

DIS-ORIENTING POLYAMORY:
PRESERVING POLY'S TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

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Abstract

Drawing on the narratives of 21 people practicing polyamory in the city of Guelph, ON, this study explores how participants define and conceptualize polyamory, in general, and in relation to their self-concept. Drawing on grounded theory, autoethnography and narrative analysis, this study presents a range of definitions and subjective meanings of polyamory. This dissertation argues that people understand polyamory in a range of ways and that there is no single unified definition of polyamory nor a standard way of conceptualizing polyamory in relation to self-concept. The narratives demonstrate that the fluidity and diversity of definitions and conceptions of polyamory afford participants the opportunity to adapt polyamory to their individual situations. While some participants define polyamory in ways that reproduce sexual normalcy by claiming essentialist identities and privileging love, other participants define polyamory in ways that enable them to resist heteronormative and homonormative monogamy and transform their relationship dynamics. Some participants understand polyamory as interconnected with their queer, feminist, and anarchist politics. Participants who identify as asexual, or who have mental health challenges, conceptualize polyamory in ways that allow them to transform their relationships in non-normative ways. The narratives reveal that none of the participants constructs polyamory as a sexual orientation or as one distinct thing. Resisting the move to define polyamory as a sexual orientation, what I call *dis-orienting* polyamory, preserves the radical politics and transformative potentials that polyamory offers polyamorists.

Dedication

For my children, Seth and Luke, who encouraged me every step of the way.
You make life more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

For my parents, who always give me a voice.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Polyamory's Multiple Meanings

One of the first places I recall reading a definition of polyamory was from *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (Easton & Liszt, 1997). In the second edition of this book, Easton and Hardy (2009) define polyamory in the following way:

“Polyamory” is a brave new word, coined by Morning Glory Ravenheart Zell around 1990 ... Formed from Latin and Greek roots that translate as “loving many,” this word has been adopted by many sluts to describe their lifestyles, often abbreviated as “poly,” as in “I am a poly person.” Some use it to mean multiple committed live-in relationships, forms of group marriage; others use it as an umbrella word to cover all forms of sex and love and domesticity outside conventional monogamy. (p. 8)

Pondering this definition only brought more questions to mind. For example, prior to the term *polyamory* being coined around 1990 (Zell-Ravenheart, 1990), did it exist under a different name, or have we created polyamory by naming it? Does a person have to be a “slut” to be polyamorous and if not, then how is “sluttiness” connected to polyamory? Is polyamory a practice, or an identity, or both, or neither? Is polyamory related to marriage, and if so, then how? Are polyamorous relationships about casual sexual encounters or about committed partnerships, or both? Is there a common idea of polyamory, or is it unique with each constellation of relationships? The current study begins to address questions relating to polyamorous definitions, conceptualizations and identities, and leaves many questions for the reader to contemplate.

As a researcher of polyamory, people I encounter expect that I can articulate a clear definition of polyamory. However, I find that my definition of polyamory has expanded and

changed over the years due to the many conversations that I have had with polyamorous people. The conversations that I have had about my research with colleagues, students, friends and acquaintances would typically begin with someone asking “what is polyamory?” I would answer that polyamory is “consensual non-monogamy practised among adult people.” The person usually then asks for clarification as to what I mean by consensual non-monogamy. I would typically answer: “when adults have multiple committed relationships with the consent of all of the individuals involved.” I would further explain that the non-monogamous aspect, while central to polyamory, is not the primary aspect that distinguishes it from other types of consensually non-monogamous relationships like open relationships, swinging, bondage, dominance, sadomasochism and masochism (BDSM), kink or attending sex-parties with a partner.

I currently understand polyamory to be a flexible and fluid way of navigating and negotiating intimate and sexual relationships that includes a wide range of non-monogamous relationship constellations where desires, attractions, and new relationship formations are all shared with the partners in the constellation (open and honest), should they choose. I see a connection between polyamory and personal freedom. An important goal of polyamory is to foster the individual freedom of all members in the polyamorous constellation through the agreement that all partners can openly exercise their choice to add partners, to remain, or choose to leave the polyamorous constellation altogether. For me, polyamory does not signal the expectation that a relationship structure is to be stable over time (recognizing that some people create closed polyamorous constellations). Rather, it is open to change; partners, boundaries and relationship structures can all change. For example, I think a couple can conceptualize their relationship as polyamorous despite only having two people in their constellation and appearing monogamous to the outside world, because the goal of the relationship is based on the agreement

that they are each free to signal a shift in the relationship structure, should they choose. Danni, one of the participants in the study, describes it this way: “I am polyamorous, and, the woman who I am with has only been in monogamous relationships. But she deeply knows I’m polyamorous, and she gets it and understands it and is completely open to it.” In addition to being open to changing the relationship structure, Danni understands polyamory as part of her identity. For me though, I have never associated polyamory with my identity or sense of self, rather, I think of it as a type of relationship structure or practice. I have experienced a range of identity crises in my life such as my francophone/anglophone struggles and coming to understand my queerness, yet I have not experienced this with polyamory. I realize that my definition of polyamory reflects how I imagine polyamory and that this subjective meaning will likely shift and change over time and with subsequent exposure to polyamorous relationships. Further, I also acknowledge that how I think about, conceptualize and imagine polyamory, has not always lined up with my experiences of polyamory. What I want to point out here is that life is so complicated and the human condition is so volatile, how we imagine our relationships and how we live them, can be in contradiction. While I have experienced both polyamorous and monogamous relationships, I have spent the last 15 years fascinated with people’s subjective meanings and conceptualizations of polyamory. I love to think about how polyamorous people think about polyamory. In addition to my experiences of polyamory and years of conversations

with polyamorists, I believe my interest in how people cognitively frame polyamory is informed by my studies in psychology and practice of counselling.¹

