acceptance (Gusmano, 2018).

Healthcare settings have been reported as one salient location where polyamorous individuals experience stigma. Arseneau and colleagues (2019) performed a study with 24 participants whose polyamorous family had recently given birth. All participants reported that they had experienced some form of marginalization related to their polyamorous relationship style (Arseneau et al., 2019). Vaughan and colleagues (2019) also reported that patients who were known to be nonmonogamous in medical healthcare settings experienced stigma and a lack of medical provider knowledge.

Polyamory and Mental Health Services

A lack of research on polyamory may not be a problem in and of itself, but if the practice is as widespread as the aforementioned studies indicate, those working to enhance relationships and personal growth need be knowledgeable of polyamorous practices. Multiple studies found that therapists and other mental health practitioners receive minimal training about counseling and assessment with polyamorous clients (Graham, 2014; Herbert, 2020). A lack of understanding of non-traditional relationship patterns could result in a damaged therapeutic experience and negatively impact patient outcomes (Graham, 2014). One sample of psychotherapists reported that 67% of the sample had no graduate training on polyamory and 74% participants did not feel their training had prepared them to work with polyamorous clients (Stavinoha, 2018).

Finding no information on polyamory in her training program, Weitzman (2006) created a pamphlet titled “What Psychology Professionals Should Know about Polyamory” for her psychology department’s Diversity Week. She worked with other therapists and the *National*

Coalition for Sexual Freedom to publish an updated, more widely version of her initial treatise to help ameliorate the shortage of publicly available information (Weitzman et al., 2009).

Some researchers have lamented the dearth of literature to guide therapists' understanding of how polyamorous relationships work (Girard & Brownlee, 2015). Therapists and attachment researchers frequently equate romantic love and security with sexual and romantic exclusivity, yet empirical evidence has demonstrated that people can exhibit low levels of avoidance and characteristics of security without sexual exclusivity (Moors et al., 2015).

As recently as 2018, therapists who identify as monogamous have been found to hold implicit bias against polyamory (Jordan, 2018). Polyamory and CNM have been marginalized and criticized as harmful (without empirical evidence of harm) in the mental health professions (Weitzman, 2006). Weitzman (2006) confronted the issue of the fraught relationship between polyamory and mental health professions head on, writing that

Despite the demographic prevalence of polyamory, therapists are under-educated about the lives and needs of polyamorous people. Most graduate psychology textbooks, curricula, and internships do not include mention of it. Monogamy is often upheld as a relationship standard by the therapy field, and polyamory is often pathologized. (p. 142)

The scarcity of literature on polyamory leaves couple and family therapy training programs without the necessary skills and knowledge to adequately teach and supervise their students, thereby privileging monogamy (Kisler & Lock, 2019). Williams and Prior (2015) assert that polyamorous relationships often deal with challenges common to all relationship styles, yet they may also face marginalization, discrimination, disapproval from family members, and lack of effective mental healthcare or legal protection.

Hauptert and colleagues (2017) suggest that a sizable and diverse proportion of US adults have experienced CNM, highlighting the need for additional theoretical and empirical therapy and family science work. This prevalence is one of the reasons researchers such as Moors and Schechinger (2014) called into question the pre-occupation Western societies have with what is deemed appropriate sex behaviors, acts, and identities. They suggest

five ways in which psychological researchers and practitioners can avoid reinforcing mono- and hetero-normativity: (1) conduct research on sexual practices that fall outside the monogamous hetero relationships (2) avoid assuming that sexual exclusivity is a hallmark feature of a healthy romantic relationship, (3) include consensual non-monogamy in multicultural clinical training, (4) ask clients about their relationship structure on intake paperwork, and (5) separate the decision to deceit from the desire for sexual and/or romantic novelty when treating cases of infidelity. (p. 476)

Similarly, Katz and Graham (2020) argue that social workers need to identify their own biases toward nonmonogamy and understand that commitment and attachment are as important in polyamory as monogamy to create a safe environment for polyamorous clients.

McCoy and colleagues (2015) published a case study of sensate focus therapy with a polyamorous couple as part of an effort to ameliorate the gap in guidance for counselors working with polyamorous individuals, couples or groups. This case study supports Williams and Prior (2015) assertion that polyamorous individuals deal with common challenges as the case study profiles a couple whose presenting issue was separate from their polyamorous identity (McCoy et al., 2015). A case illustration using the work of John Gottman and Sue Johnson's emotionally focused therapy similarly asserted that polyamorous individuals and couples may present with

issues that also occur in monogamous relationships and are not a product of the relationship style itself (Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2017).

Calls for Research

Much of the research that is present is quantitative in nature and, I believe, captures only a snapshot of how polyamorous relationship structures function in modern culture. Several studies point out the need for additional research. Mogilski and colleagues (2017) call for research to “secure information from multiple partners and [to] assess whether partners in the same relationship perceive the relationship dynamics differently depending on their role” (p. 415). Mitchell et al. (2014) also highlight “a pressing need for research involving all partners in a polyamorous relationship” (p. 338).

Synthesis and Research Question

Although the body of polyamorous research has grown in recent years, researchers have studied and guided mononormative relationships for decades. This leaves our collective understanding of CNM and polyamorous practices well behind that of monogamous relationship practices (Brewster et al., 2017). Stephens and Emmers-Sommer (2020) found a statistically significant relationship between emerging adult’s (age 18-29) choice for relationship style and their identity. Their study suggests that a growing number of emerging adults are becoming more accepting and knowledgeable of various relationship styles and relational practices, which in turn, is helping to shift these young adult’s identities (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020). If young adults are increasingly turning to CNM rather than monogamy, then I believe there is an increased need to understand what may become a common relationship style.

While snapshots in quantitative research offer valuable information, they do little to shed light on the lived experiences of polyamorous individuals. Those that do attempt to capture the

lived experience only capture a brief instance, such as coming out (Gusmano, 2018) or critical incidents (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018). Both psychologists and polyamorous individuals see a need for additional information on polyamory (Jordan, 2018; Stavinoha, 2018). Moors and colleagues (2019) encourage researchers to explore how all members of a consensually nonmonogamous relationship view their relationships as this would enable insight into the network effects of attachment and relationship dynamics. This study sought to fill these gaps, at least partially, in existing research and understanding of polycules. The primary goal of this study was to address the question of *what is the lived experience of a polycule?*

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Stories Lived and Told

This study used Narrative Inquiry (NI) as a methodology for understanding the lived experience of a polycule. Humans understand the world narratively, it therefore makes sense to study the world narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This chapter addresses the philosophy of NI, using storytelling as activism, the ethics of social justice research, and narrative use in therapy. The data gathering phase and use of McCormack's (2004) *storying stories* as a data analysis technique will also be outlined.

NI seeks knowledge of human experience that remains within the stream of human lives rather than a description of reality that stands outside human experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Knowledge *of* human experience is constructed *in* human experience and everyday communicative and meaning-making action (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

At times, reductionist approaches impinge on the philosophy of NI in that researchers are tempted to examine narratives for themes, thereby increasing generalizability and losing the richness of narrative experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The role of theory in NI also differs from formalistic inquiry in that it is more productive to begin with explorations of phenomena of experience rather than a comparison of various methodological frameworks (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Polkinghorn believed that narrative data could be descriptive or explanatory (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While descriptive narrative seeks to produce a story of the interpretive narrative accounts individuals or groups use to make sense of their lives, explanatory results account for the connection between events in a causal sense (as cited in Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000). As such, this researcher believes this causal sense is still *interpreted* by the individual and the researcher and that our lives and experiences can not be empirically validated so we are left with only descriptive narrative as an outcome of NI.

Storytelling as Activism

The idea that telling our life's story can serve as a vehicle of social and political change dates back to the Enlightenment (Lenart-Cheng & Walker, 2011). Telling the story of one's lived experience is activism on two levels (Collins, 2015). First, the act of telling one's story can be transformative in that it creates a map of personal growth (Collins, 2015). When we allow a storyteller to position themselves as a member of an oppressed group, narrative can translate feelings of shame or individual responsibility into feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment (Olsen, 2014). Second, personal narratives have the power to reach those who might resist overt forms of activism (Collins, 2015). Referring to Catherine Frazee's idea of storytelling as "deliciously subversive" (as cited in Collins, 2015), she asserts that "narrative subtly sneaks in and overthrows our idea of the mythic norm" (p. 34).

There is a precedent for telling stories as a successful means of raising awareness, engaging the public in meaningful dialogue, and stimulating social activism (Dean, 2013). The utility of narratives in relation to community building and social movement development is well documented (Olsen, 2014). Feminist scholars have endorsed narrative as persuasive communication that can be embraced by those who have been marginalized (Olsen, 2014), such as polyamorists. My research seeks to shed light on untold stories of relationships and increase awareness. Therefore, using narrative methodology is a fitting approach for this research.

Polyamorous writers have commented that "especially in the field of sex and relationships, we need to hear more from those who aren't in that sacred circle of sexuality"

(Patterson & Powell, n.d.). Indeed, polyamorous individuals might benefit from using narrative much as the gay and lesbian rights movement used it to gain important legal protections (Olsen, 2014).

Ethics of Social Justice in Research

This research was heavily influenced by social justice interpretations of key ethics principles in psychotherapy research (Paquin et al., 2019). “Western, White, heterosexual, cisgender men (and women in some cases) are overrepresented in psychotherapy research” (p. 492). As evidence of mononormativity, note that *monogamous* literally went without saying. As such, I believe even the act of performing research on marginalized communities is itself a social justice endeavor. I have considered nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice, the key ethics principles outlined by Paquin and colleagues (2019).

First, in accordance with the idea of nonmaleficence and adherence to anti-oppressive research this work aimed to

(a) refrain from only asking questions about individuals’ problems, but seek answers to address systemic problems, (b) design programs of research aimed at making invisible sources of oppression visible, and (c) using our resources, training, and skills as researchers to shine a light on an un(or under)seen problem or issue. (Paquin et al., 2019, p. 493)

This project was also conceived with an eye towards beneficence for polyamorous individuals. Participants helped generate previously nonexistent data, aiding an expanded and supportive understanding of polyamorous individuals and their needs (Paquin et al., 2019).

While altruism is limited because it fails to acknowledge the part we all have in addressing

systemic oppression, beneficence integrates self-interest with interest in the welfare of others (Paquin et al., 2019). In other words, I performed this research *this for us all*, myself included.

Paquin and colleagues (2019) assert that just research requires bringing our tools and resources as researchers to bear to shine light on injustices and working to mediate those injustices. A justice-focused approach to psychotherapy research is egalitarian and involves the assumption that all people are equals, even though that equality has not yet been fully rendered (Paquin et al., 2019).

NI seeks to understand (as opposed to critique) and it is therefore important to find a way of presenting this research so that it foregrounds relationships while maintaining research rigor (Craig & Huber, 2007). One way to accomplish this is to consciously invite participants to take part as coresearchers and to cocompose research texts (Craig & Huber, 2007). Feminist theory has enriched the philosophy of NI by stressing that it is important to be transparent about the social relations between the researcher and the participants and answer questions of whose interpretations have more validity (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Involving participants as coresearchers and cocomposers lent equal validity to the researcher and participant (Craig & Huber, 2007) and I believe this is a good representation of Paquin and colleagues' (2019) egalitarianism research principle.

Narrative Use in Therapy

As a therapist-intern, it is salient to me to briefly explore the relationship between NI and narrative therapy. As I have learned about the theory and practice of narrative therapy, I have also considered the ways in which I might craft interview questions for this project.

Combs and Freedman (2012) describe narrative therapy as an inquiry about and examination of the effects problems have on people's lives. They note that narrative therapists

look for ways to link their client's stories with other stories of people who have struggled with similar problems, thereby allowing people to contribute to and partake in a growing body of knowledge. Linking lives through shared stories decreases marginalization and supports social justice (Combs & Freedman, 2012). "A central area of narrative study is human interaction in relationships—the daily stuff of social work, counseling, and psychotherapy" (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). As such, narrative therapy interventions were considered in crafting a research methodology for this research.

Using the Tree of Life intervention, common in Narrative Therapy, helped me understand the group and the individuals in it (Haselhurst et al., 2020). Narrative therapy in general and the Tree of Life, in particular, help individuals create opportunities to tell their preferred identity story (Casdagli et al., 2020). The use of a preferred identity story raises questions of truth and reality in research (Bold, 2012). Researchers have stated that the use of narrative has strong links with postmodern thought because narrative creation and re-creation encourages reflexivity and acknowledges that truth and uncertainty are unstable (Bold, 2012). Narrative researchers also argue that knowledge is constructed in everyday worlds through ordinary communication and storytelling (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). Post-positivists would also argue that NI honors lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). It is that lived experience and better understanding that I sought in this research.

Researcher Identity

Bold (2012) declares that as a researcher, it is important that I consider my motives, feelings, and context for the duration of this project. She goes on to write that because the traditional definition of objectivity does not fit NI, it is crucial that the researcher acknowledge

and account for their subjective position (Bold, 2012). Therefore, I carefully considered how I came to my current place in relation to this work.

I received a Bachelor of Arts in English literature with a minor in communication from the University of Central Oklahoma in 2003. My decision to focus on literature was made from a love of storytelling. I focused on the development of the novel as a literary form and feminist critiques of literature. In 2006, I received a Master of Arts in Communication from the University of Oklahoma. My thesis used feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's (1982) theory of sexual difference to examine bestselling popular romance novels (Smith, 2006). As a genre that comprised 50% of paperback sales, over 1.5 billion dollars (Ramsdell, 2002), I believed the genre deserved increased academic attention. My love of storytelling and interest in media representation of romantic relationships made this a fulfilling project.

Since 2006 my interest in media has waned while my interest in romantic relationships has increased. In 2012 my husband and I became polyamorous, creating an interest in a new (for us) way to have romantic relationships. At the time few books about open relationships had been published. Both my husband and I were struck by how lost we felt. We found that all our knowledge of romantic relationships and love was based on an assumption of monogamy.

I knew how powerful storytelling and narrative could be. This was the first time I had experienced the power of *not* telling stories. In my studies of mass media, I had worked with and taught Cultivation Theory (Gamble & Gamble, 2004). The theory outlines how our perceptions and understanding of the world are created and shaped by mass media. What the theory did not address, and what became clear to me, was the vacuum created by the stories that are not told.

Many qualitative researchers believe that open admission of the qualities and experience brought to the research arena demonstrates the researcher is not hiding anything (Bold, 2012).

Therefore, I state and embrace my experience with communication studies, feminist inquiry, love of stories, polyamorous identity, and goal of becoming a therapist as “an unavoidable and...useful or essential part of the whole process” (Bold, 2012, p. 39).

Positionality

I aimed to create an emic account about the lived experience of the polycule in question. My view of reality is situated within a cultural relativist perspective and recognizes the behavior and actions of participants as being relative to and meaningful in their culture (Holmes, 2020). I will use terminology that is meaningful to those within the culture being studied here. The results of this study include colloquial language to maintain the voice of the participants (Holmes, 2020).

It is notable that my identity as a straight white cis female of middle-class background may preclude or cloud my understanding of those in the polycule who are different from me. Cultural responsiveness on my part was important in building trust with the participants and understanding their story as it is related to me as a researcher. It was hoped that by bringing on my participants as cocomposers of the final work any misunderstandings or misattributions would be addressed.

I also acknowledge that my shared identity as someone who is polyamorous could lead to assumptions of commonalities with the participants. Other commonalities such as gender, race, political views, etc. were present. As a result of these commonalities, I may have been predisposed to a halo effect and could potentially ignore or downplay aspects of the participants and their relationship(s) based on my preconceptions, values, and assumptions.

Other potential influences on this research included my age (41), identification as a Democrat with socially liberal views, and my identification as an atheist. I also wanted to be

clear about my values as I approached this research. Those values included, but were not limited to, valuing personal freedom while maintaining a collectivistic attitude about those in my sphere of influence. I believe individuals are best served by self-awareness and conscious choice about how they live their lives and what values, customs, norms they adopt. I also value knowledge, learning new things, and having a like-minded community where ideas are debated respectfully. Less socially encouraged values I held include having intellectual status and master's degree, freedom to decide how to spend my time, working for myself, and working for financial gain.

Qualitative research often calls for bracketing to aid in guarding against potential damage to the data or the researchers and participants (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Fischer (2009) asserts that the role of bracketing in researcher engagement is twofold. It is the identification and temporary setting aside of the researcher's assumptions while collecting data and an ongoing awareness of assumptions and biases when analyzing the data (Fischer, 2009). My disclosures here were part of my attempts at identifying and setting aside my assumptions and biases.

As called for by McCormack (2004), I chose the method of reflexive journaling as a means of continuing to maintain awareness of my assumptions and biases. McCormack (2004) calls for ongoing interpretation and reflection by the researcher in the form of a journal. Her guided journaling approach calls for the researcher to consider how they are positioned in relation to the participant, how they are positioned during the conversation, and how they are responding emotionally and intellectually to the participant. She has placed herself into the study, echoing Clandinin's (2020) assertion that the researcher's experience in relation with the participants' experiences are being studied. The maintenance of a journal enhanced my ability to sustain a reflexive stance and enabled me to more fully realize the benefits of this research (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Procedure

This narrative inquiry of a polycule sought to answer the question of *what is the lived experience of a polycule?* Having outlined the philosophy and use of narrative in research, next I lay out the specifics of NI design for this study. Narrative research design, data collection, and data analysis are discussed.

Principles of NI Design

One common design for narrative inquiry is the case study, which has a long tradition and is useful in exemplification and discovery (Wells, 2011). Wells (2011) points to multiple case studies that provide the detailed knowledge necessary for the advancement of professional mental health practice. She declares that the case being studied may be a couple, family, or group of social-psychological interest. Some NI case studies are *imbedded case studies* in that they call for analysis of different sub-units, such as individuals and analysis of the group as a whole (Scholtz & Tietje, 2002).

NI often employs purposive sample selection in which participants are selected because they are expected to yield in-depth information in the subject area to be studied (Wells, 2011). Smaller-scale qualitative research frequently engages a small number of people in a specific context (Bold, 2012). The use of a small sample size precludes the possibility of generalization. Because qualitative researchers in general, and narrative inquirers in particular, are typically focusing on deep explorations of a small number of people the issue of generalization is of little concern (Bold, 2012). For projects involving detailed analysis the number five is sufficient for most studies, though some widely cited narrative studies involve as few as one participant (Wells, 2011). Wells (2011) goes on to say that because the sample size is small and purposive, it is important to expound upon criteria for selection of research participants. This researcher

sought a polycule in which members have been part of that polycule for at least a year. I sought a homogeneous sample to simplify the variations of experiences and participant characteristics (DePoy, 2016).

My aim was to create a richly textured work that represents the complex narratives of experience of what it is like to belong to a polycule. There exists a tension between generalizability and the richness of experience that retains and honors the experience of participants in qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I chose the richer end of the spectrum and limited my participants to a single polycule.

Next, I looked at our understanding of the term “lived experience.” As it is explored and understood in qualitative research, lived experience is a representation and understanding of a research participant’s human experiences and perceptions (Given, 2008).

Participant Criteria

As indicated previously, a purposive sample was sought to find participants who fit the needed criteria. I sought a self-identified polycule of five-to-eight individuals. I hoped for a multi-racial polycule to mitigate the relative overrepresentation of non-white polyamory (Macqueen & Patterson, 2021). I also hoped for a sample that was multi-gendered in an effort to promote understanding and acceptance of heterosexual polyamory, which lags behind that of gay and lesbian polyamory (Moors et al., 2013).

This polycule can be defined as a “constellation” encompasses all the people linked through their relationships, usually romantic and/or sexual, to one or more members of a polyamorous group and may include metamours as these individuals are linked through a shared connection (Sheff, 2014b). For instance, if a woman, part of the selected polycule, were to have a

boyfriend who is not otherwise romantically connected to the polycule, he would be the metamour of her other partner(s) and therefore will be included in the sample.

A polycule of five-to-eight individuals was considered ideal as it is near Wells' (2011) recommended number of five people. Participants were at least 18 years of age to give consent and participate in the research. A polycule whose members were 18-45 was considered ideal as it would generate data that might capture emerging attitudes on various relationship styles and relational practices (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020).

Exclusion criteria include those who are part of a vulnerable population (pregnant or prisoners) or unable to give consent due to age, disability, or illness. Individuals previously known to the researcher will be ineligible to participate. Participants under 18 and over 65 were ineligible for the study. Polycules who were unable to meet in person due to location or other factors were excluded from eligibility.

Participant Recruitment

For participant recruitment, I emailed several counselors and psychotherapists in the state of Colorado who advertised themselves specialists in polyamory and distribute my participant flyer (Appendix A) to anyone they thought might be appropriate and interested. I also contacted local polyamory Meetup groups throughout Front Range of Colorado to distribute the flyer. Three individuals took the prescreening survey mentioned in the flyer (Appendix B). One person responded to my follow-up email as willing to gather the potential participants from her polycule for an introductory Zoom call where I could answer any questions they had about the study or my work.

Following the Zoom call, eight members of the polycule completed the participant consent form (Appendix E). Participants responded to a scheduling survey the Tree of Life activity. Participants also completed the demographics survey (Appendix G) prior to the activity.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name*	Age	Occupation	Pronouns	Gender identity	Race/ethnicity	Sexual identity/ Orientation**	Relationship identity/orientation	Romantic Orientation**	Children
Abby	37	Rn	She/her	Cisgender Female	White/Caucasian	Queer	Poly-adjacent	Queer	0
Cade	40	Event production	he/him	Cisgender Male	White/Caucasian	Asexual	Polyamorous	Demiromantic	4
Matthew	37	actor	he/his	Cisgender Male	Jewish	Straight (heterosexual)	Polyamorous	Heteroromantic	0
Jen	34	Nurse Practitioner	she/her	Cisgender Female	White/Caucasian	Queer	Polyamorous	Panromantic	0
Kacey	39	Sr QA Engineer	they/them	Agender	White/Caucasian	Demisexual	Relationship Anarchist	Panromantic	0 biological, 2 "Step"
Zara	27	Medical receptionist	she/they	Gender Fluid	White/Caucasian	Demisexual	Polyamorous	Panromantic	No
Brenna	36	Software QA Engineer	she/her	Cisgender Female	White/Caucasian	Queer	Polyamorous	Panromantic	2
Jamie	36	Massage Therapist	they/she	Non-binary / third gender	Hispanic	Pansexual	Relationship Anarchist	Panromantic	2

*Denotes that pseudonyms are used here and throughout this document.

** Demiromantic: an individual who does not experience romantic attraction until after a close emotional bond has been formed.

Heteroromantic: romantic attraction toward person(s) of a different gender

Panromantic: romantic attraction towards persons of every gender(s)

All the participants gathered on May 18, 2022 for the Tree of Life activity. Total participation time was approximately 5 hours; 3.5 hours for Tree of Life activity and a one-hour one-on-one interview.

The Tree of Life: A Collective Narrative

In order to collect data, I aimed to understand, as much as any outsider to the polycule can, the lives and relationships before me. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have observed that the researcher is entering an ongoing life that is *in the midst* of progressing and as a result, there is “much taken-for-grantedness at work in the moment-by moment relationships and happenings” (p. 76). I considered how I might come to efficiently understand the polycule and the individuals in it. The NI studies and educational materials I consulted did not provide specific instruction on coming to an initial understanding of participant’s lives to mitigate the “‘taken-for-grantedness’ and moment-by-moment relationships.”

I selected the narrative therapy activity Tree of Life “as a useful technique for exploring family resources, backgrounds, and values...” (Méndez & Cole, 2014, p. 222). In the same way “the use of the tree of life technique allows the therapist to incorporate family strengths and resources” (Méndez & Cole, 2014, p. 222) I believe it allowed me as the researcher to learn about the polycule in a way that benefited the participants thereby incorporated the beneficence encouraged by Paquin et al. (2019).

There has been a great deal of growth across the social sciences in the use of incorporating visual materials into qualitative research (King et al., 2019). Citing many visual methodologies, King and colleagues (2019) demonstrate that using visual elements as part of a research methodology can help capture everyday experience and facilitate a better understanding of various viewpoints of interviewees. It is that everyday experience and multiple viewpoints I sought in this research.

Saarelainen (2015) used the Tree of Life as a visual methodological approach to a narrative exploration of young adults' life stories. She found that using the Tree of Life in conjunction with interviews led to a deep understanding of her participants. The participants recognized that the interviews and drawings were for research rather than therapeutic purposes (Saarelainen, 2015). I hoped that using the Tree of Life with this polycule in this study would yield a similar deep understanding of the participants.

The Tree of Life methodology was developed as a collective narrative practice that would encourage people to tell their stories in ways that made them stronger (Denborough, 2020).