My experience listening to people tell me their stories in confidence has also taught me that how people think about and imagine themselves and their identities, relates to their ability to effect change and transformation in their lives. In my counselling practice, I often used cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) when working with clients. CBT was developed by Aaron Beck in the 1950s and 1960s and is an evidence-based psychotherapeutic technique that attends to the connections between our thoughts (cognitive framings of concepts), our moods (how we feel about others and ourselves) and our actions (behaviour) (Beck, 2011; Rector, 2010). I do not use CBT in the current study on polyamory; I only mention my training and affinity towards this approach because it helps to explain my interest in, and my choice to focus on how my participants cognitively frame (think about) polyamory in general and in relation to the self. In the case of asexuality and mental health problems, I extend my discussion from cognitive framing to the ways that participants use polyamory to transform their relationships structures because these participants describe clear connections between their asexuality, mental health challenges and polyamory. For the most part, this study focuses on how people define, conceptualize, and imagine polyamory. Though, not necessarily how they live polyamory. The participant's definitions of polyamory may seem optimistic at times because they are offering their cognitive framings of polyamory, which may not include the messiness and contradictions

¹ I completed an Honours Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Masters of Science in Education in School Counselling prior to commencing my doctoral work in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies. I am a Certified Canadian Counsellor and am trained in psychometric assessment and have worked under the supervision of a psychologist doing psychoeducational assessments with adults, providing counselling and mental health support to post-secondary students in the college system in Ontario from 1999-2005. In addition to teaching Gender and Women's Studies and research on polyamory, I teach psychology at the degree level, conduct research, and write in the area of intersectionality theory and counselling practice.

that come with human experiences. Having said this, their cognitive framings and subjective meanings of polyamory are likely informed by their experiences of polyamory and have likely shifted and changed since the time of the interviews.

Working as a college counsellor and psychometrist also taught me the significance of formal labels or what we might consider institutionalized definitions and labels such as psychological diagnoses. For students in post-secondary education, labels such as medical diagnoses, may give them access to support services, but, it may make them vulnerable to stigmatization and force them to reconcile being labelled “disordered” with their sense of self. It also happens that students do not meet the threshold of the diagnostic criteria despite their ongoing struggles, and they may not be granted access to support. These formal labels are like having a key that gives students access to support, yet, only those students whose experiences clearly align with the institutional definitions gain the access. If they are labelled disordered, they are granted the key to services; however, once they use it, they risked stigma. My training in psychology and experiences of counselling have shown me that how people think about their identities (subjective meanings of themselves) and how society defines their identities both relate to how people feel about themselves and how they navigate the world. They also explain my interest in resisting Tweedy’s (2011) proposal that polyamory be formally defined as a sexual orientation.

The participants of this study provided many definitions and conceptualizations of polyamory that demonstrate the diverse ways people think about and define polyamory. In this study, despite focusing on the differences among these definitions, there were also shared concepts across the narratives. The common threads flowing through the participants’ definitions of polyamory were that polyamory involves loving relationships, honesty and consent among

individuals in the polyamorous constellation. All participants clearly articulate that polyamory is not *cheating*² because every person in the polyamorous constellations understands and consents to the dynamics of polyamory. As Josephine states, “Being open and honest, that’s sort of the key things: being open and honest [and] consensual” and Mark explains polyamory as “informed consensual relationships with more than one person at a time, [that is] romantic relationships.” I heard many definitions of polyamory from the participants; all of them consistently define polyamory as a relationship formation based on love, honesty and consent.

A polyamorous constellation is a group of people participating in a polyamorous relationship together. The polyamorous constellation does not have a set structure, number of members or expectations for members. The constellation is unique to the specific group of people that are interconnected through relationships and their partners’ relationships. Some of the members may have more substantially committed relationships involving sharing living space, finances, and rearing of children. Other members may be in committed relationships with other members but do not live together or share finances. A polyamorous constellation refers to all members connected to one group of people who share each other’s partners, lovers, and in some cases non-sexual partners.

Curious people often inquire about polyamory in relation to other consensual practices of non-monogamy. My conversations with polyamorous people suggest that polyamory is usually considered to be different from swinging. Polyamory typically involves multiple committed

² I use *cheating* here to refer to the common understanding of adultery or the act of someone who is in an exclusive monogamous relationship who have a sexual experience or relationship with a person other than their spouse or monogamous partner. This is not to say that polyamory cannot include cheating. All participants of this study stated that cheating can happen in a polyamorous relationship because a person in the polyamorous relationship can break the agreed upon rules. Two participants disclosed that they had cheated in their polyamorous relationships by forming relationships with a partner without seeking consent from their other polyamorous partners.

relationships, whereas swinging typically involves multiple recreational intimate encounters. The differences can be ambiguous because relationships could form if people consistently swing with the same people. The difference between polyamory and swinging could be in the level of commitment by the people involved in polyamorous relationships compared to the casual nature of the encounters for people involved in swinging. However, some participants have a less clear distinction between swinging, kink and BDSM.