Participants each drew their own Tree of Life using the following symbolism:

- roots represent family history or ancestry,
- ground represents where the participant lives,
- trunk represents talents and strengths
- branches represent hopes and aspirations
- leaves represent important people in the participant's life
- fruits of the tree represent gifts (kindness, support, etc) from others (Milo, 2020).

Prior to that day, I sent them the Participant Guide to the Tree of Life (Appendix F) to help them come prepared to make the most of our time together. Scheduling nine polyamorous

individuals (including myself) was a challenge, something that will come as no surprise to those in the polyamorous community as jokes about the ongoing challenge of calendar management abound.

On May 18, all eight participants met me in a coworking office suite that was conveniently located for them and private enough to serve our purpose. When I arrived, the office was devoid of other people. The building was four stories of mirrored glass surrounded by a mostly empty parking lot. I took the elevator up to the fourth floor and found a reception area and a conference room I recognized from pictures on the website. This coworking space had little character beyond a “generic business office” and was an empty canvas on which to paint our experience of the evening.

As I set up my recording equipment, distributed snacks for the evening, and arranged art supplies for the activity, Jen and Matthew arrived about 20 minutes early. Jen was the person who had seen my research flyer and done most of the talking in our screening interview. Her voice was easily recognizable. Over the next half hour, other members of the polycule arrived. Once all participants were present, I distributed markers and large flipchart paper for each participant to draw their tree.

I considered what I had learned about them in the screening interview, held two months prior to this meeting. Most had joined by video, giving me some familiarity with their appearance as well as voice. Each had introduced themselves and told me their age and occupation. They had told me they were “geeks” and “nerds” of various kinds, ranging from playing Dungeons & Dragons to working as Quality Assurance and Data Science Engineers.

I gave an overview of our time together, including a detailed agenda with approximate timestamps to keep the group on track. The room grew quieter as individuals concentrated on

drawing their individual trees. There were occasional outbursts as one person would look over at another and comment on their tree. Laughter frequently broke the silence as people made funny, self-deprecating comments about their drawing skills or had difficulty putting on paper what was in their minds.

Once the trees were drawn, I asked all participants to put their trees on one shared wall to create a forest of life. One by one, participants shared their stories using the tree as a visual aid. In accordance with Mlilo's instructions on the Tree of Life activity, I asked participants to write on sticky notes the good things they heard the speaker say as they told their story, or perhaps something wonderful about that person that they had left out. Sticky notes of positive comments were added to each tree as we progressed through each person's story.

Following this activity, I asked them about the "storms of life" to solicit information about the challenges they faced both individually and as a group. Next, I asked about their strengths and values as a group to learn more about if and how they supported each other.

Each participant was invited to tell their story using the tree as a visual aid (Mlilo, 2020). Participants were invited to post their drawings on the wall to create a Forest of Life (Jacobs, 2018). Mlilo (2020) advises that the therapist or facilitator listens for common themes and strengths, retelling them to the family or group to reinforce the positive story of the group's forest of life. This collective narrative process helps the group contribute to other's growth (Jacobs, 2018). In addition to making the polycule aware of their common themes and strengths, I took notes on these commonalities and themes.

In addition, this activity will allowed me to observe the group's "in the midst" dynamics. Kitzinger (1994) lists many advantages of observing interaction between participants. These include:

- highlighting the participants attitudes, priorities, language, and framework of understanding,
- relative ease of identifying group norms,
- insight into the operation of group processes in the articulation of knowledge, and
- encouraging a variety of communication from participants—tapping into a wide range of understanding.

This activity was not included in McCormack’s work but “narrative inquiries are so context reliant that they cannot be confined to one model” (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 157).

Individual Interviews

The Tree of Life is not sufficient for this study as it did not allow for participants to convey their own story in a deeper, more personal way so individual interviews were conducted after the Tree of Life activity. Following the Tree of Life activity, I conducted a single one-on-one interview with each participant

Individual interviews were included in the methodology for a few reasons. First, McCormack (2000) only ever conducted individual interviews. Second, I wanted participants to tell the stories most salient to them as indicated by their own individual experience. I also wanted to avoid interference from group think as it related to each individual’s perspective on their experience in the polycule. Third, the Tree of Life activity did include some collective data gathering. During that experience I quickly saw that in a group this boisterous, group interviews would prove difficult to transcribe. And last, decisions on which members to include in each group would be challenging since relational interactions do not break neatly into groups because this is truly a network of individuals.

A narrative study often calls for a minimalistic interview guide to gather data and allow sufficient opportunity to allow participants to bring their perspectives which, while unanticipated, might be relevant to the research in question (King et al., 2019). It is important to allow the participants to give their narrative with as little interviewer influence as possible (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This must be balanced with an attempt to document a rich story which may call for asking “what” or “how” questions at times (King et al., 2019).

An interview guide should be used to guide interview questions about a predetermined set of topics (Wells, 2011). I developed my Individual Interview Guide to set the pacing and direction of the interview based on the work of Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) (see Table 1). The guide was minimalistic and called for avoiding imposing language not used by the participant during the interview. As suggested in Wells (2011), initial questions were phrased to be completely open-ended and begin with phrases such as “Could you please tell me the story of” and were clear and devoid of any academic language. I supplemented my guide with experience/behavior, opinion/values, feeling, knowledge, and sensory questions (Patton, 2015, as cited in King et al., 2019) to deepen the story but often found these additional questions unnecessary because the participants gave full, at times lengthy, accounts of their stories.

Table 2

Individual Interview Guide

Phase	Guidelines
1. Initiation	<p>Formulating initial topic for narration</p> <p>“Could you please tell me the story of your involvement in your polycule?</p> <p>Please talk about how your experience of the polycule has evolved over time.”</p>
2. Main narration	<p>Low Point, High Point, and Turning Point</p> <p>"Please tell me about a time in the polycule where you experienced difficulties or had a particular low point. Perhaps it made you rethink being polyamorous or being in this polycule. Was there a time of difficulty between yourself and another member of the polycule?"</p> <p>"Please tell me about a time in the polycule where you experienced something wonderful or a particular high point. Maybe it made you glad to be polyamorous or part of this polycule."</p> <p>"Please tell me about a time when your perspective shifted. Perhaps you had some particular insight, made a decision, or started doing something or thinking of something differently?"</p> <p>No interruptions</p> <p>Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling</p>

	Wait for the coda
3. Questioning phase	Only 'What happened then?' No opinion and attitude questions No arguing on contradictions No why-questions
4. Concluding talk	Why-questions allowed -Experience/behavior questions- “What did you do when” or “What happened when” -Opinion/values questions- “What did you hope” or “What did you think” -Feeling questions- “What feelings did this provoke” -Knowledge questions- “What did you know about” or “How well did you know”

Interviews were conducted online. The interview audio was recorded and transcripts were created following each interview.

Data Analysis Method- “The wholeness defines the meaning.”

McCormack (2004) developed a process of *storying stories* in which transcripts are viewed through multiple lenses in which the researcher examines the language used, the process used to tell the story, the story’s context within the person’s life and the interview, and moments of participant epiphanies or turning points (McCormack, 2000a). This data is then used to develop an interpretive story as a situated account that includes the voices of the participants and the researcher and leaves space for reader interpretation (McCormack, 2000b). Developing the

story calls for sharing the researcher-interpreted story with the participant and seeking their feedback (see Stage 1, step 2 and Stage 2, step 1 in Table 2). Sharing the interpretive story and seeking feedback indicates that the researcher’s interpretation is no more valid than the participant’s, a demonstration of the egalitarianism called for in socially just research (Paquin et al., 2019).

Table 3

Summary of the Process of Storying Stories

Stage	Steps	Tasks
Stage 1: Construct an interpretive story	Step 1: Compose the middle of the story	Re-connect with the conversation through active listening. Locate the narrative processes in the transcript. Return enriched and constructed stories to participant for comment and feedback. Respond to the participant's comments. Form the first draft of the interpretive story middle: -List agreed story titles. -Temporal ordering of story titles. -Add the text of each story. Redraft story middle:

		<p>-View the transcript through multiple lenses: language, context and moments.</p> <p>-Take into account the views highlighted through these lenses.</p>
	<p>Step 2: Complete the story-add a beginning and ending</p>	<p>Compose an orientation and choose the title.</p> <p>Add a coda.</p> <p>Use visual form and textual strategies to enhance the presentation.</p> <p>Share the story with the participant.</p> <p>Reflect on the story in the light of the participant's comments.</p> <p>Compose an epilogue.</p>
<p>Stage 2: Compose a personal experience narrative</p>	<p>Step 1: Construct a personal experience narrative</p>	<p>Temporally order the interpretive stories in a single document.</p> <p>This document forms the personal experience narrative.</p> <p>Share the personal experience narrative with the participant.</p> <p>Respond to the participant's comments.</p>

	Step 2: Construct an epilogue to close the narrative	Reflect on the personal experience narrative in the light of the research question(s). Add an epilogue to summarize these reflections and close the narrative.
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Notably, this process of analysis does not call for breaking the transcript into smaller parts, coding them, and reconstituting them into themes. Reissman (1993) defines personal narrative as talk organized around significant events and asserts that researchers should keep the narrative whole, rather than splitting it into parts, in their analysis. McCormack (2004), like other feminist researchers (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) believes that the fragmentation necessitated by coding eliminates the complexity of identity and experience. She goes on to say that the situated nature of the encounter and the contextual, structural, and performance aspects of language are lost.

This researcher believed that *storying stories* allowed the participants to retain some control over their narratives. As Collins (2015) asserts, one danger of telling our story is that we lose the power to decide how our story is told. This methodology allowed the participants to better understand, and correct if needed, their story and my interpretation of their story. This approach speaks to my ethical concerns as a consumer of research, a researcher, and a polyamorous individual.

Presenting the reader with personal experience narratives allowed the reader to process multiple interpretations (McCormack, 2000b). The reader may choose to follow a particular

voice within this single narrative (the researcher or the participant) or may choose to read the full story in chronological fashion.

Lather (2015/1991) asks how we can create and frame meaning possibilities rather than eliminating possibilities. I believe this is an embodiment of the poststructural view of research that calls for the “development of a mutual, dialogic production of a multi-voice, multi-centered discourse” (Lather, 2015/1991, p. 112).

Transcripts & Analysis

McCormack (2004) opened her article by writing about researchers who reported feelings of overwhelm, confusion, and even terror at the formidable task of sorting through interview transcripts. She reported that researchers often describe this as “drowning in a sea of interview transcripts.” So, I at least had the knowledge that I was in good company in my feelings of stupor at the glut of data I held. Fortunately, this feeling is why McCormack documented her process and response to this dilemma.

First, I corrected the artificial intelligence (AI)-generated transcripts as I played the audio to verify what had actually been said. In addition to mundane AI errors, I found the tool’s lack of recognition of polyamory-specific terms amusing. “Polycule” was mis-transcribed as “Poly Kewl,” “polygon tool,” and “public school.” The term metamour was mistaken for “metamora” and “metamorphose.” And when one participant said they were “glad to be poly, or glad to be in the polycule” it was transcribed as “glad to be piling up in the particle.” Amusement aside, this is further evidence of the marginalization of polyamory and its associated terms.

Next, I listened to each interview one-by-one before reading through the transcript again. Each transcript had the filler words such as “um,” “ah,” “like,” and “you know.” This methodology follows the idea of analysis of narrative where researchers seek stories as data and

then analyze these stories for themes that hold across stories (McCormack, 2004). McCormack does not address this transcript clean up. Because this was not a linguistic study I deemed it appropriate to eliminate many of these as they do not add to, and potentially distract from, the stories. I also edited for clarity to aid readers who would be unable to experience the benefit of the audio cues I had. See Table 3 for examples.

Table 4

Examples of Edits for Clarity

Unedited Transcription	Edited Version
And I think we got really lucky and that the group of us just prioritize that sort of support with each other.	And I think we got really lucky that the group prioritizes supporting each other.
It wasn't a really...I was in a really low point in my life personally.	I was in a really low point in my life personally.

Next, I read over the edited transcript again, this time looking specifically through the lenses described by McCormack (2000a, 2000b, 2004). I thought to craft a worksheet of sorts to help me systematize my review of the nine edited transcripts but found the work had already been done. Ford (2021) created an outline of McCormack’s process, which I followed (Appendix H).

I found that Part B (Ford, 2021), locating narrative processes in the transcript, was largely unnecessary because I had structured the interviews to ask specifically for stories and I and the participants had kept conversation not related to the stories at a minimum. Using the notes and answers posed by McCormack (2000a, 2000b, 2004), and outlined by Ford (2021), I drafted my

interpretation of the interview. McCormack's questions about what is said in relation to self and self and society, common understandings, specialized vocabulary and relationships was especially salient in these interviews. The researcher also found the questions "How have these ways of being positioned the individual? Where does she conform to and challenge them? Where does she rewrite them?" and "Look for times and places where individual reconstructs sense of self through accommodation, challenge, or resistance" (Ford, 2021, p. 1) helpful.

I analyzed the interviews in chronological order and started with the first interview, Jen's. Following my analysis, I sent the transcript and analysis, now known as the Personal Experience Narrative, to my Thesis Committee Chair, Dr. Robert Allan. At several points in the transcript, he noted the care Jen took in considering the wellbeing of the polycule as a whole and its' individual members. No "course corrections" or problems with my analysis were reported. I continued with analysis of each transcript.

Next, I emailed each individual their own transcript and my analysis of the interview for their edits and comments. I asked each participant to use Track Changes for any edits they made. Several participants edited their interviews for clarity and grammar. Others made heavier edits, namely, reordering the stories they told to make them more chronological than their actual speech conveyed. Sometimes included additional details to previously told stories later in the interview.

I was confronted by an ethical dilemma in deciding how heavily to allow the participants to edit their transcripts. I returned to Paquin and colleagues' (2019) social justice interpretation of ethical principles in research for guidance. I decided that given that these were their stories, something I had stressed to the participants several times, their edits were no more or less valid than mine. I also consulted my own intentions, set out in 2021 when I wrote the literature review

and methodology sections. Following the principles of Craig and Huber (2007), I had invited the participants to take part as coresearchers and to cocompose research texts. In a sense, I had already made this decision. Their edits were incorporated into the final Personal Experience Narratives, included below.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

“We keep in the foreground of our writing a narrative view of experience, with the participants’ and researchers’ narrative of experience situated and lived out on storied landscapes as our theoretical methodological frame” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 128). What follows is my experience of the activity.

Tree of Life: A Collective Narrative Activity (and a lot of fun)

As each new person arrived joyous greetings and hugs were exchanged. They caught up with each other as I continued set up. They chatted, made in-jokes, and enjoyed seeing each other as this was the first time some had seen one of the other polycule members in person in several weeks. The group was rowdy and full of laughter, giving the atmosphere a jovial and warmhearted feeling. They exchanged stories of work occurrences or expressed joy at anticipating a half-day of work the following day. Even though not all members of the polycule were in attendance, joy at having that many members of the polycule present was frequently expressed.

I recalled the screening interview in which Jen had explained that the eight people present on the call were about half the polycule. Some members had no interest in participating or simply did not have the spare time to devote to the project. Though I had reviewed my notes from the screening interview, I was quietly overwhelmed with the number of mostly unknown people in the room. Eight people suddenly felt like a lot of research participants! And I began to think I should have brought a friend along to help with the logistics.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “the search for patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes that shape field texts into research texts is created by the writer’s

experiences as they read and reread field texts...” (p. 133). During the activity and in the following weeks as I corrected the transcript and rewatched the video recording, several patterns and themes emerged.

Throughout the activity, something the participants called “aggressive support” occurred. For example, when Cade listed one of his strengths as “I can cook” others in the room cheerfully heckled him for excessive modesty and told him he was a “damn good cook.” Later in the activity, I tried to corral them and was told “sorry, we will lift each other up all damn day if you let us!” Another pattern that emerged was the participant’s emphasis on chosen family. For some participants, this was related to a challenging childhood, for others, it was having a small or geographically distant family of origin.

An additional narrative thread that emerged was the idea that, in one participant’s words “We’re doing science!” The participants enjoyed making this joke and also understood that this was more than a fun group activity. This narrative thread has continued throughout the project. When I emailed the participants to tell them I was accepted into a Ph.D. program and asked if they were supportive of the idea of extending this study, one responded by saying “I want to continue to be science!”

The activity aimed to help me learn about them as a group by observing their “in the midst” dynamics and learn about their challenges and strengths as a group. I did not, therefore, include a write-up about their individual stories here.

Self-Reported Group Challenges and Strengths

The activity asked participants to think about the *storms of life*, defined as challenges such as losses, stressful events, or other difficulties. One of the most commonly cited challenges was mental health. Some participants wrote “mental health” while others more specifically

mentioned “depression,” “ADHD,” “anxiety,” or “stigma about mental health.” Physical health was mentioned in terms of “chronic pain,” “health issues,” and “access to healthcare.” Financial challenges were also mentioned, sometimes in conjunction with “capitalism.” Other cultural challenges such as “patriarchy” were mentioned by multiple participants.

When asked about collective challenges as a group, they agreed that scheduling and time management were ongoing issues. Several people also agreed that navigating interpersonal issues and boundaries was a salient concern for the group. Navigating changes in all walks of life, including financial status, relationship changes, and personal changes was all mentioned. An exact count of how many participants felt these things were a challenge is difficult to ascertain. When one participant mentioned a particular challenge, others would chime in with a “yes” or “me too.” It is possible or even probable that group think played a role in this conversation.

In response to an inquiry about group values and strengths, the participants agreed that an appreciation of uniqueness and being able to show up in the group exactly as you are were strengths of the group. They were quick to list “sense of humor” and elaborated that finding “absurdism,” “whimsy,” and having a “commitment to goofiness” characterized their humor. “Thriftyness” and recrafting things for new uses and needs was something group often did. They also agreed that valuing the younger generation and contributing to that generation was important to them. “Accountability” and “teamwork” were also agreed upon as strengths of the polycule. The group also shared that a feeling of compersion was not a requirement but was a common occurrence and would likely lead someone to be more comfortable in the group. While there is “no unified definition for compersion...it can be generally understood as a feeling of warmth, satisfaction, joy, or pleasure from knowing/imagining that your partner is emotionally or sexually involved with another person” (Mogilski et al., 2019, p. 1813).

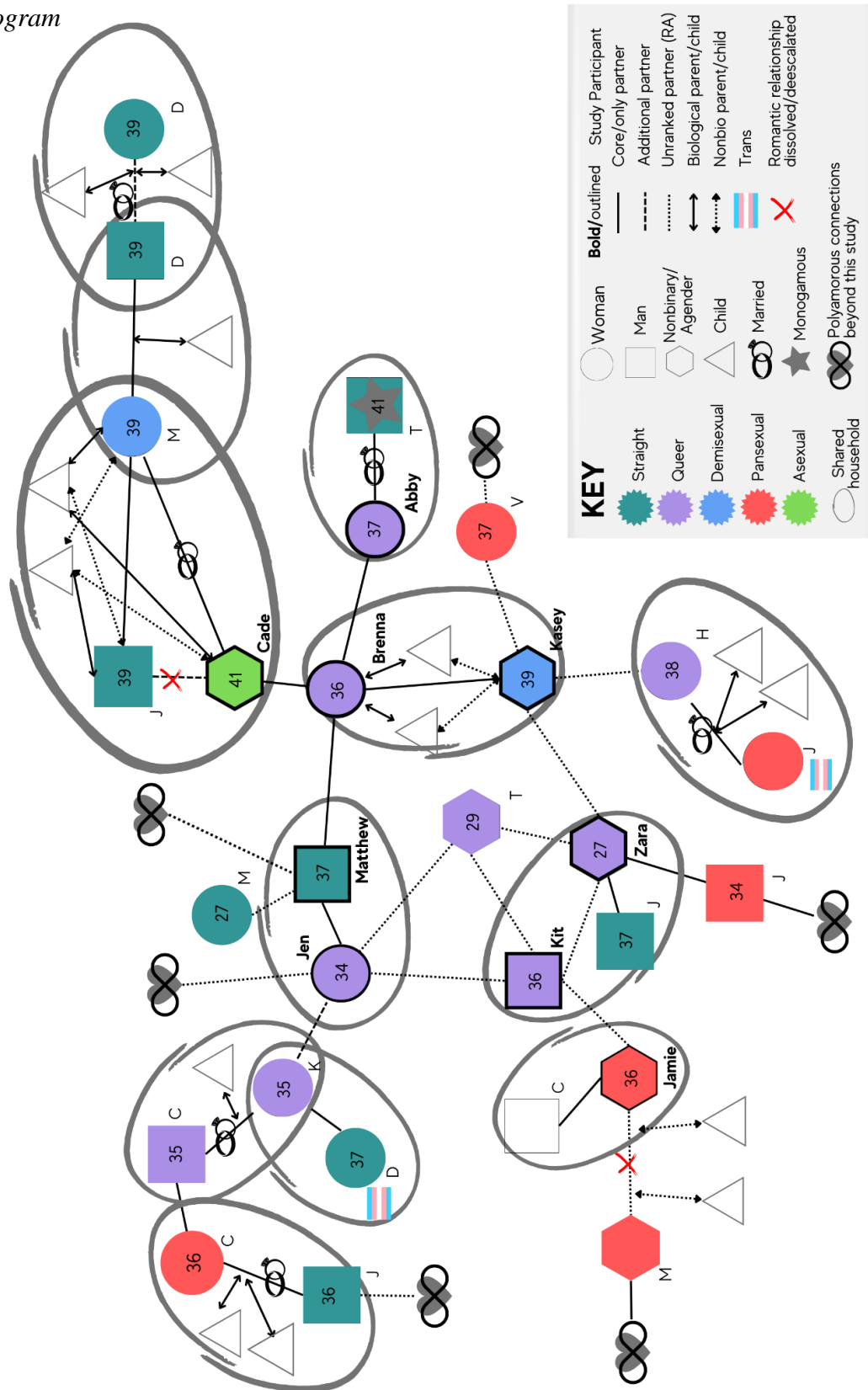
Genogram

Following the TOL activity I realized readers would need a graphical representation to keep track of how each of the participants were in relationship with others in the polycule. Jen mentioned that they had used the site <https://polycul.es/> to make a diagram of the polycule. Jen agreed to provide that graphic and spent 30 minutes on a video call with me to help me fully understand the document. Using their graphic and the information provided to me in the demographics survey, I began a polycule genogram. After I created as complete a version as I could with the information I had, I sent the genogram to the participants and asked them to fill in ages, sexual orientations, etc of others in the polycule.

It should be noted that the polycule is not static over time and the genogram reflects only what was gathered and validated by the participants in in autumn of 2022. At least one participant clarified that one relationship (outside of the eight participants) has shifted since this information was gathered. As this version is the closest to the relationship structure at the time of data gathering, I made the decision not to update the genogram at this time. Any future work with these participants may necessitate updates.

Figure 1

Polycule Genogram



Personal Experience Narratives

The following section contains an orientation to the participant and their interview, participant transcripts, and my interpretations and analysis for each participant. These three elements comprise the Personal Experience Narrative of each individual's lived experience as part of this polycule. I returned to McCormack's (2004) writings for guidance on the steps to the Personal Experience Narrative. McCormack laid out a process in which "the researcher adds a beginning (an orientation) and an ending (a coda), shares the story with the participant, and finally, reflects on the interpretive story in the light of the participant's comments by writing an epilogue" (p. 227).

Being a primarily musical term for the concluding passage of a piece, *coda* did not feel appropriate given the ongoing nature of the story of the polycule and its' individuals. For McCormack (2004), the completion of her research study represented the ending and final achievement of her Ph.D. In my case, this project is likely to be continued in my own pursuit of a Ph.D. In the time between my August 2021 methodology defense and the writing of the results and discussion chapters, I applied and was accepted to a Ph.D. program. Study participants and the faculty of the program I will enter in the fall of 2023 are supportive of the idea of continuing this study. Therefore, rather than using the term *coda* I chose to simply use *analysis*.

It should be noted steps have been taken to retain participant anonymity. All names used are pseudonyms and when participants used names of individuals outside the participants, those names are abbreviated with an initial. Specific locations the participant mentioned have been redacted.

Jen: Orientation

Jen used she/her pronouns and is a 34-year-old white cisgender woman. Her sexual identity was queer and she reported that her relationship orientation was panromantic. Jen worked as a Nurse Practitioner. When asked about her philosophy on relationships, she responded

I don't know that I've thought about it much! My life philosophy is: don't die, don't be a jerk, and emote, which I guess kind of fits in terms of my relationship philosophy. Keep growing and learning, and the best relationships come from being honest with yourself and with the other person. Each relationship is its own entity, I don't make rules for other people about their relationship.

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: Oh, this doesn't have to be hard

Jen: Gosh, I met Matthew in the fall of 2017. I was on a road trip driving around the country and attended a friend's birthday party outside of Denver. After I got home we started writing messages back and forth to each other, and then video chats, and then we kind of ended up visiting each other. We would fly back and forth about every six weeks, you know, we'd take turns. And a really lovely relationship developed out of it. I knew he was polyamorous and he knew that I was too. My second or third visit to see him in Denver was when I first met Brenna and Cade, so Matthew's partner, Brenna and her other partner, Cade. And I was really nervous. I was worried she wouldn't like me. Or that my connection with her partner would be emotionally stressful for her and I wanted to make this as smooth and frictionless as possible. I knew that they had had this longer-standing relationship and I was this newer person. And I had never met

and hung out with a metamour. So this was the first time kind of meeting a chain of people. And Brenna really made it not awkward and was really sweet. You know, both of us are slightly shy, awkward people. But I remember Matthew was going to be [acting] in a show that night and the three of us were going to go see his show. And we all went got a drink and then Matthew went off for [curtain] call. And Brenna and Cade and I were going to go across the street to grab snack or something. And as we were crossing the street, Brenna reached out and like she took my hand and I just like had this moment of being like, “oh, this doesn't have to be hard!”

After that I started to get to know her better. And when Kacey moved in with Brenna and I started to get to know them. We sit here and play board games together. How awesome!
[laughter] So yeah, that was my intro to the Denver polycule.

Then, during the pandemic, Brenna had started a text group with her partners. And then I got added in. And then a few more people got added in. And then we were doing zoom calls. And it was a huge support during sort of those early-to-mid 2020 pandemic days where we weren't going outside and we were disinfecting our groceries and all that fun stuff.

Lindsay: What about it was supportive in that and challenging time?

Jen: It was something to look forward to. It was cool to get to meet and get to know a new group of people, and you just sort of showed up, as you were, and sometimes you weren't feeling it, and you didn't show up or sometimes you were there for an hour, or sometimes several of us would be drunkenly baking in the background until two in the morning. It very quickly became this source of emotional support where we really started to lean on each other. And I think the proliferation of our various text threads also really helped by having groups based on interest, or certain topics, that has led to me getting to getting to know everyone a lot better. I feel really supported and seen. I get to show up as my authentic self. And you know, kind of like

any family. You have your moments where you're like, "oh, this person's kind of annoying me right now." But we're adults, and we're not blood-related. So it feels a little easier to either let it go or to have a conversation. And to support each other and also teach each other. And there's room for a little bit of pushback like, "oh, I don't actually think that" or "I don't believe that." And that's okay.

One more nice thing is it as a big enough group, that if you're busy, or you just aren't connecting well with somebody, it doesn't feel awkward to take the space you need. The size of the group chat makes it more emotionally accessible. Because I know that a response is not needed from me personally. There are other people to catch it. And so if the only response I can muster is to put heart reaction on your message that's enough and somebody else will give voice to those emotions that I don't have the emotional ability to handle right now. And so that's kind of an odd, supportive thing.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: It may not last forever

Jen: Oh, a low point in the polycule. Honestly, my experience at this polycule has been really positive. I think the most negative experience is that some of us are more or less competitive at board games than others and that feels a little stressful [laughter]. Like "we're not going to play board games anymore. That's cool. It's fine." But yeah, if that's the worst thing that happens, that pretty good.

Matthew and I have talked, and as a group we've talked a bit about our hopes for if a dyad splits or if a relationship changes or deescalates or someone moves out - that we can sort of nurse both parties through the breakup and still keep this going. Certainly things will change and shift but we hope to continue the good parts of this. It's a big group, it may not last forever. It's

always having little changes and people who come in and go and but it's been a pretty cool core group for a couple years and that's awesome and I'm hopeful it will continue.

Item 3: High Point

Title: Saying goodnight

Jen: So, you know, Matthew and Brenna have been dating for a long while. Brenna has two kids. The bedtime routine is Brenna's younger kid, she brushes her teeth, says good night, gets in the top bunk of the bed, and then all of the adults come and stand at the side of the bed and present their forehead. She puts her forehead on yours and you say good night. And the first time that I was included in this I was like, "I have been chosen as one of the adults who gets to say goodnight." And it was it was such a touching moment. And even more recently, Brenna and Kacey hosted a big backyard party about a month or so ago and her kiddo went around and was like putting stickers on us or tapping us with something – I don't quite remember what it was. But there was then a general announcement of "if you have been so selected, bedtime is in 10 minutes and you must come say goodnight." So 10 minutes later, we all dutifully got up and trooped into the room. There's just this big long line of polycule adults saying goodnight to the child. I think it really exemplifies the potential for positive community and joy for all people involved, including kiddos, who just get a lot of extra adults to talk about books with, their art, or people who are interested in this thing or that thing that can really nurture their interests.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: This is an old hurt

Jen: So when Matthew and M--- started seeing each other in this sort of lower intensity, casual relationship. It was before I was living in Colorado so some time in 2019 because I was going to move here in February 2020. And so the thing with M was entered into with the

intention of it sort of petering out at that point since Matthew and I were going to leave and go hiking for 6 months. M is more of a monogamous person so she was fine with Matthew having other partners because it was casual and understood that if she meets somebody that she's interested in having a serious relationship with, things would naturally shift or end.

And the first time I met her, I remember really trying to live up to that example that Brenna set for me, I was like "I got this, like, it's gonna be great." And the initial interaction wasn't bad. But it was just like "I think we're really different people. It might take a little while for us to figure out what we have in common, what we can relate on." And her and Matthew's interaction style with each other was radically different than the way he and I interact. And it made me really uncomfortable. I was deeply uncomfortable watching it and I didn't like it. I didn't want to be around it. And I couldn't figure out why. And so I was like, trying to protect myself by saying "M is, of course, welcome to come over, whenever you two want her to come over. I'll say hello and we'll chat for a minute, and then I'm going to remove myself. I'm going to be in the bedroom, you guys can have time and space." And then that way, I'm not witnessing this interaction style that I just do not like to watch.

And maybe a couple of months after that, Matthew and I were out for a walk. And as I was talking, it kind of clicked for me realizing that M and I hang out one-on-one things were totally fine. But trying to do things with the three of us, it just doesn't feel good because their style of interaction really dominates. Honestly, once I had figured that out, I was like, "Oh, this is my like elementary school self being sad that the person I want to play with on the playground doesn't want to play with me. I'm feeling left out." All of a sudden that made a lot easier. Now their interaction style is pretty of adorable to watch. And I'm like "look at you two, it's cute" in a way that I wasn't able to do until I had that realization of "oh, this is an old hurt, it's not about

them.” And I was really grateful to both of them for allowing me the probably weird and slightly off-putting reaction of being like, “I’m just gonna not hang out with you two.” Yeah, so that was probably the most obvious transition for me. Matthew and I talked about it. I don’t know if M and I ever actually addressed it directly or if after that it just didn’t feel weird to hang out. Like “I will hang out with you guys for a little while and like give you privacy when you want some privacy.”

Item 5: Turning Point 2

Title: We did not break the polycule

Jen: Oh, I think another thing that felt emotionally fraught, was when there started to be the possibility of a new relationship when Kit asked me out on a date, and I was like, “oh gosh, I don’t know about dating inside the polycule. That sounds a little emotionally fraught.”

I wondered what if we go on a couple of dates and it’s really good? What if we go on a couple of dates and it’s really terrible? You know, like, what does this do for this fairly stable structure we’ve got with the polycule?

I kept checking in with Matthew and asking “Do you think this is okay?” And he would say “I trust you to make decisions that bring you happiness, if this is something that you want to do, go for it.” And kind of informally as Kit and I were spending more time together, I got to check in a bit with Zara because she was living in the same house and she seemed very supportive and encouraging. At that point, I don’t think I’d actually met J---so I wasn’t able to gauge their reaction.

It was one of the first relationships I’ve entered into where we went on a couple of dates, we were sort of in this limbo of maybe we could push it somewhere, and maybe we don’t have to. And both of us, I think he first was the person who was like, “mental health wise, I don’t

actually have the energy to engage in a more connected relationship right now. But if you want to go on dates every once in a while, or only have sex or like, just see each other at group events and be friendly, any of that would be great.” And I was like, “yeah, honestly I’m also dealing with some things and I don’t really have the capacity or space right now. I’m functionally polysaturated, but I still like you and this could be nice just as it is.”

And having something very casual, that there is no recrimination or hurt if one of us is busy, or if we don’t see each other for days or weeks or months, was kind of about the right speed for me. And lo and behold, we did not break the polycule by doing it!

But neither did we have a sit down with every single person and say “this is what we are contemplating. What do you think?” I think it’s important that a relationship is very much a decision between the two people who are engaging in it, and we all trust each other to not agree to anything that would maybe violate a boundary for one of our other partners.

When I started dating Matthew it was really revolutionary for me when I was like, “Oh, so you’ve got these other partners? Great. What are your rules with them so I don’t cause issues?” And he’s like, “no, you and I are negotiating what we want to do and what we want to have happen or build together. And I negotiate other relationships with the understanding that I’m not going to violate their consent or trust or do something that I haven’t agreed with them [is acceptable). But if there’s something you and I want to do together, that would maybe even just push up against an unspoken assumption, then that is my job to clear with them before you and I talk about it. You aren’t responsible for managing my other relationships.” And I was so surprised - that was weirdly revolutionary to me, even though once he said it, and once I said it, it makes a lot of sense. I should not be managing your other relationships. They’re not my relationships.

All of my previous polyamorous relationships had come with caveats or rules like, “my girlfriend doesn't want anyone else to sleep in my bed with me. So we can have sex anywhere but my own bed.” Hmm. Okay, alright, if that's her rule, fine. But in hindsight that’s kind of weird that I’m holding boundaries for your other partner – that’s your job to say “I don’t have sex with anyone but my girlfriend in my bed.” So this was a new thing for me. We all get to negotiate this.

Analysis of Jen’s Interview

My interview with Jen took place on August 2, 2022 via Zoom. Jen appeared to be alone in her living room, the same place from which she had completed the participant screening call before consenting to the study. She was prepared for the interview as evidenced by her ready answers to the questions. Her easy demeanor and smiles seemed to indicate that she felt comfortable in the interview.

Jen’s account of how she met her partner Matthew resembled the origin of many romantic relationships in that they met through a mutual friend. During the course of the interview, I learned that her partner Matthew had set an expectation that relationships and boundaries are negotiated independently and this was the responsibility of the hinge partner (the partner between two individuals who are metamours, in this case, Matthew was the hinge between Jen and Brenna). Jen reported that she had not experienced this in previous relationships. This reflects the common understanding among those practicing polyamory that no two relationships or relationship agreements are the same (Taormino, 2008).

One unique issue faced by polyamorous individuals is meeting metamours, the partner of one’s partner. Jen’s account of feeling nervous that Brenna would not like her or that Jen’s

relationship with Matthew might be “emotionally stressful” for Brenna is an indicator of Jen’s respect for Matthew’s other partner even before meeting that partner.

In Jen’s case, her positive experience upon meeting Brenna and seeing that “this doesn’t have to be hard” led to her desire to be similarly welcoming, respectful, and kind towards other metamours. It is also notable that the trust and respect Brenna displayed towards Jen was coupled with Jen’s desire to respect the longer-standing relationship between Matthew and Brenna. Jen’s reports of awkwardness in negotiating previous relationships quickly gave way to trust and respect with Matthew and his other partners.

In *This is an old hurt*, Jen’s account of her uncomfortableness around Matthew and his other partner M also provides interesting insight into how one person deals with a unique situation within the polycule. Jen’s ability to separate herself from a situation that caused her discomfort without judging or interfering in the dynamic between her partner Matthew and his girlfriend is notable. Also notable is how Jen used patience and insight about herself to gain a better understanding of her discomfort, thereby reducing it.

I am tempted to say that this is one example of how and why self-understanding is key to polyamorous relationships. However, I would also point out that a similar situation might happen with one’s partner’s sibling in a monogamous relationship. If Jen had experienced similar misgivings about the relationship between Matthew and a brother or sister, Jen could have employed similar tactics to remove herself from their interactions and eventually come to terms with the fact that Matthew might relate to a sibling in a way that leaves Jen feeling left out. When we remove sexuality from the situation, perhaps monogamous people might find themselves empathizing with and understanding Jen’s position.

Jen's *We did not break the polycule* story highlighted the systemic nature of relational dynamics and considerations within the polycule. Jen used the word "fraught" to describe the potential impact of starting a new relationship within the polycule. She was aware of and has given consideration to how this might affect others in the group and the group itself.

Saying goodnight gives the reader an idea of how a sense of community works on a day-to-day basis for Jen. For Jen, this moment "really exemplifie[d] the potential for positive community and joy for all people involved, including kiddos." Jen's nonverbals of smiling and a look of warmth as she told this story indicate that this was meaningful for her beyond having a story to tell in our interview.

The pandemic had a significant effect on the polycule's sense of community according to Jen's account. She reported that the group began to hold Saturday night Zoom calls that "very quickly became this source of emotional support where we really started to lean on each other." Jen's account of being able to show up "as you were" indicates a feeling of being accepted for oneself and not feeling to need to put on an act or save face. Group cohesiveness had also been strengthened by group chats that individuals can choose to take part in as they desire. Jen shared that a group chat was more "emotionally accessible" because there was less pressure on her as an individual to help a group member in need. Having multiple adults to respond lessened the potential burden on individual group members.

Matthew: Orientation

Matthew was 37 years old at the time of the interview. He identified as a cisgender man and used he/him pronouns. Matthew also identified as Jewish. He was currently working as an actor. His sexual identity was heterosexual and his relationship orientation was polyamorous. His

romantic orientation was heteroromantic. Matthew reported he did not have children. When asked about his relationship philosophy in the demographics survey, he responded

I enjoy the freedom to explore every connection in my life in a way that makes sense and allows it to grow organically without assumptions and obligations, while also assuming that everyone is responsible for their actions and behaviors in interpersonal contexts.

When asked about “something important not covered by the demographics survey” he replied “a major component of my life is the feeling of being an outsider, tied to my immigrant experience. This has played into my relationships over time just as much as every other aspect of life.”

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: Mitigating the pandemic depression madness

Matthew: So I started dating Brenna about just over six years ago, in fact, we celebrated our six-year anniversary last week. And at the time, I had another core partner and my experience of poly had been evolving for a while. I had gotten divorced the year before. So, how I approached romantic relationships was still very much changing at a pretty brisk pace. And like learning lessons, making mistakes, all of that was happening pretty regularly. And we started dating shortly before she got divorced and moved out of sort of a poly house, Cade’s house, in fact, the Cade, M and J house, and had to completely upend her life. So she went from living in a house with four other adults, including her spouse, to living by herself with her two kids, having to figure out a job and taking care of kids. And so there were a lot of shifts in both of our lives kind of going on through that time. And for a while, that was really the only person within what is now this existing polycule with whom I was having regular interactions.

And over time, I broke up with my other core partners from that time period, about a year later. And she, she had started dating Cade as well. So she had kind of still had that connection to Cade's household, though it was much more tenuous than when she lived there. And then she started dating Kacey. And I started dating Jen. And the kernel of the whole thing was, she started a small group chat that she called 'my lovelies' for, like, the lovely people in her life, which initially it was just her partners, basically me, Kacey, and Cade, it was just a group chat to, to talk about whatever. And slowly over time, people started asking if it was okay to add their partners because they were like "this is also a cool person that you might enjoy talking to and would be a neat contribution in this chat space." And that grew and grew and grew.

And at some point, it became clear that it wasn't going to be this is Brenna's people that she really cares about, like this is a bigger group of people that all care about each other. But this is sort of the core of the polycule that chat has now up to 14 people I believe and encompasses most of the people who are in that central portion of the map that you drew up.

And then when the pandemic hit, is really when the polycule sort of coalesced as this bigger unit where everyone was isolated, everyone was stuck in their house or a couple of us were still going to work but not getting to see our partners regularly. And so to stave off the pandemic depression madness, we started a regular Zoom chat on Saturday evenings where everyone was welcome for however long or little they wanted to show up. Some nights would be four or five hours of people talking about everything under the sun. And some nights it was like, "hi, I'm really tired, I'm going to bed, see you later" and everyone was just like, "Yep, I'm low energy today, this isn't happening."

And that's kind of where the ties really got secure. Inevitably, when you talk to the same group of people for that many hours, you get to know them better, and you care about them

more, and you're more aware of what's going on in their lives and the struggles and triumphs they're having. And so that's really, it's only in the last two years that what most of us would now identify as the core group of the polycule really sort of fused into this larger entity.

Lindsay: I'm curious how, if at all, the end of social isolation has affected the group. Now that people have the option for other social interaction, what effect has that had on the polycule?

Matthew: It actually really reinforced that we enjoyed spending time with these people. So we, in the last year, have done a lot of things. Either everyone or very large chunks of the group, where we had friends getting pretty much all together. For example, a bunch of us went to the hot springs together. And, you know, that took like three months of planning to get to herd that many cats but we went out of our way to make it happen. I think 10 of us ended up going.

Kacey and Brenna and Kit and Zara, who have spaces to entertain larger groups of people, have made the effort to make sure we have regular larger gatherings where the priority is to get the polycule people together. A number of us started a D&D campaign during the pandemic that is still going on to this day. And so that also kind of guarantees that we see we see some of the people who would see less regularly on a more frequent basis. So particularly Kit and Zara and Jack live in -----, which is the northern outlier geographically for us, so Jen and I aren't going to drive up to ----- that frequently. But we can all meet at Kacey and Brenna's house which is in the middle. And we do so every two to three weeks to play d&d, but also just to hang out and see each other. So it's definitely reinforced that this group of people is a big chunk of our social interaction now, where it may not have been before or wasn't before. Yeah, we definitely see each other still quite frequently, not as frequently as every Saturday night, but at least a couple of times a month usually.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: Powerlessness & knock-on effects

Matthew: It's kind of two different things I want to touch on with that one. So the one that was common to the group was one of the people in the polycule who was isolated by themselves in their house, was immunocompromised was dating Kacey and I think also Kit or at least was very good friends with Kit. They had struggled with mental health issues off and on for a long time. And for the first few months, having the polycule was really helpful to them to have that feeling of social connection and knowing somebody cares about them. But eventually, their mental health really deteriorated pretty significantly. And they basically pushed themselves away from everyone. And because we've been the people closest to them, for the previous several months, they kind of became really paranoid about us trying to interfere with their life or like, change them. The sort of things that come with borderline personality disorder-type mental health problems. So yeah, they ultimately push themselves really hard away from the group and left all our chats. The last I know of it Kit went down there and tried to talk them into getting some help and was entirely unsuccessful.

And so that was, that was hard for certainly the people dating them, but also for everyone else to watch this person we care about deteriorate before our eyes in a way that we could do nothing about. We were fairly powerless to do anything about it. So that was not fun. And certainly left some lingering...not necessarily feelings of hurt, but just some really unpleasant sensations for everybody. So that was the first story.

The second thing is more about something, just something I've talked about a lot recently, where, because there's now this sort of bigger cohesive group, it almost feels a little bit fraught, to change it in any way. Whether that is somebody breaking up or adding a new person within

the group or even an already existing relationship shifting in any significant way. Because there are all these knock-on effects. Just interpersonal problems that mostly affect the two individuals involved, but also stem out to others adjacent to them. And so these ripple effects really become more prominent when everybody is so enmeshed. It definitely feels a little bit scarier to try and to have any change, even if it feels like the change is the right thing to do. Like counterbalancing that with the knowledge of yes, if this is the right thing to do, it's what should happen, even if it's painful in the short term.

Lindsay: Am I correct in hearing that it just, it's made things like that more complex because it affects more people?

Matthew: Yeah, it involves more. Even if it's like, "Hey, I'm considering dating this new person," I'm not only going to tell my partner but also the people connected to them. Certainly from a sexual health standpoint, but maybe someone else in the polycule was also interested in dating this new person. And now they might be feeling a little bit hurt that, you know, I'm going to be dating them because I have the time and they don't. But I still need to make some effort to sort of soothe those feelings or at least address them. So yeah, the complexity level has definitely gone way up.

Item 3: High Point

Title: A sense of community

Matthew: Certainly the Zoom calls were a big thing and having that sense of community. One of the things that have really come out of that is both the willingness of people to ask for help when they need it and the willingness of people to step up and help. And it's everything from Jamie is moving in with a new partner and is looking for furniture, like "hey, we've got some furniture in the storage unit. We don't need it, please take it" to Jen and I will petsit Abby's

bunnies regularly when Abby and Taz are out of town. Or when the ----- fire happened, and Abby and Taz and Brenna and Kacey were all worried that their houses might be in the fire zone, Abby and Taz actually came and spent the night with Jen and I. They were on the edge of a big grassy area that might just burn down. So that kind of willingness to step up and help is the high point for me. That willingness to help the people you care about has been repeatedly demonstrated. When people ask for help, 95% of the time they can get that help from within the polycule before they have to turn to any outside source for help.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: How I want to live my relationships

Matthew: The polycule I think definitely has helped clarify my own perspective of how I view my relationships and how I want to live my relationships. For example, I get to see an established couple Kit and Zara, dating a third person, both as individuals and as a unit. Like, that's been an interesting thing to observe that it can be done thoughtfully and kindly. In the poly world, there's a perception or stereotype of the unicorn-hunting couple where the couple has all the power and decision-making authority, and the third person can go along with it or get out. And that relationship has been distinctly not that. They all three make big efforts and do a good job at least from my perspective, of finding the balance and respect that each of them is an autonomous person and there's a larger dynamic of three people here. So that has definitely been cool to see it done well.

And seeing Brenna parent her kids is amazing and it reinforces that I'm not looking to be a parent. So yeah, just getting to see this variety of, of experience and variety of how people do poly getting to see all those different nuances more regularly. There's more of this continuous story unfolding. And yeah, that helps. That it's a lot more data points to be like, Okay, I like that.

I don't like that. Yes, this is how I also see that situation. Or no, this is what I think about that. I think I would do it this way. There's just much more of a data set to fine-tune. It also reinforces that, yeah, polyamory is for me. I would feel pretty unhappy if I was forcibly monogamous again.

Lindsay: Okay, so it sounds like to me, like if I summarize that as being in the polycule allows you to observe a lot of various relationships in a way you wouldn't otherwise be able to see and learn from that.

Matthew: Yeah, with much greater frequency or like watching the sausage get made. There's definitely more granular, day-to-day, people's lived experiences shared in a bigger group than I might otherwise get to see.

Analysis of Matthew's Interview

Matthew completed the individual interview on August 3, 2022 via Zoom. Matthew appeared to be alone in the living room of the apartment he shares with Jen. Having read the questions before the interview, he had given them some thought as evidenced by comments such as “yeah, I was thinking about that.” He appeared comfortable and his speech was unhurried during the course of the interview.

Matthew met Brenna when he was in a state of transition stemming from his recent divorce and looking back he was aware that at that stage in his life his concept of how he wanted to approach relationships was changing.

Matthew also revealed what seems to be the seed of what eventually became the polycule. Brenna started a group chat that consisted of her partners, Matthew, Kacey, and Cade. Over time, people in the chat began to include their other partners and the chat grew. Matthew

did not report that anyone ever set out to create a polycule but rather described the organic, spontaneous nature of metamours getting to know each other.

Like Jen, Matthew's account of the pandemic's effect on the group was that it strengthened bonds and the sense of community that had begun to form. Matthew's account that "everyone was welcome for however long or little, they wanted to show up" resembles Jen's description of people being able to show up "as you were." When I asked how ending the pandemic-induced social isolation affected the group he replied that it reinforced that this group enjoys spending time together even when life and demands on people's time had returned to normal.

McCormack examines her transcripts through the lens and context of culture, specifically social culture (McCormack, 2000b). Matthew noted "the willingness of people to ask for help when they need it and the willingness of people to step up and help" as a key part of the group's social culture. Also within the context of culture, McCormack noted the importance of looking at structural conditions. Matthew spoke about how the structure of this large group meant that relational decisions felt more "fraught" because of the potential "knock-on effects" and "ripple effects" of those decisions. He commented that "it definitely feels a little bit scarier to try and to have any change, even if it feels like the change is the right thing to do." This indicates a feeling of goodwill and responsibility for the group's cohesiveness and functioning.

McCormack also called on researchers to look for times when an individual reconstructs their sense of self. Matthew recalled that when he met Brenna, his ideas of how he wanted to have relationships were changing. How a person conducts their relationships often factors into one's concept of self (Klesse, 2014). Matthew returned to this theme later in the interview when he comments that "the polycule I think definitely has helped clarify my own perspective of how I

view my relationships and how I want to live my relationships.” In particular, the phrasing “live my relationships” points to a deeper connection with his identity and the life he chooses to live.