There was recognition by some participants that polyamorous people may participate in several non-monogamous practices simultaneously and may have overlapping and interconnected relationship practices and identities. Mark describes it as “swinging or the classic kind of open relationship might be just about the sex, DS [dominance-submission] relationship might be more the kink ... there's a fair amount of overlap, you can have an open polyamorous relationship with DS power dynamics.” Corey also conveys a similar idea “it [polyamory] can be connected to swinging and what happens in the kink communities and BDSM communities ... I see polygamy as different, as separate.” All participants clearly distinguish polygamy from polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamy, such as swinging, kink and BDSM, which may overlap or be connected to their practice of polyamory.

Over the years, it seems that the more I have tried to explicitly define polyamory, the more difficult it became to describe polyamory as one thing. My years of conversations seemed to expand the definition of polyamory to include more and more experiences that people have named as polyamorous. These conversations brought me back to Easton and Hardy's (2009) definition of polyamory. Their definition includes a flexibility about polyamory that allows people to think about polyamory in different ways and develop unique meanings: “Some use it to mean multiple committed live-in relationships, forms of group marriage; others use it as an

umbrella word to cover all forms of sex and love and domesticity outside conventional monogamy” (Easton & Hardy, 2009, p. 8). This aspect of Easton and Hardy’s definition suggests that polyamory has many subjective meanings and the potential to be lived in many ways. Not only can we think of polyamory as many loves, we can consider it to be many ways of loving others and ourselves.

As is the case for several authors who have written about consensual non-monogamy (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004; Gartrell, 1999; Klesse, 2007; Martin, 1999; Rambukkana, 2004; Robins, 2004; Sheff, 2005), my personal interest in polyamory first emerged from questions I had about my own relationships in the 2000s. At that time, I did not know any polyamorists or people practicing consensual non-monogamy with whom I could have an open discussion, so I turned my attention to the academic research for answers. To my great surprise and disappointment, I found very little published about polyamory, with only a few academic articles considering the topic of polyamory in relation to bisexuality (Rust, 1996). With so little scholarly work on polyamory, I found myself consulting the popular literature (Anapol, 1997; Easton & Lizst, 1997; Nearing, 1992) and website articles (Zell-Ravenheart, 1990) for information about polyamory. Although the popular literature confirmed the existence of polyamorous communities, I did not feel satisfied with what I found because it did not go beyond basic descriptions of polyamorous relationships and personal advice. As I continued my search to learn about polyamory, my academic interest in polyamory grew quickly as did my overall interest in studying genders, sexualities and identities. The questions relating to “what is polyamory?” and “how do people define polyamory?” have been at the forefront of my mind for close to two decades.

Since the early 1990s, when polyamory first started emerging in Western pop-culture

(Easton & Lizst, 1997; Nearing 1992; Zell-Ravenheart, 1990) there has been increased interest in polyamory in both popular culture and academia. For example, a recent Google search on polyamory in 2020³ yielded 8,220,000 results, compared to a Google search on polyamory approximately 10 months prior⁴ that yielded 6,720,000 results, 1,900,000 results in 2011 (Cheshire, 2011) and 170,000 in 2005 (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). A recent EBSCOhost search in 2020⁵ on polyamory yielded 1,130 results, compared to the same search approximately 10 months ago that yielded 1,051⁶ search results, demonstrating there is also significant current academic interest in polyamory. Polyamory has its own *Wikipedia* page that defines the practice, terminology, and values of polyamory (“Polyamory,” 2020). PolyamoryDate (<https://polyamorydate.com/>) is available to people who wish to use a dating website to connect with other polyamorous people. Fry’s (2020) article published in *The Guardian* assures parents there is no evidence to suggest that raising children in a polyamorous relationship should cause them any more or less harm than raising them in more traditional relationship structures. The TV series *Polyamory: Married & Dating* (Stein et al., 2012-present); podcast series such as *Polyamory Weekly* (Cunning Minx & LustyGuy, 2005-present) and *Polyamory Uncensored* (Miller & Williams, 2018-present); pop-culture songs titled “Polyamory” (Boneparte, 2017; Slothrust, 2012) and “Polyamorous” (Breaking Benjamin, 2011; Fleming, 2017) all mark growing cultural interest in the topic of polyamory.

While academic interest in polyamory has grown, it remains an understudied area and there remain large gaps in the literature. Several scholars of sexuality and polyamory have

³ Search date: February 19, 2020

⁴ Search date: May 28, 2019

⁵ Search date: February 19, 2020

⁶ Search date: May 28, 2019

signaled the lack of intersectional analyses of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability found in the scholarship on polyamory (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Noel, 2006; Sartorius, 2004). Critical considerations of power and privilege (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2007, Rambukkana, 2015) especially as it relates to class (Klesse, 2014a) and race privilege (Willey 2006; Rambukkana, 2015) are also gaps in the literature that continue to require attention. The recent push to review and define legal forms of non-monogamy in Canada (Barnett, 2014), and in the United States (Tweedy, 2011), have contributed to bringing the questions “what is polyamory?” and “how do we define polyamory?” to the forefront of the academic literature (Klesse, 2014b, 2016) and conferences (Klesse, 2017). These discussions have more recently turned to consider the question of defining polyamory as a sexual orientation (Klesse, 2014b, 2016, 2017; Robinson, 2013; Tweedy, 2011).

Over the years, there has been some discussion of polyamory as a sexual orientation in the self-help literature (Anapol, 1997; Benson, 2008) and the academic literature relating to counselling polyamorous clients (Buxton, 2006; Weitzman, 2006). In 2004, Emens introduces the idea of a polyamorous disposition, however, the debate on the definition of polyamory intensified in the academic literature when Tweedy (2011) presents an in-depth legal argument proposing the definition of sexual orientation expand to include polyamory for the purpose of creating anti-discrimination legislation in the United States that would protect polyamorists. Tweedy concludes her argument by stating that polyamory is “at least moderately embedded as an identity” (p. 1514), suggesting that at least for some people polyamory is a more permanent and immutable aspect of their identity. While Tweedy considers the drawbacks of the politics of essentialized identities, she focuses on moving towards integrating polyamory as a sexual orientation into legislation. Other scholars argue that sexuality, sexual identities and relational

identities are fluid (Manley et al., 2015), especially in relation to women's sexuality (Diamond, 2008). Robinson's (2013) study demonstrates that bisexual women (trans inclusive) shifted their identities between monogamy and polyamory in strategic ways. Robinson's work demonstrates how women use the identity of polyamory in ways that help them navigate their relationship landscape. This evidence challenges the argument that polyamory is an immutable identity that is consistent and unchanging over time, even if it is so for some people. Robinson (2013) concludes, "given the findings of this study, relational identity labels may reflect goals and values as much or more than they do sexual practice" (p. 34).

After examining the academic literature and activist writings on sexual orientation discourse relating to the range of ways that polyamory is defined, Klesse (2014b) proposes "the risks bound up with advocating sexual orientation models of polyamory to be severe" (p. 92). Klesse (2016) extends this argument in his analysis of sexual orientation discourse within the U.S. legal scholarship on polyamory. Klesse (2014b, 2016) argues that defining polyamory as a sexual orientation could reduce its transformative potential in people's lives by reducing the potential to disrupt the binaries of sex, gender and sexual orientation, create divisions among polyamorists and interfere with alliance building across all non-monogamous communities. Klesse (2016) advances that "the mobilisation of polyamory as sexual orientation legitimises a deeply engrained way of thinking about sexual identities and desires, which continuously produces outsiders. ... Sexual orientation discourse will reify and limit not only poly subjectivity, but also poly relationality" (pp. 1365-1366).

In 2017, Klesse gave a keynote presentation at the Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference. His presentation "Polyamory – Identities, the Law and Sexual Orientation Thinking" lays out his argument against defining polyamory as a sexual orientation.

Klesse (2017) describes seven polyamory narratives, or ways that people define polyamory in academic and activist writing. These include polyamory as “a practice ... a relationship model / form of association ... a ‘lovestyle’ / relationship orientation ... relationship philosophy ... (contested) discourse ... social sexual identity ... [and last,] a sexual orientation” (Klesse, 2017, 3:43). He then proceeds to argue that he is not convinced that formally defining polyamory as a sexual orientation is a path we should take. The narratives from the current study provide evidence that support Klesse’s (2014b, 2016, 2017) and Robinson’s (2013) arguments that polyamory is fluid, flexible and has diverse meanings for people. The narratives also provide examples of how some polyamorous people use the practice of polyamory not only to transgress the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality, but also to challenge the binary of sick (mentally ill or abnormal) and healthy. *Dis-orienting polyamory*, a term I use to represent resistance to defining polyamory as a sexual orientation, will preserve the diverse meanings of polyamory. In particular, it will sustain those meanings that enable people the use polyamory to transform their relationships and live their queer, feminist and anarchist politics.

Formal Definitions of Polyamory Matter

In addition to Klesse’s (2014b, 2016, 2017) argument that formally defining polyamory as a sexual orientation is a risky move, both Foucault’s (1976/1978) work on the discursive production of sexuality and Rubin’s (1984) argument about the regulatory power of sexual normalcy also provide the rationale for such concern. Both Foucault’s (1976/1978) and Rubin’s (1984) work provide insight into the construction of labels of sexuality in Western culture in general and how these become implicated in the control of sexualities. They confirm the importance of definitions and labels of sexuality and encourage us to attend to who and how sexualities, in this case polyamory, are defined in culture. Considering the implications of

defining polyamory as a sexual orientation from the top-down (through discourses of law, psychology, psychiatry) is important because it has the potential to further control and regulate sexualities in Western culture. As Klesse (2014b, 2016) suggests, it has the potential of narrowing the definition of polyamory, essentially changing the meaning of polyamory in Western culture by negating and excluding the many polyamories that people describe. It would silence and make invisible some of the flexible ways that people define and use polyamory.

Foucault's (1976/1978) theory of sexuality as a product of knowledge and power is useful when considering the construction of polyamory in Western culture, and is especially valuable when applied to the debate on defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. If we apply Foucault's concepts to the debate on defining polyamory as a sexual orientation, we can challenge the notion that calling polyamory a sexual orientation is simply the process of describing human experience or giving people a label to describe what they believe to be a permanent feature of themselves. Instead, we can understand that the process and the act of naming polyamory and constructing specialized knowledge about polyamory as a sexual orientation is what creates polyamory as a sexual orientation. Once named, researched, defined and categorized through law, psychology and psychiatry (incitement to discourse), people will participate in confessions that work to produce polyamory as sexual orientation to be a "truth" about themselves. Once this truth is created about polyamory, especially in the case of established law, even law created for the purpose of protecting polyamorous people, it would likely work to deepen the distinction between polyamory and other forms of non-monogamies.