The interview concluded with Matthew talking about the value of seeing how others conduct their relationships. When asked about a turning point, he spoke about how being in the polycule has helped him clarify his perspective on his relationships and desired relational style. He said that “getting to see this variety of, of experience and variety of how people do poly getting to see all those different nuances more regularly” was valuable because there are more “data points” from which to understand and choose his own relational style. This is perhaps a reflection of the lack of nonmonogamous relationship models that lead some researchers and CNM advocates to say that we need to hear more from those who aren’t monogamous (Patterson & Powell, n.d.).

Jamie: Orientation

Jamie was 36 at the time of the interview, worked as a massage therapist, and is Hispanic. Jamie identified as non-binary/third gender and used they/she pronouns. Their sexual orientation was pansexual and their relationship orientation is relationship anarchy. They shared that they are panromantic and had two children. Jamie’s relationship philosophy was “foster connections that feel right.”

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: And then it sort of turned into a polycule.

Jamie: I knew, a couple of the people in the polycule before it was a polycule. And we had different dynamics then. So really, when I came about the polycule it already existed, and Kit was involved. I just remember Kit saying that, you know, Brenna had a group chat and that it

just kept expanding. And then it sort of turned into a polycule. This is how I remember it anyway. Kit was lamenting the fact that sometimes he has to text so many people, and he loved that the polycule chat already involved so many people that he already messaged, so he didn't have to worry about updating so many people. He said "I would really love for you to join the polycule chat." But to be fair, I mean, Kit and I have known each other since like, 2017. He and I met when we were coworkers. And that's also where we met Zara. So that was like the beginnings of that stuff.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: Revoked and reissued invitation

Jamie: So the low point fits next in the storyline. Apparently, Kit had not consulted or asked or brought up the fact that he wanted to add me to the group chat. He added me and was like "here's Jamie and I think she'd be a great addition." It was like a welcome thing. And, um, that was not the way that they had hoped to add people and he wasn't aware or didn't remember or something. And within, I think, like, 10 or 15 minutes or something, I was kicked out of the group. And I was just like "okay..." Subsequently, I got a message from Kacey and then Brenna, about how, you know, they were really sorry about how that all went down, that they didn't want to make me feel like rejected or upset, but that like, they wanted that group to sort of be like "confirmation-based" or something that like. I think he had asked the group but didn't really get any response or a definitive answer. And I think he took that as a "yes" or everyone's cool and, and that was not how they wanted to do it. They wanted to sort of be like, "we all agree we all talk about it" before decisions are made. And they didn't really have any issues. It was more that some people just really didn't know who I was at all. So it became a question of "how do we get to know Jamie" and "we want to include her, but we don't know her." And I didn't know any of

that all I was seeing was my addition and then then the kick out. And there was also stuff on my end, because Brenna and I had been metamours once upon a time, and there had been history, not necessarily between her and I, but the shared partner. And, and so I was just like, “oh, maybe I shouldn't be in this group.” Because I just had no context. And so they tried to reach out and, and said something like “if you want to come meet some of us and hang out with some of us that’s cool” and I was like “no, no, no” because I had a lot going on. So we kind of all just let it lay.

And then it sounds like it came about wanting to do the group chat on a different app that seemed a little safer, encrypted and all that. And it gave them the ability to have like different kinds of group chats. So then they reached out to me again, and were like, “Hey, we're really sorry that things went south the first time Kit tried to add you. We've talked about it and we want to invite you” and that felt a lot more welcoming.

Looking back, I totally understand them wanting to create parameters for this space. And then also, you know, it sounded like over time, they found the need to have separate chats. Because, you know, in this time, I mean, in any time, but like, you know, when there's crazy stuff in the news, you know, you want to share it, but not everyone is in a space to hear it or receive it. And so then creating specific channels, I mean, made sense. I appreciate it, too. But it sounds like they were also sorting that out, like, how do we go about adding people to this group? And then how do we go about having groups for specific, you know, topics and stuff like that. So after the fact, I could see that they'd gone to a lot of work to create this space and have it be inclusive and have a way to invite people. So that was a low point, but then it became a high.

Item 3: High Point

Title: Before I buy it

Jamie: A lot of my experience with the polycule has been through the chats, especially because of the pandemic. And I tend to have higher risk tolerance and some of the folks in the group are immunocompromised. So I tend to keep away from some of the events, if I think that I might be at a higher risk profile that day. It does mean that I don't get to spend in-person time with them sometimes, but it's what needs to happen to keep people safe. So a lot of my interaction with folks is through chats. A high point for me was that I got to suggest a chat group and it has been successful. It's called "before I buy it" because there had been a couple of instances where someone was like, "Oh, I just got this new thing." And someone was like, "Ah, I had that exact thing I would have lent to you." And "I had just moved so I was trying to get rid of some stuff" or "I need other stuff." And then what made it a high point for me was that, you know, people joined the group and found it useful. Someone in the group was like, "you know, I had my doubts about this group, but now I think it's the best thing ever!" So being able to contribute to the polycule in a little way felt like a high point for me because I'm one of the newer people that hasn't spent a whole lot of time with everybody. Being able to contribute that way felt really nice.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: Polycule breakfast

Jamie: When we all went on a hot springs trip together was like almost everyone if I remember correctly and that was really special. I got to connect with people that I don't usually get to see. I got to see the big picture of the polycule how people are connected and how other people have become connected as a result of the polycule. So, the story is that the meals were

really awesome. There was a time where Abby was really collaborating and heading up meal prep. Beforehand, they had made all of these like spreadsheets for people's food restrictions or preferences.

I think it was breakfast, Abby she looked so cute. She had her hair up in a bandana, she just looked like she was in charge of the kitchen. And I was like, "Oh, my God, like, I would never have experienced this without the polycule." But like, she like turns to me and is like, I'm about to make your Just Eggs, because I don't want you to have a regular egg in your stuff. So she like made a lot of my things first, so they wouldn't get contaminated. And like, she remembered, she had it written down. It was so significant, like these people that have only really known me online, are going to so much effort to make sure that I feel welcomed that I have food to eat. And my food restrictions are not like a hindrance on anybody, because everyone's got something that they're trying to avoid or not eat or whatever.

And I guess it was like, it felt like a family dynamic, you know, of just like, when you're in sync with people, and it's just like, easy for them to come and go and interact. And yeah, that's not something that I've had a whole lot of, even with my family of origin. So to feel that with people who barely know me and are trying to make sure I feel included is significant to me.

Bonus Item

Title: "What about the kids?"

Lindsay: Can you tell me a little about being a polyamorous parent?

Jamie: Yeah, um, well, I am not a bio parent to my kiddos and my co parent, Melissa, knows the same people that I know in the polycule.

That like the most important goal, or, or moral or thing that we want the kids to walk away with, is that they've had the freedom of choice. You know, we don't, we have ways that we

are trying to raise them that we think are right, but in the end, we want them to feel empowered to be themselves. And the way that we feel like we can do that is by offering them choice and also the experience of other people, we're not always going to have the experiences and knowledge that they need. And the way that we can do that as expose them to other adults who might.

For example, J---, who's sort of peripherally involved with the polycule connected with Zara, um, he and I connected a long time ago, like when I first moved to Colorado. So he and I were going to go see the show, Hamilton, and he was like "I am wearing a dress" and I was like, "awesome, I'm wearing a dress, too." And so we basically had a little fashion show in the house. And my youngest, Ian, who's nonbinary, has a few dresses. But over time, our perception is with school and peers he's held back on wearing them. And Melissa and I didn't want to push it. So Jody and I are trying on dresses and I--- starts bringing out their dresses and trying them on. And I--- starts talking to J--- and J--- tells Ian "yeah, I, I feel like a man, but I really love dresses. I love how they feel in my body. And I think they're beautiful, and why can't I wear them?" And Ian was very much like, "well, I feel non binary, but I also love dresses."

It was so meaningful. I cannot provide that experience for my child. You know, and I'm so glad that I accidentally provided this situation and this experience for my kiddo. And they still are like, when what is Jordi going to come back and I want to do another fashion show.

Another story that relates directly to the polycule would be that I don't remember was like Memorial Day or some holiday on a Monday. And the one thing that like stood out to me that like I think was a positive experience for my oldest kiddo is him learning that one of Brenna's kids is also autistic and is on the spectrum. And my oldest is really trying to come to terms with his autism. So when he learned that one of Brenna's kids has autism, he was he like, went right

up to them and was like, Hi, I'm Jason and they had a good talk getting to know each other a little. I could see that was also an experience for him to have learning not everyone is going to have experienced autism the way that he does. And not everyone is going to have the same feelings about autism as he does. How else am I going to explain that to him, except for helping him have those experiences and hoping that they're positive?

And so I think those experiences are going to be valuable to our kiddos, you know, like, not only seeing that other people also have poly families, but that other families in general also have kiddos that are LGBTQ or autistic. We are all just existing, and the world is more diverse than some people might like to tell you. It's the epitome of it takes a village like, and it's not just a village of like, Oh, my neighbor down the street. It's someone who's invested in their life, you know. I can't see how that's not valuable.

And I feel like it's helped me understand the norms that I was taught and conditioned to reinforce, and it's helped me challenge that. It's valuable for me to see how other poly parents parent, how they, you know, deal with having autism or their children has autism, or their children's or LGBT or maybe their children or none of those things and still, like having a mixed household. It feels like it makes no sense why it wouldn't work, like why it wouldn't be healthy? Because it seems to me that it is something that helps improve me as a person, but it is going to be invaluable to my children.

Analysis of Jamie's Interview

The interview with Jamie was the third of nine and took place on August 4, 2022. Jamie's presence was calm and their speech was unhurried as we talked.

From Jamie's point of view, the polycule already existed when Kit mentioned the chat Brenna had started. Jamie was in the orbit of some members of the polycule before she was

included as a member more formally. This may be a coincidental social overlap or it could be a component of the members of the polyamorous community having wider networks of friendship. This may reflect Gusmano's (2018) finding that non-normative community members report that support groups of like-minded individuals are an important part of navigating life in a mononormative world.

Jamie's story of the *Revoked and reissued invitation* to the chat provided insight into the challenges of consent when the group is more than a few people and setting norms in the early stages of group formation. This resembles the *forming* stage of group development in which the group establishes boundaries and expectations, and begins to process of knowing each other and getting comfortable with group dynamics (Tang, 2019). For this group, it was important that they mutually agree to admit new members to the chat and agree on ways to get to know and vet potential new members of the group.

This story also illustrated how the lack of clarity around group norms and expectations negatively affected Jamie, causing feelings of questioning their belonging in this group. It also appeared that the group was aware of the potential negative impact and successfully repaired their relationship with Jamie. *Revoked and reissued invitation* also illustrated the group's attempts at keeping members safe from outsiders. It was unclear if this was because of the group's status as a sexual and relationship minority or simply a broader need to know who is in the group.

Jamie's account of the *Polycule breakfast* highlighted the group's intention and actions of ensuring members' needs are met. Abby's efforts to keep a spreadsheet of individual dietary needs and make breakfast accordingly had a direct and positive effect on Jamie's feelings of inclusion and being a valued member of the group, as evidenced by Jamie telling me that "people

who barely know me are trying to make sure I feel included is significant to me.” It was also notable that being able to contribute to the group was important to them. The fact that the *Before I buy it* story was their high point pointed to the group’s values of giving back to the group to further increase group cohesiveness and value.

In addition to asking the standard interview questions, I asked about the inclusion of children within the polycule. Because Jen and Matthew did not have kids, this was my first opportunity to learn about this facet of the polycule. I was reminded of Second Wave Feminism’s idea that “the personal is political” when Jamie spoke of the value of exposing their children to different ways of living. In making a choice to expose the kids to more than one way of being, they are rejecting the hegemonic conceptions of the family as straight, monogamous, gender-conforming, adults who conceived “naturally” (Cutas & Chan, 2014). Jamie was intentionally exposing their children to ideas that fall outside prescribed cultural and political ideas. Wanting their kids to have “freedom of choice” is a way of keeping them from unknowingly upholding societal and cultural systems and structures in the future. While this is a personal choice for Jamie and others in the polycule, this has political and societal implications for the next generation’s ideas of family, gender expression, and other cultural norms.

Zara: Orientation

Zara was 27 at the time of the interview and working as a medical receptionist. She identified as white/Caucasian and used “she/they” pronouns. Zara’s gender identity was gender fluid and her sexual orientation was reported as demisexual (a person who experiences sexual attraction only after forming an intimate bond [Hille et al, 2020]). Her relationship orientation was polyamorous and she was panromantic (romantic attraction to people regardless of their gender and/or sex [Thöni et al, 2022]). Zara did not have children. Her relationship philosophy

was “be gentle with yourself and your partners, and keep trying to improve your systems and communication.”

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: All of us holding hands and screaming into the void together

Zara: So my experience with the polycule started when I started dating Kacey, because I've been in a relationship with J--- for many, many years by then. And Kacey was sort of the first person that I dated outside of our dynamic. Now J--- and I had already sort of built the framework that this [open relationship] was a potential thing that I was interested in, I was just waiting for the right person to sort of fall in place. And then I met Kacey, and we started dating very shortly afterwards. And a lot of changes happened to Kacey's other relationship, they went through a divorce. And sometime around then we also met Brenna, and after we connected with Brenna, it just clicked that we were in this larger polycule just because Brenna had already had multiple partners. And then that was sort of how we all sort of linked together.

There were some of the regular relationship pitfalls and running into the emotional landmines that you don't realize are there until you've hit them. And it was really tough. It would have been tougher if I didn't connect with my metamours because they were people who inherently knew what I was going through and what my partners were going through. So there was already a support structure of “Hey, here's a weirdly specific jealousy problem, how do we work through that?” and having somebody that already knew that experience from other people who had already been in polyamorous relationships for years before was incredibly helpful for me. I'm the youngest of the group so I'm trying to play emotional catch-up. And it definitely developed and got way stronger.

Before the pandemic we [the group] were fairly disjointed. We were friendly, but it wasn't like we were friends. Sort of like, "oh, yeah, that's my partner's partner, I know a little bit about them, I could say like one or two sentences, they're cool." And that was as far as it went until the pandemic hit and all of our social connections got cut off. All of our disparate social lives immediately lined up because we were all on the same playing field. And it meant that our Saturday night polycule calls were really instrumental for all of us feeling that sort of human connection and community.

It really put every single person under a microscope, because when you're having that many people in a zoom call, only one person can sort of speak at a time. And so it was really nice to sort of learn and hear all the backstories for all of these individual people, and then have this one-on-one dialogue where you have to sit down and listen to them. And it was really sweet, just sort of realizing all of the connections and all of the similarities we have. It just became the running gag of like, "Oh, you and I relate on this one thing over and over and over again. Our Venn Diagram of interests overlap pretty significantly."

It's definitely grown my sense of community. I didn't have much of an interest in being a community person before getting into the polycule. I was very much solo, just trying to figure out my own shit, and doing the best I could. I didn't have a desire to be connected with a whole bunch of people, I thought it would be incredibly taxing. And over the last two years, it has changed how I function in the world and how much more I appreciate connections with other people. I've always been, you know, sort of a people person and a little bit, you know, gregarious, verbose, all the big fancy words. I like communicating. But I didn't have an emotional connection to it. I like conversing and sharing stories, but I didn't feel like my voice was worth communicating. Or I didn't feel like it was something that needed to be said, over the

pandemic, after a couple months of having Saturday night calls, you've talked about all the big shit, and then you start getting weird. And then you actually start connecting over, like, the tiny little minutiae of like, “Oh my God, I didn't realize somebody else had this very specific thing” and it started feeling like I have a space where I could literally say anything that was on my mind, and someone in here will either echo back, empathize, or have a story to share. And it made me feel like I could literally do anything, say anything, and still feel sane and grounded. And the ideas and thoughts of the other people around me, it wasn't just screaming in the void, it's all of us holding hands and screaming into the void together. So it was really nice (laughter).

It's connected a lot more things than I ever thought would be possible. And my communication style is a lot more tailored to try and be empathetic. And it's, you know, I've got the neurodivergent thing where I want to share stories in response. And it took a long time for me to realize that this wasn't me trying to like one up somebody, it was just how my communication style worked. And through the whole pandemic, that's really been helpful for me to have somebody else be like, “I'm so sorry, I just talked over you and I didn't want to one up you.” And they're like, “No, you're just sharing a valid experience. I'm glad you shared,” and it was really validating to be like, “Oh, okay, I'm not an asshole here, and you did want to hear that. Awesome.” So yeah, it's grown a lot.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: A wound on the collective heart of the polycule

Zara: There was a particular person, a partner, of one of the individuals in the group that is no longer part of the group and not for lack of trying. This is somebody that we all cared about. They have a lot of physical health issues, a lot of anxiety, and other issues. They were very spiritual. A couple of us were talking about mysticism and all the spiritual stuff, tarot cards,

star readings, and all of that. I'm part of that group a little bit. But their mysticism went from “cool, this is stuff that we can implement to make us feel better in life” to “I think you have telepathy.” It got into a realm where we couldn't determine what was happening in their brain and it was scary. And some of us wanted to reach out and some of us did reach out, and in reaching out, I remember this is the first and only time I've ever had to call for a mental welfare check. Because I was scared that they weren't going to be able to keep themselves alive. It was traumatic to the point where it completely shifted how I approached my spirituality. I couldn't engage in things that I was excited about anymore because it felt too close.

And with this particular individual, we still try and like keep an eye on them from a distance, because they made it very clear that they didn't want to share things with us. And no matter how much we wanted to try and build a space for them, they didn't want to be here. And we couldn't force that. And we weren't going to force that. So we had to let them go. It was intense because there were thinly veiled threats towards members of the polycule and we just didn't know how to approach it. A few of us talked and like, “do we think they're actually going to harm themselves? Do we think those threats that they made on Facebook are legitimate? Are they going to be able to maintain their quality of life? Are their service animals going to be okay? Are they getting their meds in them? Do they need to speak with somebody? Do we need to enforce that?” And it took the course of a month, maybe two for us to just realize that we're not their space anymore. And yeah, just didn't know how to move forward. There's definitely a wound on the collective heart of the polycule. It's hard. It's still raw.

Lindsay: Yeah. About when was this?

Zara: Oh, god, my concept of linear time is terrible. [laughter]

Last time I saw them would have been last summer, so maybe a year ago at this point? Um, yeah. And that was they were really excited about the spiritual stuff. And we didn't want to discourage their excitement and zest for life because they had been depressed for a long time. But it also became really tricky, because they were convinced that they had told us what was wrong through telepathy and were mad that we weren't responding in kind. It's a hard scenario to try and balance. Like, "I don't know who were what you think you're communicating with. But I'm right here right now. How can I help?" And then being shut down. There's not really a lot of wiggle room there. And we still try and keep an eye out for them. See if there's anything that we can maybe do help them peripherally. But there's, there was nothing to do at that point.

Item 3: High Point

Magical moments of compassion and communication

Zara: That one's much harder to narrow down because it's consistently awesome. But for an example of high point, I would say we all took our group first group vacation together and that was super fucking cool. Um, so we went to ----- Hot Springs, and if you've never been, it allows you to be nude and for some of the group, like me, I'm like, yeah, no, clothes. Hurray! And for some of the group probably would have been a little bit more daunting and yet that was still okay and accepted.

So we went and we had a riotous time, going these hot springs and sitting in the sun, and reading books and playing card games, and it was incredibly sweet and wholesome and amazing. And to have every meal be like a giant buffet from Abby, no one asked her, she just did it because no one's gonna say no or stop her because she has a spreadsheet, and we're following it! It means that I don't have to food, I don't have to feed myself. I can turn around and there was a buffet of fancy jams and tiny jars. And we're just looking at the mountains. And it was, it was

delightful. And in the evenings, we, you know, go to different camps, or go to the different cabins on sometimes people would be playing games. And sometimes, you know, somebody would split off and go read a book. And Brenna and I went on like a mini adventure to, for her to show me like, there's a giant swing set out there that I would have totally missed. And we sat in the hot springs, and we talked and it was like going back to the Zoom call chats. And separating into our little pods of like, let's talk about this random thing, or just not talk about anything and just sit in silence and look at the mule deer that are close enough that you could almost touch them while you're in the hot springs.

Like there were some really nice, very sweet, magical moments of compassion and communication and sitting in silence near each other just enjoying being near my friends and my loved ones and their loved ones. And it was very, very nice. I was sick for most of the trip. And I have nothing but good memories. There was a good chunk of the time where I was just sitting in bed being sad and in pain. And yet the folks are, you know, four feet away from me playing a card game and I'm still joking with them. It was great.

So there's definitely some high moments where we were able to like build a space that I didn't know if it would translate off zoom camera, and it works just fine. It's the same as any other meetup. It just happened that some of us were nude. And I was worried about that for some reason. I don't know why. It was fine. Everybody was at their comfort level as per usual. And, you know, we just enjoyed being in each other's company.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: You have to keep talking

Zara: So for clarification, during the pandemic I had set up and only fans because I like external validation. And I like getting dressed up and makeup, and I figured it'd be a great excuse

to not wear clothes and maybe make some money. Awesome. And it kind of shifted how I approached connecting sexually and physically with people. And I kind of shut down that portion of my life by accident. And so over the course of a couple of months, I dialed way the hell back on my sexuality.

Around that time, connected with someone new and there was that chemistry, there was the physical passion and that all clicked again in my brain. I realized I do still have that drive, I just need to figure out how to implement it in other fashions. And after a date night, I mentioned something offhand to Kit like trying a particular toy that I hadn't tried yet. And I felt like there was something weird in that interaction but I couldn't put my finger on it.

And about a day later he, the more established partner, came to me and he was like, "I have all of my feelings written down. Please read this. I need to get this off my chest." And in that letter was a lot of openness and vulnerability of like, "Hey, I feel so sad. This is something I've been so interested in and you're almost immediately jumping into that pool with this new partner. What's going on? How can we fix that? Because right now I feel undervalued and sad."

And I realized my whole being was swept away by new relationship energy. Like yes, I was trying to figure out physical connections for everybody in general. But the fact that I had taken that excitement to one partner and I didn't reintroduce it with you really messed up a dynamic. And it felt weird and gross.

And I realized that there was a jealousy thing, and I needed to just swallow my ego. This is not necessarily about me, there are needs here that I need to look at and address because I think that they are important to do so. I need to address my partner's wants and desires, and I can't just let them fly by the wayside. Because that's not how I do ethical nonmonogamy.

This is the ethical part. And so I had to swallow my pride. I wanted to say “oh, no, but I'm not doing anything wrong.” Technically, no, but that doesn't mean there aren't things that I need to improve on. There are things that I need to consciously acknowledge and outline parameters for what works for me and what worked for my newest partner, and what works for my other partners to make sure that everyone understands that there is still love here. So with that, um, we've, there have been a couple other hiccups here and there, but in my calendar, every single Saturday, there is a reminder to remind me “Hey, have you talked with your older partners about things that have really excited you? How can you implement them when you get a second? Like, it felt gross, and the whole conversation made me feel like I've been a failure. And it's not that, it's a learning thing. And more importantly, I saved that note, because I need to remind myself that this is a thing that I need to work on. It's not just something that I can slap a patch on, and say, Hey, I worked on that one minor aspect. I'll never think of this problem again. So even though it made me feel sad, I have that note as a reminder to ask myself have I actually been being true to those things that I wanted to change? No, I better work on that and then I keep trying to have that communication. So it is a constant balancing act of realizing that you can do everything that you think is right and still not do all of the right things for all of your relationships. It's a balancing act and you have to keep talking no matter how gross it feels.

Lindsay: Are there any other big giant events or anything that you feel like you didn't get to mention?

Zara: Give me a second....

Bonus Item

Title: Silly little things and little mundane moments

Zara: I think the big thing that doesn't get brought up a whole lot is how much my polycule's having kids in it has made it better. I am somebody who I didn't think I would ever have kids, and I still don't think I'm gonna have kids. But that doesn't mean that I can't chime in with some vaguely parental inclinations here and there. And so it's, it's really nice to have a whole like age range of kids to remind myself of "hey, look, you can still be sort of an influence for the next generation without having to change how your current life is going." And in fact, you can provide more support for the friends and family around you.