Klesse (2006) argues that distinguishing polyamory from other forms of non-monogamy works to privilege polyamory. The act of distinction is part of defining polyamory and also works to privilege polyamory:

This strategy is based on an act of distinction. Polyamory is said to be different from promiscuity, swinging or casual sex. ... The problematic dichotomies they see getting established in polyamory discourses are “the good polyamorist” / “the bad swinger” or the “responsible non-monogamist” / “the promiscuous queer.” (pp. 577, 578)

That some non-monogamies are privileged compared to others in Western culture (Rambukkana, 2015) demonstrates that our culture remains committed to naming certain sexualities, sex acts and relationship constellations as negative and harmful. Formally defining polyamory as a sexual orientation may work to create even more problematic dichotomies such as “the legal polyamorist” / “the criminal polyamorist” and the emotionally and sexually “healthy polyamorist” / “the perverted and ill polyamorist.”

In *A History of Sexuality: Part 1* (1976/1978) Michel Foucault theorizes the ways that power can be revealed through the production of discourses, in particular with regards to the study of sexuality. Sexuality is a site where authoritative voices in society produce discourses through law, medicine and psychiatry that work to construct sexual perversions and by default outline the imperative of the sexual norm in Western culture.

While Foucault (1976/1978) argues that sexualities and perversions in Western culture have been produced discursively, he is also clear that this is not a simple process, whereby the authoritative powers imposed a top-down system of control on those who were less powerful. He advances a model of power that describes power as complex, multifaceted, multidirectional, ever-shifting and productive. According to Foucault (1976/1978), we are all bound within systems of power and are unable to step outside of relations of power to fully see its workings, and sexuality, is a product of these complex power relations:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in

check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (pp. 105-106)

Sexuality is not a thing that is controlled through laws or particular groups of people in society. Sexualities are produced through strategies of knowledge and power that are linked to the creation of discourses and special knowledge of sexualities. To define polyamory as a sexual orientation through psychology and psychiatry would work to construct polyamory as one thing and potentially exclude the many definitions and meanings of polyamory outlined by the people who live polyamory (Klesse, 2014b, 2016). This move could also begin to shift polyamory towards sexual normalcy which would work to regulate polyamorous identities and practices.

Gayle Rubin's (1984) essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" argues that sex negativity plays a major role in social stratification of sexual acts: several persistent features of thought about sex inhibit the development of such a [radical] theory. These assumptions are so pervasive in Western culture that they are rarely questioned. Thus, they tend to reappear in different political contexts, acquiring new rhetorical expressions but reproducing the fundamental axioms. ... the most important is sex negativity. (pp. 275, 278)

Rubin explains that one such persistent feature and assumption about sex in Western culture is that sex is something negative and should be treated with suspicion; sex negativity extends that sexuality must be controlled. When considering sex, the worst case scenarios are typically used

to draw attention to the dangers of sex. In general, erotic behaviours are considered “bad” unless they are associated with sexual normalcy that includes monogamous marriage, love and reproduction, which are sanctioned through law and medicine as the “natural”, “normal” and “healthy” ways of demonstrating intimate and sexual relations. Polyamory as a non-monogamous, consensual practice and sexuality is likely to be understood as bad and dangerous because it challenges sexual normalcy. Having said this, should polyamory be labelled as a sexual orientation and protected by law, it could begin to gradually move away from sex negativity toward sexual normativity (Schipper, 2016). The cultural shift relating to same-sex marriage that has taken place in many countries, including Canada, demonstrates how a sexual act - even one that was once criminalized and pathologized - can shift toward sexual normalcy. This example further demonstrates the role that law and psychology play in the process of normalizing same-sex desire and relationships.

Over the last couple of decades certain sexualities and sexual acts that were once considered bad have become somewhat exempted from sex negativity. For example, loving, committed, monogamous relationships between same-sex people have become more accepted in society; in Canada, the legalization of same-sex marriage occurred well over a decade ago (Civil Marriage Act, 2005). By participating in the institution of marriage, “homosexual”⁷ desires and identities are shifting and are now somewhat released from sex negativity. However, this exemption selectively extends to those forms of same-sex desires and behaviours that align with sexual normalcy and are married, monogamous and loving. Even still, there continues to be some opposition to same-sex marriage in Canada (Little, 2019) and sex negativity continues to extend

⁷ I use quotation marks here to draw attention to the label of homosexual and to emphasize the criminalized and pathologized history of same-sex desires, intimacies, identities and relationships in Canada.

to all forms of same-sex erotic behaviours and sexualities that are promiscuous, non-monogamous, pornographic and commercial.

Rubin (1984) presents “the hierarchical valuation of sex” (p. 278) as another grand narrative that plays a role in the formulation of sexualities in Western culture. Rubin (1984) posits that:

Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid. ... Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries. (p. 279)

Rubin further explains that in Western culture, those behaviours that are placed at the top of the sexual hierarchy are “rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits” (p. 279). Those individuals whose sexualities are much further down the hierarchy of sex, lose privileges, and depending on the sex acts, they may further experience sanctions such as being pathologized through medicine and psychiatry and criminalized through the law.

Drawing on Foucault’s (1976/1978) discussion of the major role that medicine and psychiatry play in constructing modern taboos of sexuality, Rubin (1984) argues, “medicine and psychiatry multiplied the categories of sexual misconduct” (p. 280). Evidence of the multiplication of categories in Western culture can be seen in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5) which classifies and organizes human

experiences into categories of mental disorders and is published by the American Psychiatric Association (2013).⁸

The classification of sexual dysfunctions and gender dysphoria continue into the DSM-5, which is the most current version. Over the years, we can see that some sexualities that were once identified as illnesses and disorders within the DSM are no longer categorized this way (Blashfield, et al., 2014). In 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) shifted its stance on homosexuality and removed the diagnosis of homosexuality from the DSM manual (Drescher, 2015). Having said this, Drescher (2015) explains that same-sex desires and identities were not normalized overnight; the diagnostic label changed to “sexual orientation disturbance” (SOD) in the DSM-2 and “ego dystonic homosexuality” in the DSM-3 and was finally removed in 1987. By removing these diagnoses, “APA implicitly accepted a normal variant view of homosexuality in a way that had not been possible fourteen years earlier” (Drescher, 2015, p. 571). This brief history of the classification of same-sex desires and behaviours by the APA demonstrates the power of discursive production in relation to sexualities.