So like, I'm working with T--- and B---, Brenna and Kacey's kiddos, um, like, every single Tuesday, I go over there and T--- shows me all of the new monsters and all of the stuffed animals that they've made. And it's really awesome. And then, B--- and I had a really nice day sitting around playing in her Legos trying to make a snake get a jetpack Just silly little things and little mundane moments that I didn't think my life would have. I get just a little bit of it. And it's perfect. Like, I wouldn't necessarily, I don't think I'm well equipped to have children. I just don't think it's in the cards, but I do definitely have the urge to connect with kiddos. We can hang out and we can nerd out about things and color and talk about makeup and I'll guide them through on how to wash their brushes for makeup. Little things, little things and it's really sweet. So I think that's one of the things that I was not anticipating being part of this and I'm so glad that it is.

Analysis of Zara's Interview

The interview with Zara took place on August 11, 2022. Her speech rate and demeanor were animated and she laughed frequently during the course of sharing her stories. At one point

she described herself as “gregarious” and it seemed likely that this is how she often showed up in life and her relationships.

For Zara, becoming part of the polycule was also her introduction to actively being polyamorous. She mentioned that while she and her partner had been together for years and talked about the fact that dating multiple people was something she was interested in, dating Kacey while still in a relationship with her established partner was a new experience for her. As is common in any new relationship, she encountered “emotional landmines that you don’t realize are there until you’ve hit them.” In Zara’s case, she had been able to find support and a sense of normalcy in being able to discuss polyamorous relationship issues with other members of the polycule. Jealousy can be a common pitfall in polyamory (Mogilski et al, 2019) and Zara found it helpful to be able to discuss “weirdly specific jealousy problems” with others in the polycule because of their prior experience with similar issues.

In addition to understanding and support regarding relationship issues, Zara found “connections and similarities” are so common in the group that it became a “running gag” of discovering these commonalities.

Zara also explicitly mentioned the sense of community within the polycule. For her, it became a source of confidence and an enhanced sense of self-worth. She said “I didn’t feel like my voice was worth communicating” in the earlier times of her involvement in the polycule. Over time, she found significance in being able to “literally say anything that was on [her] mind, and someone in here will either echo back, empathize, or have a story to share.” She came to see not only value in the group but value in herself as the group validated her thoughts and opinions. In addition to making her feel “sane and grounded” she found a sense of community during the

difficulties posed by the pandemic as evidenced by her saying that it was “all of us holding hands and screaming into the void together.”

Zara’s story *A wound on the collective heart of the polycule* gave new insight into an episode previously mentioned by Matthew. Zara indicated that the events took place nearly a year prior to our interview and she still became visibly emotional while speaking about it. It is clear from both Matthew and Zara’s accounts that the polycule tried to come together and help this individual. Their lack of success was felt at a loss by multiple members of the group.

Like Matthew, Zara mentioned a group trip to a local hot springs resort. Despite her own comfort with full or partial nudity, she reported being nervous about having the group together in such a setting. In what is perhaps an expectancy violation for some, she described the experience as “wholesome” and “very sweet” as she recalls the times spent together eating meals, relaxing in the hot springs, or watching mule deer nearby.

Zara’s low point was an excellent example of the potential pitfall of experiencing the happiness of a new relationship while still in a more established relationship. Zara used the term “new relationship energy” which is common in the polyamorous community and has been defined as the euphoric state of love or lust in which the world seems to revolve around the new person and is often abbreviated to *NRE* (Taormino, 2008). The term has been commonly used by polyamorous people since the 1990s (Taormino, 2008). According to one successful book on polyamory, “to make it through NRE while preserving our other relationships, we need to recognize it for what it is, nurture our other partners when we feel it, and not mistake it for love” (Veaux & Rickert, 2014, p. 260). As Zara described, it is easy to become carried away in the limerence or infatuation commonly felt in a new relationship, potentially leading to paying less attention to or even neglecting to meet the needs of more established partners. This story also

illustrated the importance of being self-aware enough to understand one's own hurt feelings and vulnerable enough to share those feelings with a partner. Just as important, Zara was able to put aside her initially defensive reaction and hear her partner's concern. Zara also outlined how she continued to make proactive efforts to meet the needs of more established partners to avoid a similar misstep in the future.

Cade: Orientation

Cade was 40 at the time of the interview. He identified as white/Caucasian and worked in event production. He reported he was a cisgender male and asexual. His relationship orientation was polyamorous and his romantic orientation was demiromantic (experiencing romantic attraction only after a bond has formed [Copulsky & Hammack, 2023]). Cade had 4 children. When asked about his relationship philosophy he answered "relationships are fluid and dynamic."

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: It blossomed into this polycule

Cade: Wow. Yeah. Complicated. So Brenna, myself, J were all living in the same house with the kids. Brenna was going through a divorce and I was sort of the neutral safe party. And ended up doing a lot of like, sitting with Brenna, talking about things with her, and letting go, processing and sort of holding the space for her.

And we needed more space in the house so it was like, well, Brenna, can you two share a bed? And it was sort of this like? Yeah, I mean, I guess that's sort of how this is gonna go. And we're the two people that make the most sense. Even if we hadn't really been looking to codify anything romantically or physically. I'd say that it was probably the, the seed that that crystal

developed on, because we had already done a lot of just emotional work with each other and like, support and holding space and listening and, you know, so a lot of the emotional severs there that's just like, well, this is just the next natural transition. And I would be fascinated to hear how Brenna describes the story. Because one of golly gee, okay, you probably know this term relationship anarchists?

Lindsay: Yep.

Cade: I love it. I am a firm believer in it. I hate labels. Relationships be what they be. And so for me, I probably wasn't examining the minutia step by step. And trying to quantify or what is this relationship now is probably just like, well, this is what it is. This works too. Now, all that to say that, you know, Brenna, and I did sort of set a formal talk of like, yeah, we kind of just became a couple and that combined with knowing having known Michael, for many, many years we've all sort of shuffled around the same (town name) poly environment. So we came across each other that Michael and I have known each other for years. And it was just sheer coincidence that he was dating Brenna as well. So it's like, Well, Michael, and I get along great. We think we're each other are awesome. So yay, like, compersion!

Then Brenna met Kacey. And like they really connected on a lot of different levels. And like, here's the struggle that was probably the turning point. Here's the struggle. And it wasn't it's not a big struggle. Right? It's one of those day-to-day minutia, polyamory struggles, which is that Brenna really wanted to move slow with Kacey and me. When she introduced us, we hit it off fantastically. I remember watching them get closer and seeing what Kacey's life was doing. And life saying that, yeah, like there's probably a good opportunity for them to move in together.

But trying to navigate that relationship change with Kacey being a live in partner of Brenna. It was a minor struggle, just a lot of sitting down and feeling out, stuff like that. And what does she want? How does she feel? No, I don't have any, like wibbels about this.

And I had known Matthew. I had met Abby, at this point once. I had met Jen once. I didn't know Kit or H and J or Zara. I knew of Jamie.

So a lot of these people like either just didn't know or weren't necessarily in a social circle because I'm a bit of a hermit. And it was Kacey, when Kacey sort of got involved were more of these people with his connection to Zara then Zara's connections. It's sort of just blossomed into this polycule. In my mind, seemed like just organic, sort of growing as connections grew. But, you know, that's my relatively removed perspective.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: They were all really worried

My personal low point in the polycule was brought more to my attention by the comments of everyone in the polycule versus my self-awareness of the time. But Jeff, Megan, Angela, and I's oldest son W-----, when he turned 16 had major psychological struggles, like it got BAD. Everyone moved out of the house and Jeff and I basically tried to police our son. At that point, like I was a stress case I had to like be on anxiety meds. I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't eating and according to Brenna, Kacey and Zara, were worried. They were all really worried. They sat me down and were like “you are neglecting yourself terribly.”

But they couldn't really do much about that. Right? That's sort of the probably hardest part about this is being able to be like, “wow, this person is struggling even with all of these resources.” That's tough. I don't think we'd ever encountered an inter-group thing where

something was going on and we weren't able to solve it. So, yeah, it was probably my personal low point within the polycule where it was like, even with all this, it's awfully lonely sometimes.

Lindsay: How did this situation eventually get resolved? Or maybe de-escalated, is a better word.

Cade: The state took custody because he ran away one too many times. He got a job at the Colorado Renaissance Festival. And he convinced his caseworker, who effectively let him run away with the circus, to take this touring job and it's been a really good thing for him. He's toured around the US working for Renaissance festivals. We got to see him this last summer. We met his girlfriend and they winter here in Colorado now. It's a stable relationship. And yeah, he and I can be in each other's presence. We can give each other hugs. We say we love each other. I don't know if I'm ever going to have a super close relationship but I'm okay with having a functionally good relationship.

Item 3: High Point

Title: A community that produces marvels

This is going to sound silly, but I don't know if I could quantify just one because we are pretty regularly able to able to celebrate successes that happened through the support and or effort of the group.

For example Zara and one of her partners had a major crisis, they ended up losing their house with basically no notice. We were able to get them moved out and settled very quickly. They now live with Kit. It worked out for the best and Yay! We get to celebrate that. There have also been times when like when Matthew and Jess were out on the trail and needed to be rescued and Abby and Taz, bless their hearts, were able to because go out and drive and rescue them. Other times like Zara was kind of miserable at her job and she was looking to transition. We all

gave her advice on resume writing and interviewing and she got the new job. And so we're all it'll be like, "Yeah, we did it!" So I feel like those high points. We seem to live in a community that produces marvels. It's pretty nice, even if they are little victories. But four unique high points, like being able to pull together and figure out living situation for a member of the polycule in a 72 hour span that has not only been successful but beneficial for them and helpful. That's a pretty good one. Yeah, that's a pretty good one.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: A baffling amount of little interactions and micro calculations

Cade: Um I know, I know exactly what it is. I think Jess, is delightful. She is brilliant, clever, passionate, beautiful. And she and I give each other the best hugs on the planet. I thought about it [pursuing a romantic relationship with Jen]. And I was like, there's a lot of reasons why I'm going to deliberately choose not to. I don't think I have time to even remotely commit to another relationship fairly, but that was probably the lowest consideration. Just above that was "oh boy, Jen reminds me an awful lot of a partner who I lost a breast cancer." There's a lot of unhealed stuff there that just I don't need to drag Jen into. But above all, that is me, I don't know if I want to make this more complicated. Right? Like, there's a lot of very complicated emotional entanglements and social interactions and things that even if we do it gracefully 99.9% of the time, there have to be a baffling amount of little interactions and micro calculations that I know I'm making, we're all making. Making that more complicated doesn't make that an easier process for any of us.

And yeah, I think that was one of those where I was like, you know, the only person in this group that I'm going to be dating is Brenna. And while I'm happy to snuggle with anybody and be sort of, you know, physical in that sense, I was like, the only person I'm gonna be really

trying to commit any of that energy to is going to be Brenna. Not because of incompatibility or dislike, but because I just, yeah, I don't want to make this more complicated. So actively cutting off, in my mind, sort of exploration of options for relationships. Like, I'm not even going to worry about getting to the point and talk to Brenna about feelings about that, because I'm going to actively choose to make sure that that just isn't the thing.

Lindsay: Is there anything else that you would add in terms of your experience of the polycule?

Cade: Ah...no, I think we hit on a lot of it.... It's a brilliant structure, and it works astonishingly well astonishingly often. And if you can, through individual interviews and analysis, tease out what that is, write a book! (laughter) Publish, get that PhD, and then publish again.

Lindsay: (laughter) Well, I'll do my best.

Analysis of Cade's Interview

Cade's interview took place on August 11, 2022 via Zoom. He arrived on time and was ready for the interview. His rate of speech varied from carefully considered during the Low Point story to a more rapid, laughter-filled demeanor during the High Point story.

One thing McCormack calls for the researcher to look for is common understanding (McCormack, 2004). Cade paused his story to ask if I knew the term *relationship anarchy* and then gives his own relationship philosophy of “relationships be that they be” when referring to his dislike of labels and the need to rank partnerships.

Cade was the link between two smaller polycules. With regard to the Lovelies, Cade's “only throughput is Brenna.” Given the nature of large networks, this illustrates that what one

considers the “center” of a polycule may be a manifestation of their point of view of the system and there may be no true center.

One unique part of Cade’s story was his mention of metamours who split their time between households. This is somewhat common in the polyamorous community as some people choose to move from one household to another with regularity (Kauppi, 2021). Cade does not split his time between households and does not elaborate on these arrangements. Kauppi, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, writes about the challenges that may come with splitting time between households, such as different roles and agreements in each household and considerations for others who may also live in each household - “you do your best to be considerate and take into account the desires and preferences of many people, both your partners and their families” (p. 322). Even in a polycule as large as the one I have studied here, we do not see all the complexities that may occur in a polyamorous lifestyle because none of the participants split time between households.

In telling the story *They were all really worried* Cade described how difficult this time was in his life. He noted that he was really struggling and “even with all of these resources” the group wasn’t able to help him resolve the issue. He noted that “I don't think we'd ever encountered an inter-group thing where something was going on and we weren't able to solve it.” This was in contradiction with what I knew from speaking to Zara about the *Collective wound on the heart of the polycule*. This may be an indication of the limitations of information traveling through the polycule given how far-removed Cade is from Zara’s part of the polycule. It may also be the case that the *Collective wound* story was kept between those who knew the individual in question.

The story *A community that produces marvels* illustrated the sense of community Cade perceived in the group when someone is in need. He easily pointed out multiple instances in which one or two members of the polycule had a need and others in the network quickly acted to meet that need.

Cade's turning point story *A baffling amount of little interactions and micro calculations* illustrated the effects of the relational complexity that can occur within multi-partner relationship systems. The polyamorous community created the word *polysaturated* to codify the idea of understanding one's limits on the number of partners or level of entanglement they have the capacity for. Cade did not use the term but the definition of "someone who is polyamorous but not currently open to new relationships or new partners because of the number of existing partners or because of time constraints that might make new relationships difficult" (Veaux & Rickert, 2014, p. 457) appeared to fit the situation he described.

Another unique facet of this interview was that the reader gets a glimpse of the relationship between myself and the participants. As a group, they have been very supportive of this research and my academic journey. Prior to consenting to this study, I informed them that I intended to go on to get a Ph.D. and continue to study polyamory and perhaps even this polycule. Cade's comment revealed the ways in which they wish to help the polyamorous community by making their story known.

Abby: Orientation

Abby was 37 at the time of the interview and used she/her pronouns. She was white/Caucasian and a cisgender female. She worked as a Registered Nurse. Abby reported that her sexual and romantic orientations were queer. She described her relationship orientation as poly-adjacent. Abby did not have children by choice. When asked about her relationship

orientation she responded “I value mutual respect, growth, direct communication, mutual support, consideration, and partnership, and both of my relationships reflect these principles.” She also reported that something important about her that was not covered by the demographics survey was “the intersectionality of even just my dating experience: fat chronically ill queer kinky white cis femme.”

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: My dance card is full

Abby: Regarding my involvement in the polycule, when talking to poly folks, I always say that my “dance card is full.” I’m not seeking other partners, and haven’t since I got married. Brenna and I were dating long before then. I don’t go to a lot of poly events and I don’t date. My interaction with the polycule is through my partner Brenna. She and I have been together much longer than the polycule has existed, so when she started accumulating -maybe there’s a better word for that, but- accumulating her other partners, I started to get to know them, and we’d run into them occasionally.

I got to know everybody through Brenna. At first, we didn’t do a ton of hanging out, but everybody seemed cool. My husband is a very binary person when it comes to friendships. Either he wants to hang out with people and go to concerts with them and have some beers or “it’s cool that you’re over there”. I wanted him to get to know *these* partners better because they were kind and fun to chat with/be around. So I corralled Cade and Matthew , saying, "You should come over for Scotch." Because that's something that everybody could have a moment about. I could sit with my mixed drink, and everybody else could enjoy chatting about Scotch, including Brenna. And that was probably when I started to really get to know the "proto polycule."

I was starting to hear about these people- meaning a lot of folks in the polycule. Her relationship with Kacey was getting more serious, I was starting to hear about Kacey's partners. And Jen had come on the scene. I thought she was brilliant the moment I met her. She had an impeccable anatomical clitoral necklace on - I thought, clearly this is a person I need to know because , this is a subtle cast metal piece of jewelry. There's room in the world for unsubtlety, but this was just a thing of beauty. She and I have become good friends. And so in the year or six months or so before the pandemic I was starting to hear about these folks. I started to hear about how great H--- was, starting to hear about Zara, and I knew that I wanted to get to know Jen. About six months before the pandemic, a bunch of us went to dinner, just getting to know one another teeny tiny bit.

My spouse and I intentionally moved about 20 minutes away from Brenna, because I was frustrated living about 45 minutes from Brenna for years and years. Of course, we moved in a month before the pandemic started.

And then the pandemic hit and Brenna and Kacey enacted Saturday night polycule Zoom meetings. And that allowed me to get to know people that I had never met. Because I had never met H--- and I had met Zara once, and I had met Kacey a handful of times. And I had never met D--- or Kit. Getting to get on Zoom with everybody and have a three-hour chat on a Saturday night was just impeccable. It was so good. It was an opportunity we never would have had. We lead the quintessential polycule busy lives. We never would have had a year's worth of Saturdays to get to know each other. Even though it was on Zoom it was really lovely. H--- and I have become good friends, Jen and I have become good friends. I'm fond of everybody. And that's how I got to know everybody in the polycule. I don't remember what the question was, hopefully that was the answer.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: The polycule HR lady has concerns

Abby: There's a really beautiful part to being able to come into this polycule and be exactly who I am. Which includes being bossy, which is a casual word I use for being somebody who just like takes care of the details, doesn't put up with a lot of BS, and that type of thing. There's a real beauty in coming into the polycule and having people really like "yeah, that's who you are, you take care of the details, you don't put up with BS, and if somebody's doing something wrong, you're gonna tell them," and just being deeply accepted for that. But that also feeds into a sense of responsibility to fix things when there is a simple lack of communication. There's so many reasons things get miscommunicated. It's not necessarily that individuals are inherently communicating poorly, this is why we end up having mediators in friend groups and businesses and large groups. So I've ended up taking on a semi-joking, semi not, role of polycule HR and there's a couple of challenges that come with it.

One challenge is conversations about, "hey, something's not quite right here" are hard. And balancing that I'm not overstepping what is functionally a very casual role. There's an innate fear that everybody's been super accepting of me so far, but *this* is the thing that's going to throw it over the line. That's a very internal stress point, nobody in the polycule has ever made me feel that way.

So when things have come up where someone has come to me and said "Oh man. I'm really having trouble with communicating this thing" and seeks advice, it allows things to go more smoothly in the future, but can be challenging and scary in the moment. A low stakes example is we have all of these group chats. Towards the beginning of the polycule we had one chat and it was everything. It was "this is what's going on in my life," it was funny cat pictures, it

was everything, including all of the crazy awful crap that was going on. And this was me speaking up for my own needs at the time, I said “We need to have a second chat. I can't keep coming into this one thread and playing roulette between funny cat pic or downfall of society,” and everybody came together with “yeah, fair, actually that really checks out. I think I would also like that,” and we've had a division of chats since then. I think that's a low stakes low-ish stakes example of exactly the type of thing of seeing an issue, calling it out, and having other people be like "yeah, that is a bummer actually." The really nice thing about this polycule is somehow everybody has been chill for a long time now, these instances of communication always seem to work out.

Lindsay: Thank you for sharing that. Next can you tell me about a time in the polycule where something that was particularly wonderful happened or a particular high point.

Abby: I want to hit one other challenging point real quick.

Lindsay: Okay. Yeah, absolutely.

Item 2, Part 2: Low Point

Title: They were not ass-slapping buddies

Abby: I think about the story from a little while ago where everybody felt like they knew each other really well, and we're feeling very comfortable around each other. Many of us went on a trip together. On the last night, we're hanging out in a hot spring and one of our members got a little toasted and slapped another one on the ass, who was not an ass slapping friend. They were not ass slapping buddies. They came to me the next day, as we were all getting prepared to leave, saying "So-and-so slapped my ass last night. I don't think they knew it was my ass they slapped, and I don't feel great about that." I don't care if they were drunk, you don't do that.

We have multiple problems here. One, of course, was inappropriate touching. But also, the level of chillness we have with each other cannot be maintained if boundaries are not maintained and discomfort just kind of gets swallowed up. I said, “you know, I hear you that it's not the end of the world to you, but this needs to be addressed. By our conversation right now, it looks like you don't want to address it, that you are concerned about the discomfort of addressing it. Is it okay with you if I address it with them?” And they said yes. I said, “I would like it for you to come with me. Are you willing to do that?” It ended up pretty clear that they didn't want to do that, and that's okay.

I then looped in my girlfriend, and I said, “Hey, I want some perspective that I'm not going off half-cocked being protective.” And she responded “Nope, I think that's something that needs to be addressed.” All right. I just wanted multiple touchstones that I wasn't being overbearing.

I let the person know "Hey, I gotta talk to you, let me know when you have a second." It ended up being a conversation with them and one other person in their same household around physical touching boundaries. I started with "Hey, we've all gotten really familiar with one another. And I think we need to step back and remember that our touch boundaries are different. You were really trashed last night, and you slapped their butt." "Oh, I didn't, I didn't know that." ", Not knowing who you're touching is its own problem. And I want you to take some time to think about that. But not cool, friend.” They took a really well, "yeah, I'm gonna have to do something about that. I messed up." I turned to their housemate, saying, "Hey, you're not touching people sexually. But you're touching people very familiarly on the shoulder or on the mid back, and they don't want that. I understand that we're a really touchy feely group. We all

need to take some time and readdress those boundaries, because everyone has gotten so familiar."

On my end, it was a scary conversation. It felt appropriate to address it while we were still all together on the trip, instead of putting it off, but I felt I was so concerned, I was going off half-cocked, and it was a relief to get some perspective from Brenna before I charged in. But I was worried that somebody was gonna come back and be like, "Who died and made you HR?" We've all had conversations since then, where we've kind of joked about me being HR. I keep records of people's allergies and I keep some other documentation organized for the group as well, so it's not it's not just bossy conversations.

Item 3: High Point

Title: I need to feed you all.

Abby: I deeply appreciate the overarching friendship and support that I've gained from the polycule. I have not dated, my dance card is full. I have not acquired any more romantic partners, sexual partners, etc., but joining in this close knit group of folks where I get to be vulnerable and say, "I want to host a party for you all at my place. You all need to come over. I need to feed you all. You're all very busy, I understand. We will find a time. It can be months out, but I need to feed all of you over here." I feel like with a lot of social groups, and even a lot of times that we get together, it's you plan a party and people show up or they don't. But in this group of people I get to be vulnerable and communicate that I need both their company and to show how much I care for them. I can be like, "come over so I can feed you."

We're very much that that group of people who are like yeah, Thanksgiving is a sketchy holiday, but we all have the day off, so we're going to take the day and get together. The planning quickly outgrew one of our members houses because somehow almost everybody was

available. It came up in conversation “Abby's been wanting to host people. We can do at Abby's house" and I said “yes, you can!” Everybody came over. We have a picture of everyone, 10 seats at the table and then people overflowing into the next to kitchen area and sitting on the floor. We made sure to have gluten free casseroles, vegan casseroles, and fully loaded casseroles. Dairy free potatoes, and fully loaded potatoes, etc. It was so good.

Lindsay: And what does that mean to you?

Abby: Um, for varying reasons, I have not had the benefit of large, organized friend groups. My college experience was broken up over time, I wasn't a sorority type of gal, I didn't end up best buds with 16 people from a knitting group, none of those things ever accumulated in my life. So it's been a lot of piecemeal friendships, which I enjoy. I still have and love deeply. But I have never had a closely knit friend group, the way that happens for some people. And so this has just been really beautiful to have that. I've never been without friends. But I've never had this type of adult close knit friendship group, and it's really beautiful and fulfilling.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: I can't do this forever

Abby: The realization that I needed to move up closer to Brenna, and by extension have ability to be closer to the polycule. I lived too far away from Brenna. And too far away from what was clearly a fulfilling social group, even though it was a "proto polycule" at best, it was clear that I would be a valued member and find a lot of joy with them. But I just live too dang far away. And that was a big low point. It was...it really sucked.

Before the pandemic, we lived 45 minutes away from Brenna, I was also working 90 miles away and chronically exhausted and didn't realize it, which meant that I wasn't getting up there and interacting with her or the whole northern contingent very often. There just wasn't a lot

of social interaction with the proto polycule, but every time I came around, I was like, “Oh, God, it's so nice to be around a bunch of just chill folks.” And I came home one night after having been up at Brenna's and hanging out with some of the folks in the polycule. At the time, it was kind of incidental that it was the members of the polycule, it was just the feeling that I was enjoying hanging out with these really great people. Such a “breathe easy” social group, where you just relax the moment you walk into a room with these people, even though you don't really know them. It's just such a natural fit. I was getting to the point where I was frustrated and bummed anytime I left Brenna's house. I would have to cut the night short because I have to be safe to drive 45 minutes home, it was just an alertness thing. And I was frustrated because I don't know when the next time this is going to happen. For probably months or a year or two before that I would drive home and I'd be like, "Man, this is really a bummer."