Now, through the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and law, behaviours that were once criminal and disordered are now protected by the law. The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) and the Ontario Human Rights Code (2019) protect Canadians from discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) developed a policy stating their position on conversion therapy: “The Canadian Psychological Association opposes any therapy with the goal of repairing or converting an individual’s sexual orientation, regardless of

⁸ In Canada, the DSM manual is the most commonly used taxonomic system for mental disorders by mental health professionals and is the standard approach to diagnosis taught in graduate programs across Canada (Kogan & Paterniti, 2017).

age” (CPA, 2015, para. 1). The American Psychological Association (APA) published a pamphlet to help answer people’s questions about sexual orientation and homosexuality.

Is homosexuality a mental disorder? No, lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations are not disorders. Research has found no inherent association between any of these sexual orientations and psychopathology. Both heterosexual behavior and homosexual behavior are *normal* [emphasis added] aspects of human sexuality ... that these orientation represent *normal* [emphasis added] forms of human experience ... are *normal* [emphasis added] forms of human bonding. (APA, 2008, p. 3)

This pamphlet clearly confirms the shifts of framing of homosexuality in Western culture and demonstrates the role that psychological and medical discourses play in normalizing human behaviours and identities – bringing them into what Rubin (1984) describes as the *charmed circle*.

In 2006, CPA published their position statement supporting same-sex marriage in Canada, further demonstrating the normalization of the same-sex desire in Canadian culture. According to Rubin (1984), sexualities that are married, monogamous, coupled and heterosexual fall in the charmed circle and are considered to be “sexuality that is ‘good,’ ‘normal’ and ‘natural’” (p. 280). When people align their relationship practices with sexual normalcy (long-term, committed, monogamous and married) they begin to cross into the outer limits of the charmed circle (Rubin, 1984) of the sexual hierarchy (Schippers, 2016). The process of normalizing sexualities moves more people across the line of respectability but it does nothing to interrupt the system of sexual hierarchy and continues to exclude many people from the charmed circle (Rubin, 1984).

In the case of polyamory, and in particular with respect to law, psychology and psychiatry, the move to define polyamory as a sexual orientation is an example of how complex relations of power and privilege reveal themselves through institutionalized powers and the construction of sexual normalcy. It is not a far stretch to imagine that should a formalized definition of polyamory develop, it would lend itself to the construction of “good polyamory” and reduce polyamory to one specific, acceptable (tolerable) form, relegating all other polyamories to the category of “bad polyamory.” In the same way that married, long-term, monogamous, same-sex relationships are crossing over the line into respectability and sexual normalcy (Rubin, 1984), constructing polyamory as a “natural sexual orientation” begins to move polyamory closer to the line, and possibly in time over the line to sexual normalcy and into the charmed circle. However, polyamories that are not tied to immutable characteristics of the self, that include casual sex, BDSM and kinky acts, align with radical sex politics would likely fall outside of sexual normalcy. Radical politics, in general, would not fall in the definition of polyamory as sexual orientation and would remain contested, or simply fall on the other side of the line and be constructed as bad and dangerous sex.

Foucault’s (1976/1978) and Rubin’s (1984) work continue to be relevant and useful when considering the discursive constructions of sexual normalcy. Rubin’s model of the charmed circle that highlights the grand narratives of sexual hierarchy and sex negativity is a useful theory to help us understand the importance that definitions of polyamory can play in society. Based on the range of definitions and meanings of polyamory that are presented by the participants of this study, this dissertation argues that polyamorous people define polyamory in many ways. Constructing polyamory as sexual orientation through law, psychology and psychiatry will work to privilege one form of polyamory to the exclusion of other forms of polyamory.

Normalizing, Naturalizing, and Privileging of Polyamory

Queer theory significantly informs my views of gender, sexuality and polyamory in general. I understand genders, sexualities and polyamories to be social constructs that are culturally and historically specific and are produced through complex systems of power (Foucault, 1976/1978). The research on polyamory to date indicates that polyamory is associated with White privileged subjects (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Rambukkana, 2015; Sheff, 2005) and this study continues this trend. In response, I draw on whiteness theory in my analysis of the narratives. Queer theories provide a strong analysis of how power and discourse (Foucault, 1976/1978) work to produce sexualities, sexual hierarchies (Rubin, 1984) and heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner, 1998). In this section, I review some of the key concepts relating to queer theory, sexual normalcy, whiteness, and privilege that I believe influence my own thinking on polyamory and inevitably my analysis of the narratives. I describe *heteronormativity* (Berlant & Warner, 1998), *homonormativity* (Duggan, 2002), and also discuss Schippers' (2016) advancement of theories of *mononormativity* and *polyqueer sexualities*. I also present Willey's (2006, 2016) system of *non/monogamy*, Dyer's (1988) analysis of whiteness and normativity, and Rambukkana's (2015) concept of *intimate privilege*. Rambukkana, Schippers and Willey all integrate feminist anti-racist critiques of monogamy with their queer theorizing and influence my views of sexualities.