I can't tell you what the tipping point was the night I went home and said I can't do this forever. I went home to my husband and said, “I can't keep living 45 minutes away from Brenna.” This is how our lives have been for at least a decade. There were different reasons we weren't seeing each other a ton at times. I was exhausted because I was working nights, her kids were getting older, at one point her marriage at the time wasn't doing super great. And her life was much busier. And then...it is hard to describe how chronically exhausted I was, and yet didn't realize it. I was too busy, too tired to know that life sucked and it was partially medical problems.

Brenna and I've never lived less than 45 minutes away from one another. but I couldn't keep doing it. Every time I left her house, it broke my heart a bit to leave and know that it's going to be weeks before I see her again, weeks and months before I get to hang out with the neat people that are up there. We didn't have a specific social group in the town we were in. We were

just in a close suburb of Denver. So everybody else we knew was half an hour away from there, too.

I sat down with Taz and I said I said "if you say 'I don't want to do this' then we will have that discussion. We'll figure it out. But I don't want to live this far away from her. She's got kids and a whole social network up there and her job is up there. She can't move, but we can." And his response was "okay." His unwavering support of me is something I am so thankful for.

We had lived in that house for six, six and a half years at that point, and he said, Okay. So started saving up the down payment, and we started looking for a new place.

Analysis of Abby's Interview

The interview with Abby took place on August 16, 2022. Her rate of speech was measured and unhurried. There were frequent pauses and nearly as frequent asides such as "maybe there's a better word for that" which led me to think she tried to choose her words carefully.

I learned a lot about how the group maintains boundaries and works to resolve conflicts when they arise. The trust and vulnerability it took for Abby to assume a leadership role was significant and was not lost on me as I listened to her describe her place and role as the "polycule HR lady." Abby described the mental load of doing what needs to be done to keep the group a safe place while not overstepping in a role that is loosely defined at best. Abby's self-described "bossiness" fills a vital function in maintaining interpersonal safety in the polycule. Furthermore, she was aware of the longer-term costs of not maintaining interpersonal safety as evidenced by her saying that "the level of chillness we have with each other cannot be maintained if boundaries are not maintained and discomfort just kind of gets swallowed up."

Abby's story *They were not ass-slapping buddies* gave insight into how boundaries are maintained and repairs are made when those boundaries are crossed. Abby's willingness to listen and be a neutral party seems to have helped the group member who was slapped feel comfortable talking with Abby about it. Abby's self-awareness of the potential outcomes of her actions was evident as she told me about checking in with another member of the polycule to get another person's input before acting.

Equally important in the overall functioning of the polycule was the offender's willingness to take responsibility for their actions. It was also notable that in addition to addressing a clear violation of boundaries was that Abby also addressed another person's minor infractions and more delicate touches before they became a serious issue.

In addition to her conflict management and mediator role, Abby kept a record of polycule members' allergies and food preferences. I was reminded of Jamie's story of how meaningful it was to her that Abby and the group proactively met her dietary needs. In addition to the health and safety aspects, Jamie's story gave meaning to Abby's role in documenting things as something that contributes to members' sense of belonging and being valued. It seemed that Abby also shows her love in acts of service such as feeding and hosting members of the polycule with some regularity.

Abby's high point of being part of a group where she can ask people to show up and know that they will allows her to "be vulnerable like that." This indicated that at least part of what she received in return for the mental load of being "polycule HR" and organizer and food documentarian. I recalled my time teaching and studying communication, specifically the Social Exchange Theory (Thibault & Kelley, 1952). The theory posits that people weigh, consciously or unconsciously, the costs and benefits of relationships and that people are more likely to stay in

relationships they feel give equal or more benefits when compared with costs. According to this theory, Abby's responsibilities, which are significant, must be outweighed by or equal to the benefits of being in the polycule. I theorize that her matter-of-fact nature was the reason for short and simple statements that this "close-knit friendship group" is "really beautiful." These understated feelings became evident again when she talked about relaxing "the moment you walk into a room with these people" and "it's just such a natural fit."

Abby's turning point of saying to her husband that she needed to be closer to her other partner is another interesting story. While monogamists may be familiar with the idea of moving to be closer to family, the idea of moving to be closer to someone's other partner is likely more foreign. I have not spoken to Abby's husband T-- about this decision but I can imagine that this move came with significant costs in terms of energy, time, and finances. The willingness of Abby's husband to not only move to be closer her other partner but also to be willing to help members should not go without notice. Even at the extremities of the polycule with a monogamous member such as T--, the sense of community appeared to be significant.

Kit: Orientation

Kit was a white/caucasian gender-fluid person who uses he/they pronouns. He was 36 at the time of the interview. He reported that his sexual identity was "questioning or unsure." His relationship orientation was relationship anarchy and his romantic orientation was heteroromantic. He did not have children. When asked about his relationship philosophy he replied "all types and styles are valid; none should be held above another."

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: Super Relationship

Kit: I think that I was first absorbed into the polycule around the time of the pandemic. Mostly I think it started as a text chat for us to all keep in contact and have a place to plan events and talk to each other and stuff like that.

I've been poly for a couple of years. Zara and J--- and I had been dating for a couple years each at that point, and Zara started a relationship with Kacey, and that connected a network of people who are all friends and occasional lovers. Yeah, I just really leaned into that. I needed a community, especially in that time. I'm a pretty extroverted person and the pandemic was a real nightmare for me. So we had a consistent text chat. And then also Saturday evenings, basically we had a zoom happy hour kind of situation.

And it kind of went from there. You know, I got to develop relationships because I had known most of those people tangentially. We had met here and there at parties and stuff, but I didn't know them well. So over that time I got to know them all and then spent time with them as the Covid restrictions were lifted and we all got vaccinated and we all felt comfortable being around people again. I feel like that's when we really came together and became this pretty cohesive family, even though we're all very different. We all bring something unique to the table, and our relationships kind of really started to overlap into one meta relationship or a super relationship that contains each of our dyads, whether it be friends or lovers and what have you.

And ah, it's like I've lost the thread on my point. But the overall experience is largely positive.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: A higher purpose brings about a low point

Kit: Um, you might know some of this story already depending on who you've talked to, but I was dating someone named D—. D--- and Kacey were also really good friends. And D--- was partially, if not seriously, invested in the polycule as a whole. At some point, they started talking about spirituality a lot; how they have a higher purpose, how they feel like they have some kind of destiny, and they want to do big things essentially. I was like “That's great. I really encourage you to. You know it never hurts to research new things and to try to better your life. However, the way in particular that you're speaking reminds me of people that I've known who've gone through a psychotic break, and I want to warn you about that.”

Unfortunately I was right, and that sort of happened. D--- became really paranoid and strange and accused me of impossible things, like I was invading their apartment and their dreams and saying and doing terrible things, when in actuality I've not spoken to them in weeks. Then they would come at me with these wild accusations and threats. It just became really apparent that they were going through a psychotic break, and as much as we tried to hold on, they burned a lot of bridges, and I haven't really heard from them since.

That was really hard for our polycule, because we had to kind of do a huddle and be like, *what the fuck are we supposed to do in this situation?* Like, we love them. We don't want to directly challenge their concept of reality, but at the same time their actions and their words are really worrisome. We didn't do anything drastic; I'm certainly not gonna call the cops on anybody, but we did try to check in on them. It didn't go very well, but we did our best, you know, as a bunch of not-therapists. We tried to get them to seek help, or research resources on

their behalf. But our actions seemed threatening to D---, which made them pull away. Like I said, unfortunately we haven't really talked to them in a while in order to find how they're doing.

Item 3: High Point

High Point: Amazon Prime for love and help.

Kit: Pointing out high points is much easier. It happens quite a bit whenever we all get together -or when we have between seven and ten of us in one place, in one room; for a barbecue, or for a party, or whatever- you can really just kind of feel the vibe and the love in the room. It is palpable, tangible. We are quite different people but we're all brought together by the shared sense of love and community that we all have for and with each other. That's a really magical kind of experience and not something that I've felt even with family; I feel like I'm begrudgingly hanging out with them. But these people, the people in my polycule, I gladly volunteer to spend time with them whenever possible.

Yeah, like the fact that some of us are really good at logistics, and some of us are very good cooks, and I'm more security minded. Then we have so many people who are interested and proficient in medical stuff. So if anything comes up in our individual lives, we can kind of bring that to the chat, to the polycule, and everybody kind of showers that person with love and answers and help with whatever the question or problem is. It's kind of magical. I referred to it the other day as Amazon Prime for love and help. Not too long ago, I dropped in the chat, "Hey, our fucking basement flooded. Does anybody have a wet vac that we could borrow?" Within an hour J--- came and dropped off a wet vac right on my porch. I didn't necessarily expect that particular reaction, but I'm not surprised. I'm trying not to take it for granted that I have this amazing network of people who I can just casually be like, "hey, something fucked up, can

somebody help me?” to then have that help literally delivered to my door, that was the Prime of it all.

Item 4: Turning Point

“From the silo to the kitchen table”

Kit: So I considered myself solo-poly or just kind of anarchical in general and my relationships were more or less siloed. I date this person and I date this person and they might meet occasionally, but they don't usually know each other. I still practice that more or less, but I'm a lot more “kitchen table”-y now. I feel like it's important to me that these people know each other and that's the community aspect. They don't all necessarily need to get along, but it's important to me to have a sense of community among those I love. Our current polycule -the Lovelies, as we tend to call ourselves- does that extremely well. So yeah, I would say that I turned from a novice polyamorous person, just kind of dating whoever individually, to more of a community-oriented way of seeing things with the help of this group.

Analysis of Kit's Interview

Kit was not initially part of the study and did not participate in the Tree of Life activity that took place prior to these interviews. Jen mentioned that Kit was in the chat less frequently and had missed her initial message about participating in the study. During our time together for the Tree of Life activity, she mentioned to me that he was sad not to be a part of the study. Other members also casually mentioned his name in talking about the polycule. During my initial one-on-one interviews, Kit's name again emerged as a central member of the polycule. The Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board (COMIRB) had granted approval for a study of five-to-eight participants; Kit would be the ninth participant. I considered what I had read about the flexibility of qualitative approaches and emergent methodology design that allows for evolution in data

collection as more is learned about the story in question (Bruce, et al., 2016). Because Kit's name had arisen organically in participant stories and his position within the genogram was somewhat central, I decided he would be a fitting addition to the study. After consulting with my thesis chair Robert Allan, I submitted an amendment to the initial COMIRB proposal and it was quickly approved.

My interview with Kit took place on August 26, 2022 via Zoom. In addition to the interview, this meeting served as onboarding to the project since he was a mid-study addition. He told me stories of the polycule in a succinct manner.

Kit is a self-described extrovert who would have found pandemic-induced isolation more difficult without the polycule. Like several other members, he mentioned the significant role that the text chat group and Saturday night Zoom calls played in solidifying the polycule. He saw the polycule as one "super relationship" that contained many relationships between its members.

Kit's low point echoed Michael and Zara as he told me about his view of the time when a member of the polycule had what Kit described as a "psychotic break." It was clear that multiple members of the group struggled as they watched this individual recede from the group and possibly reality. It may also speak to systemic challenges with mental health care in the US that there was little recourse for these people who clearly cared about the individual in question.

It was also notable that Kit's sense of membership and belonging in this polycule challenged his understanding of his relationship style. He shared that he was more solo-poly, a term which often describes "an approach to polyamory that emphasizes personal agency. Individuals do not seek to engage in relationships that are tightly couple-centric or financially and/or domestically entwined" (Fern, 2020, p. 115). Then he said he's "a lot more kitchen-tably now." Colloquially known as "kitchen table poly," this term describes a relationship style in

which metamours can sit around a kitchen table together in a family-like fashion (Wilby, 2017). His transition was further clarified when he said he “turned from a novice polyamorous person, just kind of, uh, dating whoever individually and this group had helped turn to more of a community-oriented way of seeing things.”

Kacey: Orientation

Kacey is white/Caucasian and works as a Senior Quality Assurance Engineer. Kacey was 39 at the time of the interview and used they/them pronouns. Their gender identity was agender. Kacey’s sexual orientation was demisexual and their relationship orientation is relationship anarchy. Kacey was panromantic. They had two step-children. When asked to add something important that was not covered by the demographics survey, Kacey replied “I also have a disability - type 1 diabetes.”

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: Trauma bonding during the pandemic

Kacey: Yeah. So I got involved into polycule in January of 2019 a year after Brenna and I had met through a mutual friend. She had gotten an invitation to my party via our mutual friend, who's who's kind of a satellite partner of mine. So that was that was how Brenna and I met initially and then fast forward to January 2019.

And my partner Zara and I were out dancing at [restaurant name]. And Zara, we were sitting at the bar and Zara elbows me it was like, "hey, check out the check out the girl across the way check out look at her tights," and it was Brenna and she was wearing these tights that had little bunny rabbit prints on them. It's kind of hard to explain that like, not like multiple rabbits, but like the stockings that have like just the rabbit head kind of thing on him. And I was like, “Oh,

hey, hi, Brenna.” And Brenna was kind of like, "Kacey!" And so we ended up you know, I ended up kind of leaning over to Zara and being like, "Hey, is it okay? If I get my flirt on tonight?" and she was basically like, "go do your thing." Because this was, my wife and I had separated in November of the previous year. And I was kind of in a really tumultuous place. And she was my rock in a lot of ways and getting through that, that kind of transitional period of my life. So she was like, "yes, go date somebody, please!"

And so Brenna and I started dating. And after a couple of weeks of dating, she was like, hey, "I'd really liked for you to meet, the other important people in my life." And she set up a game night and that's when I met her partners. I actually had met Matthew, I think, in passing at one point, but we hadn't really spent any time together. But Brenna set up this game night and was like, This is my partner Chris, and this is my partner, Matthew. This was I would say a couple of months, maybe maybe a month or two into our relationship. But then that's when Brenna was like, I'm gonna set up a Facebook group for for my lovelies. And that's kind of how I started that's how you know that's how I got to get to know me a little bit better. And we kind of we kind of expanded this group, involving all of the various people and all of the various aspects and it grew over time into into what it is now with the, you know, the I think there's 13 people in our chat group. But yeah, it was I started dating Brenna and Brenna brought me into her her life and was like “Hey, you're a cool person, I hope you stick around, I want to bring you into my group.”

And I would say probably at that point in time, I don't know that we really had the idea of the polycule very firmly established. I think that is something that I don't really know that I can put my finger on when we started referring to it as the polycule and when it became this, what it is now which is, you know, I like to think of it as it's, it's really these people are my family.

They're the, we're not a we're not a nuclear family, by any sense of the imagination. But that's what we are, because we're all so dedicated to each other or also important to each other and our livelihood and well being matters to each and every one of us. But I would say that it was probably over that first year, Brenna and I started dating in January. And then the stars just kind of aligned that we ended up moving in together in July of that same year.

And it was really the pandemic that sort of solidified this. As you know, Brenna was like, "Well, I'm gonna start inviting more people to the group chat and we're gonna make it bigger and we're gonna use this as a way to communicate." And then we started doing our Saturday night zoom calls, which was just you know, anybody who can show up, we just, we started a zoom call at nine o'clock on Saturday night after we got the kids to bed and we just went until, you know, some nights we go until 10:30 and some some nights we'd go until two o'clock in the morning. But I really think that those zoom calls really shored things up, they really made us feel like a cohesive unit. A little bit of trauma bonding during the pandemic because we were all so separated but we had each other to rely on and that that mattered a lot.

Lindsay: Thanks for sharing. That's, that's quite a tale.

Kacey: So I guess to go back to your initial question, I got involved with the polycule because of Brenna but the the polycule as it is now really evolved over the course in the next year or so.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: Look at everything you've got to lose

Kacey: I would say, you know, I hit a really low point earlier this year [2022], I would say probably around like February, March of this year. I was in a really low point in my life personally.

In 2021, I lost my grandmother, my 94 year old grandmother who basically raised me and my best friend's mom, who was my basically surrogate mom through high school and beyond. They both passed within three weeks of each other. And it wasn't until this year it wasn't until like the one year anniversary that those deaths really hit me. And I have Seasonal Affective Disorder as well. January is a really hard month for me in general and the anniversary of these two deaths and my Seasonal Affective Disorder and I was in a rough place at work and I was in a rough place with my relationship with H---. We were just feeling very disconnected from each other. And so I was I was at a really low point at that point in time. And there was definitely some conflict. Zara and I had to sit down and have a really long hard conversation about our relationship and whether or not we wanted to continue it. A big part of that was just because she was like "You're you're being a dick right now." I was like, "yeah, I'm not trying to but...." I didn't have a really good handle on it. And you know, there were several conversations in there about did Brenna and I want to continue our relationship? I hit a point one night where I was just very emotionally distraught. And Brenna and I had had a disagreement, and she'd gone off on her own, just spend some time by herself. And I was I was looking up apartments in Asheville, North Carolina, because I have a bunch of friends who have moved there just in the last year. And I was like, well, if I'm gonna uproot my life, I guess I'm gonna uproot my life.

And that low point wasn't just one day, that low point lasted for a couple of weeks. But it was really the, the group chat and the conversations that I was having with people at that point in time. And even Abby chiming in and being like, "hey, Kacey, you know, we see you" type of thing. That really convinced me that like, "Hey, man, you're, you got to get your shit together, you got to figure out what the hell is going on with your brain and your depression and your

anxiety, and all of these trauma responses and everything else that you've got going on. You need to figure out what you're doing or you're gonna lose everything."

And so it's really weird, because in a lot of ways that some of that stress and that anxiety did stem from the polycule, because there was a lot of pressure to perform and that was contributing to my anxiety. Feeling like even if you're not in a good place, you have to pretend like you are in a good place. Because otherwise people will see that you're not in a good place. And it will affect the way they view you. In hindsight, I recognize "Wow, that's dumb." Right? Like, that's not how this works. That's not how any of this works. But at the same time, it was all those relationships, and those people basically saying "Hey, man, is your shit together? If it's not together, can we help get it together?" So that was my that was the most recent low point that I can think of. It was both caused by, at least partly, and resolved by being part of the polycule.

Lindsay: Sure, yeah. Okay. Life and all its complexities. Right, exactly. Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you sort of came out of that low point? You kind of touched on it.

Kacey: Yeah, I think it was basically...I know what it really boiled down to and back, and I've had a few conversations about this since then, is that I sat there and I thought, "man, look at everything you've got to lose here. You have this family, you have these relationships, you have these people in your life that care very deeply about you and your well-being. And you need to act like it. You need to act like it matters. You need to recognize that these people all love you and care about you and want to help you and want to see you happy and healthy." And when that really clicked. It was I think that was the first time, at least in this bout of depression, I think that was the first time when I looked at things and I realized "you don't have to do this alone. You've got this entire group of people who want to help and want to see you doing better and want to see

you happy and in a happy place. And you don't have to try to do this by yourself. You can lean on other people, and not just your partners.” I would say, you know, it was during that time that Chris and I had a few really, really heart-to-heart chats over messenger and just kind of talking about things and him kind of providing some nudging guidance to kind of like, “hey, you know, are you looking internally? Are you doing the work to unpack a lot of what's going on right now?” And we had some good conversations about that. And, you know, swapping memes back and forth with Matthew. Just opening my phone one day and randomly finding this meme about, I don't know, some inside stupid joke about the Prussian empire from Matthew was just like, “oh, he gets me.” It was a lot of the little things about the polycule that just made me realize, you know, that “hey, you've got this group of people that's very interested in your well-being. You don't have to do this alone. You can use them you can rely on these people.” And I think that also helped really solidify that as a feeling of like, this is where you belong.

Item 3: High Point

Title: Kacey's Mountain Rescue Service

Kacey: So in July of 2021 Jen and Matthew had been backpacking for a little over two months, the trail starts at the Mexico border and goes all the way up to the Canadian border. And they were deep in the mountains of Colorado and trying to make their way across the trail. It was like maybe around one o'clock in the afternoon, Jen sent a group a text to the group and was just like, “hey, we have decided that we need to get off trail a couple of days early. We're burnt the fuck out. We are completely fried.” So they were like, "here's where we are. It's kind of the middle of nowhere. Can anybody come get us?" At the time I had a '99 Suburban, so big old monstrosity of a vehicle and I was like "Yeah, I'll go. I'll go do this. I got nothing going on this afternoon. I can go get them" and so I drove up there and it was about a sort of a two ish hour

drive maybe two and a half hours to get out to where they were. But I remember being on this remote dirt road, like I wasn't sure my suburban was going to fit on this trail. I had to ford some flowing water, it had very limited use. I remember coming around the corner and seeing them and just both of their faces lighting up as they saw my truck role around that corner. And just both of them getting in the car and being like, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you."

And so, so then they stayed in town for I think it was five days, and then they got back on the trail. And then it was about a week after that Jen messaged the group and was like, "Hey, we're fried. Again. This kind of sucks. And I don't want to be in the trail anymore. And Matthew's going to try to continue on for another couple of days. But I'm ready to get off. Would anybody mind please, please, please, coming to get me." And you know, it when Jen tells the story now she'll be like, she'll talk about her time on the trail. And she'll be like "kudos to Kacey who rescued us not once but twice." And so that's just it's a fun little memory to me of just Yeah, it's like, of course, I don't mind taking off work and driving two hours in the mountains to come pick you up. Why would I mind that? You very clearly need somebody. And it was actually really nice because at that time that that two ish hour drive back on the second trip we were actually both trips, were times that I really got to know Jen. And that was really neat. Because up until that point Jen wasn't somebody that I really talked to very much. She was more than just Matthew's partner. So to have those times of rescuing them from the mountains and being able to sit and talk with her was actually very meaningful. So those those trips will always stand out as, well not fun for them, but fun for me. And definitely, I get to tell the stories about how I rescued my friends off the Continental Divide Trail.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: More than the sum of our parts

Kacey: Yeah, um, there's, there's definitely, there's definitely been a couple of those. When we were doing the poly zoom calls over the pandemic was definitely one. Because that was when it really started to click that, hey, you know, we are, we are more than just a group of people who are dating each other or are dating, you know, we're more than just a collection of people who are dating, we're a family. And I think I think that that that same realization has hit several times in several different ways over the years. But I think that that's, that's kind of the that's the one that sticks out the most is that there have been so many times where I have just thought to myself, Man, this is an amazing collection of people that has come together in love and solidarity.

In terms of specific times that stand out to me, we generally throw a summer party, a solstice party, every year in at the end of June to kind of celebrate "Yay, it's summer, the days are getting longer. Hurray." And at that party last year, minus Matthew and Jen who were on the Continental Divide Trail. And so, this was the first time that we'd really gotten almost everybody together as a polycule. I mean, there were other people there of course, because, you know, it was a summer party. But it was this was the first time that we've really had so many of the polycule together in one place as a group.

I remember sitting and chatting with J--- for like 15 minutes about photography, which is a passion of hers that I don't really have a whole I don't have any interest in doing but I love understanding why people do photography. So the first time that we actually got to sit down and have a conversation about that was really neat. And you know, I remember I'd been on the grill I'd been grilling for like 45 minutes straight and Cade just came over and handed me a drink and

was like, "go mingle. I got this." Because he could just see that I was just burned out from being in front of the grill for so long and not socializing. He was like "no, I got this. I am done socializing you need to socialize. This is the perfect trade off." And I remember I remember looking up just seeing Brenna smile at that little exchange.

That was I think I really felt the cohesiveness of this group and felt like we were more than just the sum of our parts. We were more than just independent relationships. We were more than just the metamour connections we were a polycule. My only regret is that Matthew and Jen were not there for that.

Like, I look back on this now and I'm like, how much of that day that whole party just feels like a bit of a fever dream. And, you know, it was because this was, this was, you know, the end of June of 2021. So this was we were only just starting to reemerge from the pandemic.

Lindsay: Yeah, first time, we all left our houses in a year, right?

Kacey: Yeah, exactly. It was just Yeah, it was it was so surreal to be like, I am standing on my back porch drinking a beer with a dozen people that I have not seen or been around for over a year. Yeah. It's like before times [laughs].

Analysis of Kacey's Interview

My interview with Kacey took place on September 2, 2022 via Zoom. They were relaxed as indicated by casual conversation before the interview formally started. Kacey's rate of speech was energetic but not hurried. They seemed happy to do the interview and talk about their polyamory journey as indicated by conversational asides such as "you know?" and "right?"