Heteronormativity is much more than considering heterosexual coupling to be the "natural" and "normal" way of reproducing families and way of being in Western culture (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Heteronormativity is a form of social organization that takes place within all levels of society even if most people think their heterosexuality plays out in private intimate spaces or in their choice of a sexual partner. Heteronormativity bestows a

sense of rightness-embedded in things and not just in sex - is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (Berlant & Warner, 1998, pp. 554-555)

Heteronormativity is so deeply embedded in Western culture and permeates all aspects of life that not only is it ostensibly natural, it gives the impression that sexuality is a constant that exists outside of culture and history. Heteronormativity presupposes gendered and sexed positions and monogamously structured relationships that are aligned and work to hold up the *sex-gender system*.⁹ Heteronormativity produces a world that makes compulsory the binary of sex and gender with the expectation of uncomplicated and unquestioned desire for monogamous relationship formation and intimacy with a person of the opposite sex and gender (Schippers, 2016). Heteronormativity is so ingrained in our world that if you fit into it, you may not see it; however, if you deviate from heteronormative cultural expectations, you can feel it almost immediately. Just ask a heterosexual couple who is married and without children how often people ask them about their reproductive endeavors or lack thereof. I believe they experience such questions on a regular basis, despite the fact that such a couple (cis-sexed, cis-gendered, heterosexual, monogamous, and married) meet all but one of the requirements of

⁹ Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix, I use the term *sex-gender system* to refer to the rigid binaries of sex (male/female) and gender (masculine/feminine) that are deeply engrained in Western culture. The term *sex-gender system* also implies that gender is based on sex, that gender and sex are stable, immutable categories that remain over one's life.

heteronormative reproduction. Heteronormativity extends privilege to those heterosexual people who embody and live out normative expectations which:

includes, but is not limited to, marriage between one man and one woman, a definition of family that hinges on the presence of dependent children, relationships based on love and commitment rather than sex, relationship longevity, active participation in capitalism in terms of both employment and consumption, and monogamy. (Schippers, 2016, pp. 7-8)

Homonormativity is a term used to describe a de-politicized gay and lesbian politics that does not challenge heteronormativity or sexual normalcy on personal or institutionalized levels (Duggan, 2002). Duggan (2002) introduces the term homonormativity to describe a “new neoliberal sexual politics” (p. 179) produced through the Independent Gay Forum in the United States. Homonormativity is a sexual politics that is de-politicized, does not challenge the assumptions of sexual normalcy and heteronormativity and imagines same-sex relationships as following the same practices (marriage, reproduction, monogamy, and consumerism) and ideals of heteronormativity. Homonormativity is considered a result of an assimilationist identity politics that gay and lesbians have used to gain respectability and move in to the charmed circle (Schippers, 2016). While homonormativity is thought to privilege people whose same-sex relationships follow the patterns and values of heteronormativity, it should not be considered a parallel concept to heteronormativity (Duggan, 2002) because the hierarchy of sexual acts is still at play and same-sex couples do not reap all of the institutionalized privileges bestowed on heterosexual couples (Schippers, 2016).

Schippers (2016) draws attention to the lack of engagement with race privilege in earlier queer theories, such as Foucault’s (1976/1978) theories of sexuality. Highlighting work by Sommerville (2000) and Holland (2012), Schippers reminds us that sexual normalcy in Western

culture is always bound up in discourses of white superiority emphasizing the role of heteromasculine dominance. Notions of being a “good citizen” are not just referent to being heterosexual, monogamous and married, they are also about being “White.” Interracial sex acts and desires (even those that are considered normal), have historically, been constructed as perverse through discourses of medicine and sexuality (Holland, 2012).

Schippers (2016) argues that despite the fact that many queer scholars of sexuality signal monogamy as an element of sexual normalcy, there are few intellectual engagements that thoroughly interrogate how compulsory monogamy as a normative practice interconnects with gender, race and other social hierarchies. Schippers proposes:

a theoretical framework for identifying and cultivating what [she is] calling *polyqueer sexualities* - sexual and relationship intimacies that include more than two people and that, *through plurality*, open up possibilities to “undo” race and gender hierarchies in ways that would not otherwise arise within the context of dyadic sex or monogamy.

(p. 25)

Schippers acknowledges that mononormativity intersects with heteronormativity, but emphasizes the unique privileging system of mononormativity.¹⁰ She asserts that the concept of polyqueer sexualities can be used to explore a wide range of power hierarchies in relation to race, class, sexuality and ability.

¹⁰ Schippers (2016) notes that heteronormativity, homonormativity and mononormativity are all part of sexual normalcy. The term mononormativity emphasizes the privileging of a form of relationship (monogamy), where heteronormativity and homonormativity emphasize the sexes of the monogamous couple. Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms *heteronormative monogamy* and *homonormative monogamy* because I want to signal the different ways sexual normalcy as monogamy plays out for heterosexual and same-sex couples. Having said this though, at times I use the term mononormativity to refer to the privileging of monogamy as a relationship formation.