One of the first things I noted was the amount of text in the overall appearance of Kacey's interview transcript. Remembering details and taking the time to describe Brenna's

leggings when they ran into each other on a Saturday night reveals the vividness and importance of this memory for Kacey.

Kacey's account of their time in the polycule also provided a personal account of some of the group norms mentioned in the Tree of Life activity a few months before the interviews. Kacey's story of how Zara encouraged him to talk to Brenna is an everyday manifestation of the compersion norm mentioned by the group. Had Kacey and Zara been monogamous or less prone to feeling compersion, Kacey likely would not have asked Zara if she would mind if he flirted with Brenna. Kacey was unsurprised by Zara's encouragement to flirt with another person based on his description of her enthusiasm encouraging Kacey to "yes, go date somebody, please!"

The story of *Kacey's mountain rescue service* also revealed a sense of interdependence within the group. Jen and Matthew felt they could reach out to the group for help even when providing help would come at a considerable cost in terms of time and distance traveled. Kacey, the person who paid the cost, remarked with pride "I get to tell the stories about how I rescued my friends off the Continental Divide Trail."

Further evidence of interdependence was given when Kacey shared openly about his depression and its effect on him and others in the group. There seemed to be an acceptance of caring pushback in the group as indicated by Kacey's mention of Cade asking him "are you looking internally?" and group members asking (anecdotally) "is your shit together? If not, can we help get it together?" This also indicated a level of trust and psychological safety within the group. It is acceptable to check a member's negative effect on the group by asking and helping that member improve, thereby limiting the negative impact on the group and the individual.

Kacey described a shift from an individualistic to a collectivistic approach to dealing with depression when they said "I realized 'you don't have to do this alone. You've got this entire

group of people who want to help...” McCormack calls for transcript analysis to look for times “people use [story] to construct and reconstruct their identities” (McCormack, 200a, p. 287).

Kacey underscored the importance of this shift when they reiterated their newly-found understanding that “you've got this group of people that's very interested in your well-being. You don't have to do this alone. You can use them you can rely on these people.” Furthermore, this realization solidified a feeling of “belonging” in this group of people. This story illustrated Kacey’s reconstruction of self and identity as a result of the polycule.

The interdependence and collectivistic nature of the group was underscored yet again with Kacey’s final story, *More than the sum of our parts*. Kacey reveals multiple times that they felt that the polycule was a “family” and “an amazing collection of people who have come together in love and solidarity.” Kacey offered evidence of this by describing a moment during a backyard BBQ when Cade offered to take over the grilling. Seeing the exchange, Brenna smiled, presumably at seeing the friendship and interdependence between two of her partners.

Brenna: Orientation

Brenna was 36 at the time of the interview. She worked as a Software Quality Assurance Engineer. Brenna identified as white/Caucasian, used she/her pronouns, and was a cisgender woman. Her sexual identity was queer and her relationship orientation was polyamorous. Her romantic orientation was panromantic. Brenna had two children. When asked about her relationship philosophy, she responded “it is so important to recognize where your expectations are coming from and communicating openly, create and maintain what you want your connections to look like and grow together.” When asked about something important not covered by the demographic survey, she shared the following:

I have been part of a communal living polycule that did not last or grow nearly this tightly. I believe it takes individuals that each dedicate themselves towards this level of connection and support, I feel so lucky to have found the lovelies that I have.

Personal Experience Narrative

Item 1: The story of your involvement in your polycule

Title: It all started with the first lovelies chat

Brenna: So I'm trying to remember when it must have been in like 2017 or so that I created a group chat between Matthew and Cade and Abby and I. Now my relationship with Abby is back from 2003 in various different forms that it's taken. Cade is 2016, maybe 2017. Matthew is 2016. Yeah. So these were all established relationships that I had been in and everyone kind of knew each other. And we had done some things together but I think the group chat has been like a core part of our polycule, having a place where we all kind of chat together and then you know, as that progressed into like adding more people into the group chat, like, that almost became like "okay, you are part of the polycule now you are part of our chats whether it's our happy fun chats or our 'OH MY GOD everything's on fire' chat or 'I just need general help' chats." So I think in my mind really like the polycule started as a group individually on it's like, not individually, but like on its own thing. I'm back with the first Lovelies chat. And I think it was really when we, when we moved into, like quarantine was really when, as a group, we got a lot closer. Like it wasn't just a chat at that point, it was a place to support each other on an active level when we were all so separated. I think I wandered away from the question....

Lindsay: No, that's okay.

Brenna: So when I started seeing Kacey they kind of got folded into the chat. And then...I think, I think Jen actually just may have come around a little bit before Kacey. So it was

just kind of like adding like metamours into it until it became like a “no, you know, you're not, you're not just the partner of my partner, you are a person that is close and dear and important to me.” And I think we got really lucky and that the group of us just prioritize that sort of support with each other. It's very important for us to have that closeness and people that we can lean on and have fun with. Trying to think what else I can add there.

I'm trying to sort of contextualize, because in some sense, so much of it started with you saying, “Hey, we're going to, you know, have this chat,” adding people so, yeah, maybe if you just sort of continue on from like, you know, when the pandemic happened, the group got closer and more cohesive. And then sort of how things have evolved since then.

Yeah, I think it wasn't wasn't just the chat alone. We did a video chat, video call on Saturday nights, most Saturday nights, whoever was around would get together and we'd all just hang out and do a little socially distanced gathering with each other. That kind of ended up being almost like a support group. Yes, we were chatting and having fun with each other. But it was also talking about the things that were on our minds and what we were struggling with. And what we were working through or proud of. And you get close to people when you're sharing that sort of information on a regular basis. And then these are all people that there is a basic trust level, because I trust my partners, and I trust the people that my partners trust. So there's none of that like breaking in of new people. This a person that I can really open up to and someone that belongs with us, because you know if my partner has, has been with this person enough to decide that they want to bring them into the fold, I trust that this is going to be a person to have in the fold. And I think that really like that escalates the closeness really quickly, not having to feel out and vet people as to whether or not they're going to be a good fit. So we were doing the video calls on Saturdays, and that was really, really lovely. And I think, something we've talked about

trying to set up on a semi-regular basis since we started doing outside social things [since the pandemic restrictions lifted]. But we haven't set that up yet. I miss the connection of everyone sitting together. I don't miss being forced apart from everyone, that's not fun at all [laughter]. Um, but I think that we do need to have some designated time where we can all get together because as life has started back up for everyone, we've kind of all gotten a little bit busy and we're doing things and we're not seeing each other all together quite as much as we were before. So that transition from pandemic into whatever it is we're in right now is, I think, kind of a bummer. In that we don't have the sit down, intentional conversations with everyone on a regular basis anymore.

But also pretty great because we can actually like, it's not as often, but we can physically get together and we can do brunches, or we can go out and see someone's show or just hang out at Kit's house. And that's, that is really, really nice.

I think that there was a little bit of pain in the transition from digital space to physical space. Because there's all these people that we all love so much, and we're all very cuddly and we're all very touching, we all want to be close together. And we all had to figure out where those lines were for comfort for everyone again, and there's been a couple of times where we've had to get together and have conversations like "hey, those lines" so that would that would be like the kind of the, the main things from transitioning from being like a polycule during socially distanced time to, to these times now where everybody is going off and doing a bunch of different things and and scheduling is challenging. Yeah, yeah. So we still get together, especially like in smaller groups on Tuesday nights, we have Kacey and Zara and Cade, come over and then on Saturday nights we'll go out. Sometimes for some of the other people as well.

So there's, there's regular smaller gatherings that come together. And that's a lot of fun to be to do that again.

Item 2: Low Point

Title: Opening up 2.0

Brenna: Yeah. I was thinking about this one a little bit before and trying to figure out what would define as a low point for the polycule because I think we're all trying to be as committed as possible to being drama free. We try to own our shit and there are definitely a lot of situations where things could have gotten really rough if that wasn't the case. As I said, like kind of the transition back from being in, in the distanced space to being in the physical space that was that was challenging for me I think for a number of reasons. So I live with Kacey and I had been living with Kacey for only about six months, maybe eight months, before the pandemic hit and we got locked down. And we both work from home, we both work in the same office. And, and I have kids too, so Kacey was kind of new to the whole parenting thing as well. And you know, on that, always trying to find the half glass or the glass half full crash course in figuring all of that out. But it was also ended up putting us in a living situation that looked an awful lot like you know, man and woman who share a family.

Lindsay: Nuclear family.

Brenna: Yeah. Um, and because Kace is immunocompromised, we were on a much higher risk level. So we were very, very shut down. And for longer than most people were. And I think that it started to feel like it was almost opening back up to polyamory when we moved out of pandemic times, when I started seeing my partners again, when we started having the social gatherings with all these people that I want to cuddle and hug and, you know, all those things.

It was like opening up 2.0 where you gotta go through all of the same stuff. Figuring out where the insecurities are, figuring out where the worries are coming from, making sure that you're doing the communication, and almost even like taking it very, very slow again from the start. That was necessary. But it was not easy for me at all. I came out of a 10-year marriage that was pretty controlling of my behavior. So I get fiercely independent sometimes and fiercely independent and taking it slow and cautiously, sometimes those things can be a little bit butting heads with each other. So I think like that first six-month period of where we were like starting to see people again, starting to have dates again, starting to engage in physical relationships with other partners because that had been off the table for over a year. It was a little bit tense. But I'm very grateful that through it all we had the resources to have the conversations and to talk through it. So my difficult point in the polycule was trying to figure out how to balance my relationships within the polycule.

Item 3: High Point

Title: A Swarm of Support

Brenna: So there are some wonderful points that I think felt wonderful in the group's response. A couple of occasions where like, for one reason or another, things just go to shit for someone in the polycule and they need everyone to come together to help.

Like when Zoey had to move out of her place a couple of years ago with very little notice. And the swarming that happens. And that swarm is such a beautiful thing to see, as much as it sucks that this person is going through something difficult, seeing everyone come together and resources just pulled in. Everyone just sort of says "No, no, I'm here. I've got you." And there's been a couple of times where, you know, everybody has come together to help me with

emotional distress as I've been going through court proceedings with my ex-husband, or you know, whatever reason that I'm having emotional distress.

There's, there's a couple of days and I don't even remember the reason now. But just from like, 10 o'clock in the morning, like something big awful happens. And I'm just in a rut for the rest of the day. But just slowly, one-by-one, people stop by my house and just give me a hug and then they go on with their day. And it's such a small thing to just have just that stop-by hug that says "I got you. I'm here for you." And there's always this little thing in my head that lights up when all of my partners make it by for a hug in one day, and like "Yay!" They've done it a couple of times for my birthday as well.

The commitment that it takes to just be like "if you are one of these close people, if you say go, we go! And there's no question asked about it." I think as far as lovely, wonderful times that are not based on somebody else going through a rough time.

Item 4: Turning Point

Title: We're just full of love for each other

Brenna: So back in April, we managed to get almost everybody up at the hot springs. And there was one point where we were working on meals. And everybody was everybody that had made it on the trip was there and just joking and laughing and conversing with each other and moving around and it was such a wonderful and lovely feeling to just be surrounded by these people that were full of love for each other. And yeah, I'm not sure I have an end to that sentence. We're just full of love for each other and I really enjoy anytime that we get to experience that and be together and just take care of each other with love and kindness.

Analysis of Brenna's Interview

Another participant had shared with me that Brenna was experiencing some anxiety about the interview so I prepared a little differently going into it. We spoke person-to-person before moving to an interviewer/researcher-to-participant tone. I expressed that whether she did the interview and what the content did or didn't reveal was entirely in her control. Despite her anxiety, she expressed a desire to go ahead with the interview.

The text of the interview has a somewhat different appearance than other interviews because I interjected more and spoke at more length in an effort to alleviate any anxiety. My aim was also to provide a more conversational tone in the hopes of setting her at ease. Her speech rate was measured, giving me room to add or interject more than I did in other interviews.

Brenna was able to date the timing of starting to date her partners and include them in her life. Her interview underscores the integral role that the group chat and pandemic played in the social context of the polycole. Brenna explained that it became more than a group chat during the pandemic when she says it became "a place to support each other on an active level when we were all so separated." Rather than individuals who know each other through a network of interaction, the group had a "closeness" and was comprised of "people that we can lean on and have fun with."

Brenna also described navigating her individuality within her household dynamic. Having left a controlling marital relationship, her desire to exert independence was at odds with household and relational considerations due to the pandemic-induced need to limit social interaction. Her sense of self as someone who was "fiercely independent" clashed with meeting the needs of those close to her.

This mirrors Kumashiro and colleagues' (2008) Personal-Relational Equilibrium model in which people who experience disequilibrium between gratifying personal needs and meeting relational needs will try to achieve personal and relational equilibrium. They also found that achieving equilibrium promotes life satisfaction. For Brenna, this represented a low point in her time with the polycule, perhaps because she did not have a sense of equilibrium in balancing needs. She expresses difficulty in meeting her need to see other partners as pandemic restrictions lifted and still maintaining safety for herself and her nesting partner who is immunocompromised. Brenna alluded to communication as the tool that helped navigate this challenge when she said she was “grateful that through it all we had the resources to have the conversations and to talk through it.”

McCormack (2000a) asserts that it can also be helpful to examine metaphors and imagery used by participants. The term “swarm” is typically used in reference to insects and therefore carries a negative connotation. In the case of this interview, it is used with positive intention to describe the group's collective effort to help a particular member of the polycule who was in need at the time. Brenna stated “that swarm is such a beautiful thing to see” to describe the pleasure she felt at seeing members of her community come together in support of each other. Common understandings are another facet McCormack (2000a) suggests the researcher examine. When Brenna referenced coming out of pandemic-induced social isolation, she used the term “opening up 2.0.” Within the nonmonogamous community, “opening up” is understood as the phase when an established relationship transitions from monogamous to openness of some kind (swinging, polyamory, etc.) (Taormino, 2008). Brenna used the term assuming that as a researcher of polyamory and as someone who had self-disclosed earlier in the study that I am polyamorous, I would understand the term. She did go on to describe what this meant in her

particular situation when she added “you gotta go through all of the same stuff. Figuring out where the insecurities are, figuring out where the worries are coming from, making sure that you're doing the communication, and almost even like taking it very, very slow again from the start.”

McCormack (2000a) also calls for the researcher to pay attention to what is not said. At the time I conducted this interview, I had already spoken to Abby. As Brenna described some of the conversations around boundaries within the group, I recalled Abby’s story of having to be the “polycule HR lady” and address boundary issues. Brenna may be referring to a different or additional incident but at the time of the interview, my mind could not help but connect the two stories. Brenna spoke in general terms to avoid revealing who may have made a misstep, triggering the need for one of the “boundary conversations” she referenced. I assumed this is to avoid transgressing another potential boundary about spreading negative information about group members, especially when the issue seems to have been resolved to the group’s satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Summary of results

Results of this study include participant accounts of the polycule's collective strengths and challenges and a genogram depicting the relationships and individuals in the polycule. Results also include nine loosely structured interview transcripts as well as researcher analysis of salient themes. Interpretation, implications, validity, limitations, and conclusions are below.

Interpretation

Amongst the nine interviews, there are several shared stories. One example is the group's time at the hot springs as this time was mentioned by Matthew, Jamie, Zara, and Brenna. This provides strong evidence that this shared experience was a high point for many in the group though it does not reach the level of data saturation, in which no new salient data emerged when another person mentioned the story (Given, 2008). Other shared stories include the effects of the pandemic, which served as a stressful event but also seems to have effectively helped the group become closer and more cohesive during the Saturday night Zoom calls.

A Sense of Community

Perhaps the single most significant thing to emerge from the data is a "sense of community." Five members of the polycule (Jen, Matthew, Zara, Kit, and Cade) used the term "community" or "sense of community" in the course of the interview. Matthew names a "sense of community" as a high point. Zara shared that the "Saturday night polycule calls were really instrumental for all of us feeling that sort of human connection and community" during the pandemic. Even those who did not mention it by name seemed to feel and describe a sense of community as outlined below.

In 1986, McMillan and Chavis set out to define the term “sense of community.” Building on a decade of research at Vanderbilt’s Peabody College in the Center for Community Studies, they codified a definition that could be applied to both physically bound communities and to relational communities. Their definition had four parts:

The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. In the following section, I will elaborate on these elements and use examples from the interview to highlight the beneficial sense of community the group possesses.

Membership

McMillan and Chavis (1986) assert that having membership implies boundaries to differentiate those who belong and those who do not. They also point to research that finds that the boundaries provide members with the emotional safety needed for group intimacy to develop. One example of this is Jamie’s story *Revoked and reissued invitation* in which she was invited, uninvited, and then reinvited to the chat group. When she reported that “it was more that some people just really didn’t know who I was at all” it was evident that group members wanted boundaries between themselves and those unknown to the group.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) also noted that a *common symbol system* helped create and maintain a sense of community and to create a sense of difference between members and

nonmembers. In this sense, we can see two levels of a *common symbol system*. The first is in shared language and terms such as *metamour* (and its' abbreviated term *meta*), *relationship anarchy*, *opening up 2.0*, and *kitchen table* are all terms used by the group in such a way as to imply shared understanding. This implies a broader sense of community amongst polyamorists or even a wider grouping of nonmonogamists. This is beyond the bounds of this study. However, there is one shared term that defined membership to this polycule in particular and that is *the lovelies*. This was the term Brenna originally used for the original chat group of her partners and it was slowly expanded to be metamours and those in the larger polycule. Brenna, Kacey, and Kit all spontaneously used the term during their interview.

Influence

Influence is a bidirectional idea of how the group influences the individual and how the individual influences the group. In terms of the group's influence over individual behavior, there must be some pressure to conform to create and maintain group cohesiveness. That pressure to conform must be balanced by respect for and appreciation of individual differences. One example of how group members think of this is when Kit said "We are quite different people but we're all brought together by the shared sense of love and community that we all have for and with each other."

Matthew's turning point *How I want to live my relationships* illustrates how he was able to "get to see an established couple Kit and Zara, dating a third person, both as individuals and as a unit." Not only did he respect and appreciate their individual differences and relational practices, but he took it one step further and learned from them. It is evident that this has influenced him when he shared that the polycule "has helped clarify my own perspective of how I view my relationships and how I want to live my relationships."

In particular, Kit named the value of individual differences when he told me about how to group functions:

the fact that some of us are really good at logistics, and some of us are very good cooks, and I'm more security minded. And then we have so many people who were interested and proficient in medical stuff. And then if anything comes up in our individual lives, we can kind of bring that to the chat, to the polycule, and everybody kind of like showers that person with love, and answers and help with whatever the question or problem is.

It appears that the group draws on individual differences to strengthen group cohesiveness and support.

Integration and fulfillment of needs

“For any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its’ members” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 12). When asked about a high point Zara stated “that one's much harder [than a low point] to narrow down because it's consistently awesome.” And Kacey readily reported that “there's definitely been a couple of those” when asked the same question.

Abby’s story of needing to stop “playing roulette between funny cat pic or downfall of society” in the group chat and the subsequent splintering of chat threads with various themes or guidelines illustrated a group member’s stating of one’s needs and the groups ready and willing response to those needs.

Perhaps Cade summed it up best when he said “I don't know if I could quantify just one [high point] because we are pretty regularly able to able to celebrate successes that happened through the support and or effort of the group.” The “support” and “effort” he speaks of refer to the efforts of the group to meet each other’s needs in times of stress or need.

Shared emotional connection

Cade's words about being about to "celebrate success" supports the idea that "the more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond" (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 13). McMillan and Chavis also point to research that found that there is immense bonding among people who experience a crisis together. Kacey's words beautifully illustrate this within the group when he says there was "trauma bonding during the pandemic because we were all so separated but we had each other to rely on and that, that mattered a lot." Similarly, Matthew told me that "to stave off the pandemic depression madness, we started a regular zoom chat on Saturday evenings."

Zara's account of the group included the statement "it wasn't just screaming in the void, it's all of us holding hands and screaming into the void together. So it was really nice." She ended the account with laughter. It is notable that she can speak of "screaming into the void" with laughter because of the shared sense of emotional connection that made the "screaming" a "nice" experience.

Magical marvels of community

When talking about the hot springs trip that many of them went on, Zara told me that "there were some really nice, very sweet, magical moments of compassion and communication and sitting in silence near each other just enjoying being near my friends and my loved ones and their loved ones." Cade casually mentioned that "we seem to live in a community that produces marvels." Abby characterized her time in the polycule as "really beautiful" because she was "able to come into the polycule and be exactly who [she was]." When Brenna named her high point a *Swarm of support* she added that the "swarm is such a beautiful thing to see." Zara characterized her time with the group at the hot springs as "incredibly sweet and wholesome and

amazing.” When speaking of the challenges of the pandemic and having to socialize virtually, she commented that “even though it was on Zoom it was really lovely.”

McCormack (2000a) stated that what “helps the researcher see how the storyteller speaks about himself or herself, about the relationships in his or her life, and about the environments in which his or her life has been or is being lived” (p. 287). The group’s usage of words such as “magical,” “beautiful,” “amazing,” “lovely,” and “marvel” revealed that they treasure the sense of belonging and the group itself. Participants’ feelings about the polycule and their place within it were revealed in their adoption of the self-styled moniker *The Lovelies* and descriptions of the “magical” “marvels” of their community.

Limitations

Though this study may contribute much to our understanding of the lived experience of being in a polycule, there were several limitations. The small sample size precludes generalizability to the polyamorous population at large. With one Hispanic and one Jewish participant, the sample did not represent a racially diverse makeup. Self-identification as a polycule does not allow for external validation of the group’s status as a polycule. Coherence of the narrative is a challenge in this study. The interrelations among polycule members are very complex and can be difficult to follow, both for the researcher and the reader. This study also cannot speak to the lived experience of those who were polyamorous or in a polycule at one time but chose to leave the relationships style. Another limitation of NI is that the data is subjective and impossible to assess in an objective way. Participants’ stories, researcher interpretation, and participant reinterpretation are all subject to selectivity, perception, and bias.

Other methodologies were considered for this study. Phenomenology was considered but the researcher preferred NI’s emphasis on stories in the hope that non-researchers and lay-

persons might one day read and benefit from this research. Grounded theory was also considered. However, this study does not seek to uncover patterns but rather to explore polyamory without the constraint of seeking such patterns. Lived experience is understood in narrative terms so it is fitting to explore lived experience with NI (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Regarding limitations of a narrative inquiry, some researchers and their guides concentrate on validity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Wells, 2011). Descriptive and interpretive validity are of concern with any NI. Although care was taken with the participant's narratives, this is an inherent challenge with NI. Descriptive validity was attended to by recording interviews and using transcripts. My interpretation and analysis were conducted with a constant eye toward the work of other scholars, namely McCormack (2000a, 2000b, 2004).

Emic validity was attended to ensure that I accurately understood the research participants' stories and experiences and successfully portrayed them in the research report. Both emic and descriptive validity were attended to as I asked participants to take part in reviewing the Personal Experience Narratives. As stated in Given (2008) the validity of an emic construct is based on the community member's views, not on the external social scientist's views. Allowing the participants to cocompose the data ensured that these emic perceptions are shared views of cultural knowledge from the insider's perspective.

Wells (2011) developed the following questions to guide evaluation of the validity of narrative studies. Each question is followed by the researcher's answer.

What were the conditions under which the narrative was produced, and what are the consequences of these conditions for interpretation of the narrative's meaning? The conditions under which the narrative was produced are described in depth above. The consequences of these conditions include that the participants described their stories to a researcher who is an outsider

to the polycule and may therefore be subject to misinterpretation. This concern was spoken to by allowing the participants to coauthor their narratives and comment on the analysis if they saw fit.

Has the full text subjected to analysis been included in the study report, or is it available to other scholars? Yes, the full text is available in this document, thereby allowing other scholars or laypersons to conduct their own interpretation and analysis.

Have the analytic categories used in the analysis been specified, and is their relationship to the text (its structure and or content) clear? Why do aspects of the text that do not support the major claims not undermine them? The analytic categories and questions asked are available in Appendix H. Aspects of the text that do not support the major claims were not identified.

Has the broad context in which the text was produced been discussed and its relevance for its interpretation examined? The context of practicing polyamory in a mononormative culture was discussed in the literature review. Only very broad contextual information regarding the participants was discussed to help maintain anonymity. The researcher's positionality was included in this work. This work also alludes to the context of this project's place in the researcher's academic journey. The appropriateness of the methodology was ensured by three qualified thesis committee members and a methodology defense on September 13, 2021.

One strategy for enhancing a narrative inquiry's reliability is transparency of method (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). It is hoped that by providing all the research materials (Tree of Life handouts, interview protocol, etc) the reliability of this study is enhanced. According to Merriam & Grenier (2019), reliability has to do with instrumentation of the study and since the researcher is a major instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, the researcher can become more reliable over time. So, the researcher's lack of experience may be considered a limitation in this study.

Saturation is another measure of the quality of qualitative research (Mayan, 2009). Saturation is influenced by the amount of useful information acquired from the participants as well as the number of interviews with each participant (Mayan, 2009). While some occurrences were mentioned by multiple participants, new information about those occurrences still emerged with new accounts. This study only included two contact points with each participant, and in the case of Kat, only one. Though the data gathered in the interviews allowed the participants to convey thick stories (such as details about the leggings Brenna was wearing when Kacey saw her out dancing), this data surely falls short in conveying the complexity of nine participant's intertwined lives.

Implications

This study contributes to our much-needed understanding of modern relational practices. It has cultural, clinical, theoretical, and research implications.

The findings herein may contribute to a cultural shift towards the destigmatization of polyamory and ethical nonmonogamy in general by providing first-person accounts. Contact theory, the belief that contact between two groups can encourage tolerance (Vezzali & Stathi, 2017) provides a basis from which to argue that additional familiarity with polyamorous people and polycules may aid in increasing tolerance of this stigmatized identity (Brewster et al., 2017).

There are also clinical implications for those who teach in the behavioral health fields or are currently practicing counselors, therapists, and social workers. This polycule fits the definition of a system which suggests that those who work with polyamorous individuals may find value in conceptualizing cases using systemic treatment modalities such as structural therapy, Bowenian family therapy, systemic family therapy, emotionally focused therapy, or similar modalities.

This study may also contribute to clinicians' and instructor's understandings of polyamory and polycules. I found no studies examining polycules and clinicians who may be treating an individual or multiple members of a polycule may be at a loss in trying to understand their client's relational dynamics.

Another contribution of this study is an additional application of *storying stories*, McCormack's (2004) feminist methodology of viewing an individual's reported lived experience through multiple lenses. McCormack draws from many influential narrative scholars (Polkinghorn, Laboz, Connelly and Clandinin, and others) while also paying attention to power structures and foregrounding the participant's views (Ford, 2021). This research may be useful to future scholars who wish to follow in McCormack's footsteps.

This is also a new application of the term *sense of community*. McMillan and Chavis (1986) used the term to refer to those geographically or relationally close. While this group is geographically close, it is clear that what binds them to each other is relational and a shared sense of responsibility for the group and individual well-being. While the term *sense of community* may have been used casually, this is the first research to show empirical evidence that a polycule is a representation of McMillan and Chavis' empirical definition of the term.

As a contribution to research on CNM, as evidenced by the literature review herein, this is one of few qualitative studies. While quantitative studies are vital in increasing our understanding of many aspects of polyamory and CNM, qualitative studies increase our understanding of people's lived experiences (Moors et al., 2019).

There are also few studies examining the views of multiple members of one relational system or polycule. This study is the first to examine the experience of so many individuals in

the same polycule. If polyamory continues to rise as research suggests it will (Rubel & Burleigh, 2020), it is vital that research such as this is carried out and disseminated.

Future Directions

In November of 2022, I applied to the PhD in Counselling Studies at the University of Edinburgh. My research proposal was to continue this study, making it a longitudinal narrative inquiry. The faculty was supportive of the idea and my application to the program was accepted. As referenced near the end of Cade's interview, the polycule was aware of my goal to extend this study and is supportive of the idea. The flexibility of qualitative approaches and emergent methodology design will allow for evolution in data collection (Bruce, et al., 2016) so this project will likely grow and change as the data necessitates.

Future research and analysis will also have an eye towards generating data and analysis regarding the challenges of polyamory. Additionally, future data collection and analysis will aim to help therapists better understand how to work with part of or a whole polycule. This may help counselors and therapists better understand the issues faced by people who are polyamorous and better serve this marginalized community.

Though the individual Tree of Life drawings and narratives were not included in this paper, the researcher intends to publish an article with this information, thereby adding to our knowledge of this data collection method as well as the polycule and its' individuals.

I believe that it is important to not only take data from the nonmonogamous community, but to give back. Opportunities to disseminate this information beyond academia may also be sought by the researcher.

EPILOGUE: SELF OF THE RESEARCHER

In June of 2020 I had an inkling that I wanted to do a thesis so I took Research Methods in the summer prior to starting in the Couple and Family Therapy program. I knew I wanted to gather and tell the stories of people who practice polyamory but wasn't sure how to go about it. Then I learned about Narrative Inquiry in class and my final assignment for the class eventually turned into this project. I saw my passion for how stories can change the world reflected in the writings of Clandinin, Connelly, Wells, and McCormack. It was a wonderful fit for an undergraduate English literature major, a master's student who loved the study of communication and the effects of popular media consumption and someone who had seen the power storytelling holds as an adult. I wondered where this had been all my life. In many respects this methodology was only in its infancy or adolescence during my first thesis at the University of Oklahoma in 2006.

This passion project carried me through the dark days of the pandemic. Much like the polycule had "a year's worth of Saturdays to get to know each other" I had a year's worth of no social obligations to fill with academic inquiry. Even when the pandemic receded, my love for the project carried me through the forfeiture of fully resuming my social life. Instead, my time was time spent in my home office, correcting transcriptions or experiencing feelings of overwhelm as I tried to figure out what to do with all the data I had collected. In March of 2022, I was awarded a small grant from a newly minted Polyamory Foundation. This and other encouragement kept me going even when I felt the full weight of the enormous project I had concocted.

In my journal entry after the Tree of Life activity, I recalled the ethnography I did in 2004, learning what a "participant observer" was.

I was a participant observer in that I sometimes joined in the conversation. I felt like if I was asking them to bring their authentic selves I should do the same if my aim was to be an egalitarian researcher. I'm glad to be in a discipline where I get to bring my authentic self, whether that's a researcher or therapist. -May 18, 2022

Woke up today feeling both that I can't wait to get started and also oh my god, where do I start with all of this? -May 19, 2022

In the midst of my overwhelm, it was sometimes the participant's words that reminded me why I was doing this work. I would recall the moment during the Tree of Life activity when Kacey told the group "I was once told by a therapist that I needed to quit seeing so many people and pick one person in my life to devote my life to them and God." I was doing this research to provide empirical evidence to support the argument that monogamy is not the only way.

A few months later, I wrote

I'm exhilarated, overwhelmed, excited, and scared of how much data I have and how to craft it into a form other people will actually read and enjoy and learn from. -August 15, 2022

I am still wrestling with this conundrum today. The good news is that I have another three years to puzzle these questions and continue to tell these stories. And so I'll leave you with an excerpt of my Personal Statement that was submitted as part of my application to my soon-to-be PhD program.

"Do you have any books on polyamory?" I asked the clerk at Glasgow's Calton Books. Supporting local bookshops is always a priority in my travels, so I sought out this little gem in 2019. The clerk pointed me in the right direction. I purchased Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities by Mimi Schippers. This book helped me understand the systemic benefits of being more "out" about being polyamorous. I realized that hiding my

identity was contributing to the marginalization of polyamorous people, many of whom have intersectional identities within the LGBTQ+ and racial spectrum.

Months later, I returned home and applied to a master's program to become a therapist. My mission had grown beyond being "out" as polyamorous. I was determined to use my love of research and positive stories of nonmonogamy to help reduce stigma against nonmonogamists by showing that monogamy is not the only healthy way.

In my current MA program, I have dedicated myself to research that expands our knowledge of relationship diversity. I have also benefitted from a very supportive faculty and academic environment. My master's thesis, a narrative inquiry of a polycule (network of polyamorous individuals) was created to decenter monogamy and two-person romantic relationships. My research has revealed the ways in which non-monogamous adults navigate their relationships and lives.

Though I have been thrilled to apply my talents to this endeavor, I approach it with humility. I want my ideas to continue to be challenged and expanded. I look forward to my next steps as a researcher and doctoral student. Perhaps it can lead to a new collection of thoughts and ideas, one that can be stocked on an independent bookstore's shelves and picked up by a curious traveler in the future.

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APPENDIX A

Flyer and/or social media post to recruit participants

Flyer title: Volunteers needed for research study on polycules

Name of the study: “How do you do Poly?” A Narrative Inquiry of a Polycule

Principle investigator/researcher: Lindsay Hayes

Direct questions to: Lindsay.Hayes@ucdenver.edu

Purpose of the study: The goal of this study is to tell a story of what it is like to be in a polycule.

This study seeks to provide an in-depth look at the complexities, nuances, and issues faced by polyamorous groups and individuals.

Participant characteristics: Participating members of the polycule must be at least 18 years of age and able to consent to participating in the study. Ideally, the selected polycule will have 5-8 members (including metamours), be racially and/or ethnically diverse, and in the greater Denver area.

Participation involves:

- One 4-hour session with the 5-8 designated members of the polycule;
- A single one-on-one interview with the researcher.
- Participants will be asked to review and comment on the researcher’s write up of the group activity and their individual interview.

Location of the research: The group activity and one-on-one interviews will be conducted at a quiet, private location such as meeting rooms available in local libraries. The location will mutually selected with participant convenience in mind.

Potential benefits: Participating in this study will involve a group activity shown to aid groups and families highlight strengths, resources, and values. Individual interviews will provide a

unique opportunity for reflection. The resulting research report will benefit other polyamorous individuals and polycules by providing other researchers, therapists, and social workers with valuable insight and information on the practice of polyamory.

APPENDIX B

Prescreening survey for prospective participants

This research seeks to inquire about what it is like to be part of a polycule. The polycule selected will have 5-8 members of various genders and racially diverse to increase minority representation in polyamory and research studies. All participants must be 18 or older. Please contact Lindsay.Hayes@ucdenver.edu with questions.

1. Are all members of the polycule able to give informed consent (18 or older, legally eligible to give consent)? yes no

2. Please describe the racial or ethnic makeup of your polycule. _____

3. For each member of the polycule, please list age, length of time in this polycule, and length of time as polyamorous.

a. Member 1: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

b. Member 2: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

c. Member 3: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

d. Member 4: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

e. Member 5: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

f. Member 6: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

g. Member 7: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

h. Member 8: age ____ # months in polycule _____ # months in polyamory _____

4. Please indicate how many members of the polycule are:

female

male

nonbinary

prefer not to disclose

other: _____

5. Would all members of the polycule be willing to participate in a Zoom call to meet the researcher to discuss questions you may have? yes no

6. Would all members of the polycule be willing to participate in an in-person, 4-hour group meeting? yes no

7. Would all members of the polycule be willing to participate in a one-on-one meeting with the researcher for an interview? yes no

8. Would all members of the polycule be willing to review notes and provide feedback (if any)? yes no

Note: Your participation in this survey and subsequent research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. If you and the researcher choose to move forward, the research will be described more fully (duration, confidentiality, right to withdraw, benefits, risks, etc.) in the Informed Consent form.

If multiple eligible polycules volunteer, your polycule may be asked to participate in a prescreening phone interview. Please ensure that you are in a quiet, private location for this conversation. Everything you say in this conversation will be confidential. You are welcome to ask questions prior to verbal consent to the conversation. Consent may be revoked at any time during the conversation. Participation in the prescreening phone call is voluntary and needed only if the polycule would like to be considered for this study.

APPENDIX C

Email for Screening Follow Up Call

Thank you for completing the prescreening survey for prospective participants. This polycule is invited to participate in a screening phone interview. Please ensure that you are in a quiet, private location for this conversation.

At the beginning of our phone call, I will ask if you consent to the prescreening conversation. Everything you say in this conversation will be confidential. You are welcome to ask questions prior to verbal consent to the conversation. Consent may be revoked at any time during the conversation. Participation in the prescreening phone call is voluntary.

Please list 3 times/dates when members of your polycule can participate in a 30-minute call.

APPENDIX D

Script for Screening Follow up Call

“Thank you for your interest in this study. Before you come in to learn more about the study, it would be helpful to see if you are likely to qualify to be in the study. In order to do this, I would like to ask you some eligibility questions, which will include questions about being polyamorous, your age and other demographic characteristics. It should take about 20 minutes to go through these questions. Some of the questions may make you uncomfortable; you do not have to answer any question that you would not like to answer, but without answers to these questions, you will not be eligible to participate in the study. I will not record your name or any other information that would identify you on the form I use to record your answers until I know you have qualified for the study; at that time, I will keep this information secure. If you do not enroll in this study, I will keep the information I collect during this pre-screening but there will be no way for anyone to link that information to you. I am also required to give you the number of COMIRB, the Ethics Board that oversees our research: it is (303) 724-1055, in case you have any questions or concerns for them.

Do you have any questions about the screening questions I will ask you?

Do I have your permission to begin the questions?”

Screening Items

Items one through eight will verify answers from the Prescreening Survey.

“Thank you for verifying that information. In this next section, I want to talk about the benefits of participation in this study. Potential benefits include a group activity shown to aid groups and families highlight strengths, resources, and values. Individual interviews will provide a unique opportunity for reflection. Our one-on-one interview may also provide you the opportunity to

give thoughtful reflection on your relationships and encourage increased self-awareness. The resulting research report will benefit other polyamorous individuals and polycules by providing other researchers, therapists, and social workers with valuable insight and information on the practice of polyamory. Potential risks are being identified as participants in this study. All information will be stored securely on Microsoft OneDrive using pseudonyms. Pseudonyms will be cross-listed with your names on the consent documents and nowhere else. Those documents will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. Other risks include not enjoying the group activity, not enjoying the one-on-one interview, and remembering and/or discussing upsetting episodes in your life during our one-on-one interview.

APPENDIX E

Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Lindsay Hayes

COMIRB No: 21-4615

Version Date: March 19, 2022

Study Title: A Narrative Inquiry of a Polycule

You are being asked to be in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. A member of the research team will describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to take part.

Why is this study being done?

This study plans to learn more about the lived experience of polyamorous individuals in a unit (polycule) as a group and as individuals.

You are being asked to be in this research study because research and scholarship is needed to help educators, therapists, social workers, and others understand the complexities of polyamorous relationships. Although the body of polyamorous research has grown in recent years, researchers have studied and guided mononormative relationships for decades. This leaves our collective understanding of non-monogamy and polyamorous practices well behind that of monogamous relationship practices

Five-to-eight people will participate in the study.

What happens if I join this study?

If you join the study, you will be asked to participate, as a group, in a narrative activity called the Tree of Life. This activity will last for 4 hours. During this activity, you will be asked to draw a

tree and tell your story to your polycule and the researcher using the tree as a metaphor and visual aid. In the weeks following this activity, you will be asked to complete one one-hour interview with the researcher. Each member of your polycule will be asked to do one interview. Following the interview, the researcher will craft an interpretive story and return the story to you for comment. Themes that emerge from the Tree of Life activity and photographs of your tree may be published in the researcher's thesis and in an academic journal. Your interpretive story may be published in the researcher's thesis and in an academic journal.

Participation will take no more than six total hours of participation. You will be asked to name a pseudonym at the beginning of the study to protect your identity.

What are the possible discomforts or risks?

Discomforts you may experience while in this study include remembering or talking about challenging times in your relationship. These emotional risks and any revelations concerning difficulties are at your discretion to reveal. You do not have to tell the researcher about difficulties you do not wish to discuss.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

There is no direct benefit to being in the study.

Will I be paid for being in the study? Will I have to pay for anything?

You will not be paid to be in the study. It will not cost you anything to be in the study.

Who is paying for this study?

This research is being paid for by a grant from the Polyamory Foundation.

Is my participation voluntary?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you refuse or decide to withdraw later, you will not lose any benefits or rights to which you are entitled.

What happens if I am injured or hurt during the study?

The University has no plan to pay for a physical or psychological injury. If you are injured or hurt during this study, you may call Lindsay Hayes at 405-641-1014.

Who do I call if I have questions?

The researcher carrying out this study is Lindsay Hayes. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call Lindsay Hayes at 405-641-1014

You may have questions about your rights as someone in this study. You can call Lindsay Hayes with questions. You can also call the Multiple Institutional Review Board (IRB). You can call them at 303-724-1055.

Who will see my research information?

We will do everything we can to keep your records a secret. It cannot be guaranteed.

Both the records that identify you and the consent form signed by you may be looked at by others.

- Federal agencies that monitor human subject research.
- Human Subject Research Committee.
- The individual doing the study.
- Regulatory officials from the institution where the research is being conducted who want to make sure the research is safe.

The data we collect will be used for this study but may also be important for future research. Your data may be used for future research or distributed to other researchers for future study without additional consent if information that identifies you is removed from the data.

The results from the research may be shared at a meeting. The results from the research may be in published articles. Your name will be kept private when information is presented. Some things we cannot keep private. If you give us any information about child abuse or neglect we have to report that to county officials. Also, if we get a court order to turn over your study records, we will have to do that.

Some things we cannot keep private: If you tell us you are going to physically hurt yourself or someone else, we have to report that to the police or another agency. Also, if we get a court order to turn over your study records, we will have to do that.

Any video or audio recordings and all photographs will be stored in the Principal Investigator's Microsoft OneDrive account. Microsoft OneDrive is encrypted and protected by dual-factor authentication.

Agreement to be in this study

I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I understand the possible risks and benefits of this study. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I will get a copy of this consent form.

Signature:

Date:

Print Name:

APPENDIX F

Participant Guide to the Tree of Life

Today you have the opportunity to tell your story as an individual and as a polycule. You will be able to use the art supplies in this room to draw a tree that helps you tell your story. Once you have drawn your tree, you will have a chance to tell your story to the group using the drawing as an aid.

Guidance for drawing your Tree of Life: The type of tree, colors you select, are entirely up to you. Please use the following as guidance to write meaningful words or smaller drawings on parts of your tree.

- Roots of your tree represent where you come from, your family history, origins, family name and ancestry
- Ground of your tree represents where you live, with whom you live with, what you like to do when you are at home, your favourite place or hang out at home, your favourite song or dance
- Trunk of your tree represents the things you are good at, talents, the things that people tell you, you are good at, for example, special skills like caring for others, helping around at home, encouraging others
- Leaves of your tree represent the most important people in your life. These could be people who have supported you, provided love and encouragement and have been supportive of you in different ways
- Branches of your tree represent your hopes, dreams, wishes and aspirations. This could be both about the near and distant future

- Fruits or flowers of your tree represent the gifts that you have been given by others which have been helpful in your life. These do not need to be just tangible or physical gifts but they could include gifts of kindness, care, support, life skills taught or passed down to you.

Next, let's put your trees together for a Forest of Life. The facilitator will discuss their observations and any themes or commonalities. Participants words of encouragement on each other's trees based on what they heard their group members express as skills, hopes, dreams and so on.

Last, we'll discuss the strengths in your Forest of Life. We'll discuss and identify your collective strengths to deal with life's challenges head on.

Adapted from Mlilo (2020) with permission.

APPENDIX G

Demographics Survey

Name:

Email:

Phone number:

Age:

Pronouns:

Occupation:

How do you identify your race/ethnicity?

- White/Caucasian
- Black
- Asian
- Hispanic
- Native American/Indian/Indigenous
- Multiracial
- Prefer to self-describe:
- Prefer not to say

Gender identity (at present)

- Cisgender Female
- Cisgender Male
- Non-binary / third gender
- Transgender man/ Trans masculine
- Transgender woman/ Trans feminine

- Gender Fluid
- Gender Queer
- Two-spirit
- Agender
- Prefer to self-describe
- Prefer not to say

Sexual Identity/Orientation (at present)

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Gray-Ace
- Demisexual
- Straight (heterosexual)
- Queer
- Questioning or unsure
- Prefer to self describe:
- Prefer not to say

Relationship Orientation (at present)

- Polyamorous
- Solopoly
- Relationship Anarchist

- Monogamous
- Prefer to self describe:
- Prefer not to say

Romantic Orientation

- Aromantic: individuals who do not experience romantic attraction toward individuals of any gender(s)
- Biromantic: romantic attraction toward males and females
- Panromantic: romantic attraction towards persons of every gender(s)
- Homoromantic: romantic attraction towards person(s) of the same gender
- Heteroromantic: romantic attraction toward person(s) of a different gender
- Gray-romantic: individuals who do not often experience romantic attraction
- Demiromantic: an individual who does not experience romantic attraction until after a close emotional bond has been formed
- Prefer to self describe:
- Prefer not to say

Do you have children? How many?

My philosophy on relationships is:

Something important about you that I haven't asked:

APPENDIX H

Storying Stories Transcript Analysis Process

Shared as part of the IRDL Speakers' Series presentation From Story to Research: Storying Human Experience Narratives given by Emily Ford, 2/4/2021.

The following is an outline of Coralie McCormack's storying stories process. I pulled content for this detailed chart from three of McCormack's articles.

- Coralie McCormack, "From Interview Transcript to Interpretive Story: Part 1 — Viewing the Transcript through Multiple Lenses," *Field Methods* 12, no. 4 (2000): 282–97.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X0001200403>

- Coralie McCormack, "From Interview Transcript to Interpretive Story: Part 2 — Developing an Interpretive Story," *Field Methods* 12, no. 4 (2000): 298–315.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X0001200403>

- Coralie McCormack, "Storying Stories: A Narrative Approach to in-Depth Interview Conversations," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 7, no. April (2004): 219–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570210166382>

Stage 1: Construct an Interpretive Story

1. Compose the story middle.

a. Active listening to transcripts.

i. Who are the characters?

ii. What are the main events? When do they occur?

iii. As a researcher how am I positioned in relation to the participant?

iv. As a researcher how am I positioned during the conversation?

v. How am I responding emotionally and intellectually to the participant?

b. Locate the narrative processes in the transcript.

i. Identify stories. Stories have discernable boundaries with a beginning and an end. In the story there is an abstract, an evaluation, and a series of events. The evaluation is the title of the story. It's how the person wants to be understood. It's why the story was told—the abstract (summarizes the point); the evaluation (why it was told, highlights the point); the orientation (who, what, where, when); the series of linked events/actions that are responses to the question, and then, what happened? and the coda (brings the story to a close).

ii. Identify text not part of any discernable story. These textual parts are theorizing (participant reflecting, what does it add to the story?), argumentation, augmentation (did the participant tell more about a previous story? What does it add and how could it be included in the story?), and description.

iii. Construct any stories that you find in the text that is not already identified as a story.

c. Return enriched and constructed stories to participant for comment and feedback.

i. Does what I have written make sense to you?

ii. How does this account compare with your experiences?

iii. Have any aspects of your experience been omitted? Please include these wherever you feel it is appropriate.

iv. Do you wish to remove any aspects of your experiences from this text?

v. Please feel free to make any other comments.

d. Form the first draft.

i. List the titles of constructed and enriched stories

- ii. Cull the list for titles that speak to the plot/research question.
- iii. Order the story titles temporally (they form an outline of the interpretive story middle).
- iv. Add story texts. The first draft is done.

e. Redraft the story middle.

i. View transcript through language.

(1) What is said—relation of self and society, common understandings, making space for thought, specialized vocabulary, self-image, and relationships.

(2) How it is said—active vs. passive voice, speech functions, personal pronouns, internal dialogue, metaphors, or imagery.

(3) What is unsaid—silence, tone, speed of delivery, inflections, volume, hesitations.

ii. View through context: situation.

(1) What can I learn from the participant's response to my opening and ending questions?

(2) What can I learn about our interactions from the appearance of the text?

(3) What can I learn about our interaction from what is not said?

iii. View through context: culture.

(1) What cultural fictions does each person draw on to construct her view of being a person?

(2) How have these ways of being positioned the individual? Where does she conform to and challenge them? Where does she rewrite them?

(3) Look for times and places where individual reconstructs sense of self through accommodation, challenge, or resistance.

iv. Reflect on these new findings.

v. Redraft the story middle to show new understandings. This may be different for each individual.

2. Completing the interpretive story.

a. Compose an orientation for the reader (what would they need to know?).

b. Choose a title.

c. Construct the ending.

i. What were we feeling at the end of the interview, and what foreshadows future conversations?

d. Return completed story to the participant for comment.

i. Does what I have written make sense to you?

ii. How does this account compare with your experiences?

iii. Have any aspects of your experience been omitted? Please include these wherever you feel it is appropriate.

iv. Do you wish to remove any aspects of your experiences from this text?

v. Please feel free to make any other comments.

e. Compose an epilogue. This is usually used for participants who have more than one interview.

Stage 2: Composing a Personal Experience Narrative from Multiple Interviews

1. Construct a personal experience narrative.

a. Temporally order the stories into one document.

b. Return to participant for comment.

i. Does what I have written make sense to you?

ii. How does this account compare with your experiences?

iii. Have any aspects of your experience been omitted? Please include these wherever you feel it is appropriate.

iv. Do you wish to remove any aspects of your experiences from this text?

v. Please feel free to make any other comments.

c. Respond to comments.

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