Willey (2006, 2016) integrates feminist antiracist critiques of both imperialism and colonialism into her analysis of sexualities and privilege. Willey considers discourses of non-monogamies in Western culture to be inextricably interrelated with racialized and naturalized discourses of monogamy (Willey, 2006, 2016). Willey uses the term *non/monogamy* when referring to this interrelated system. Willey (2006, 2016) traces the racialized origins of the naturalization of monogamy to early canonical texts written by sexologists in Western culture. In her examination of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1924/1886), Willey (2016) postulates:

In the book's opening pages Krafft-Ebing mobilizes the vague specter of "Islam" repeatedly to establish the "we" of the text. "We"- the Christian nations - are monogamous. ... monogamy is the national characteristic that separates the civilized from a generic racialized Other, and "especially" from Islam. Islam stands in as an exemplary threat to a "Christian" worldview and way of life; *Christianity* stands in for whiteness, Europeanness, and modernity. (p. 30)

Based on the system of non/monogamy, discourses of race and nation (White and European) are always at play when considering non-monogamous practices. Applying Willey's argument to polyamory means acknowledging that discourses of polyamory, including formal definitions of polyamory, are also interconnected with whiteness through the system of non/monogamy. I also draw upon Dyer's (1988) articulation of whiteness and normativity. Dyer (1988) states:

Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior. This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted, in common-sense thought, in things other than ethnic difference. (p. 45)

Discourses that represent the dominant White culture typically fail to name this racialized position; however, naming the racialized “other” is common. By not naming this (White) position, it gives whiteness power because it becomes accepted as the “normal.” In this sense, the lack of naming the obvious, empowers the obvious. Dyer (1988) argues that “when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death” (p. 44). The “emptiness” of analysis of whiteness in the polyamorous literature has been noted by Willey (2006, 2016),¹¹ in particular as it relates to universalizing claims about the “naturalness” of polyamory. Willey (2016) contends that “we must constantly interrogate the invisible whiteness that purportedly race-neutral claims about sexuality and sexual difference belie” (p. 10). By identifying statements such as “I am naturally non-monogamous,” as rooted in the White superiority of Western culture’s discourses of sexology, we expose the workings of power implicit in these discourses of sexuality.

Rambukkana’s (2015) analysis of discourses of non/monogamy¹² in the public sphere forms the basis of his arguments about discourses of non-monogamies and their interconnection with social privilege based on intersections with race, class, and gender. Using a framing of discursive space, he analyzes pro-adultery discourses and argues these are part of heteronormativity. Specific to polyamory, Rambukkana argues that polyamory discourse represents a privileged enclave of non-monogamies in Western culture. Further, Rambukkana analyzes the Supreme Court of British Columbia’s review of the constitutionality of section 293 of the Canadian Criminal Code that decriminalizes polyamory and affirms the criminality of

¹¹ Haritaworn et al. (2006) also acknowledge the need to attend to “polyamorous accounts of whiteness and race” (p. 523).

¹² Rambukkana draws upon Angela Willey’s framing of the non/monogamy system.

polygamy. Using this case, Rambukkana argues that a person's access to non-monogamy in Canada relates to their intersectional position and in particular their racialized position.

Should polyamory be formally defined as a sexual orientation, it would legitimize and further privilege one particular form of polyamory in the public sphere and would establish a hierarchy among polyamories thereby creating more divisions among polyamories and other forms of non-monogamy. Dis-orienting polyamory can help to preserve all of the many meanings of polyamory, create space for polyamories that have yet to be imagined, resist privileging whiteness and one type of polyamory.

The Guelph Polyamory Study

Overview

The current study explores how the participants define polyamory and how these subjective meanings relate to the prospect of formally defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. This dissertation combines grounded theory and autoethnography, bottom-up approaches, by using personal subjectivities to question and resist Tweedy's (2011) top-down approach that proposes legally defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. Based on the narratives of 21 participants living in the city of Guelph (situated in South-Eastern Ontario, Canada) this dissertation argues that there are a range of ways that people understand and conceptualize polyamory; people define polyamory in various ways in relation to their self-concept - their sense of who they are as a person.

Some participants conceptualize polyamory as part of their self-concept such as Josephine who expresses "I think it's [polyamory] who I am" and others understand polyamory as both an essentialized identity and a practice, for example Mark states, "I am poly by nature and polyamory is something I do." Participants who identified themselves as having a low sex-

drive (who may also define themselves as asexual), and those who navigate on-going struggles with mental health, explain that their practice of polyamory directly relates to their asexuality and or mental health. For example, Matt explains, “it’s more my way of relating to people [due to mental illness¹³] is really changeable ... and that works in polyamory a lot better.” Other participants describe their practice of polyamory in relation to their identities as anarchists, feminists and queers. These findings support Klesse’s (2016) argument “that advocating a sexual orientation model of polyamory is likely to reduce the complexity and transformative potential of poly intimacies” (p. 1348). Klesse argues that applying sexual orientation discourse to polyamory would anchor the meaning of polyamory in discourses of immutability and essentialized identities, (what Willey 2006, 2016, argues represents whiteness) and it would narrow the definition exclusively to polyamorists who strongly identify polyamory as an essentialized identity or an immutable characteristic of themselves. To illustrate this point, such an approach would include Josephine and Mark as polyamorous, but would exclude Matt who strategically uses polyamory to transform his relationship structures because it accommodates who he is, a queer man who has mental illness.

Matt’s utilization of polyamory demonstrates what Klesse (2016) calls the transformative potential of polyamory. Klesse broadly defines polyamory and asserts that polyamory has the

¹³ I want to make an important distinction about labels that relate to mental health and medicalized labels of “mental illness.” As a scholar and as a counsellor, I frame all human experiences along a continuum of health and consciously work against the medicalization of human struggles with mental health. For this reason, I generally use the term *mental health* to resist reinforcing medicalized discourses of human experience. At the same time, I also want to honour my participants by using the language they use to describe themselves, in particular when I am directly referring to their experiences and identities or in cases when I am paraphrasing their words. Some of the participants in this study use labels such as *mental illness*, *crazy*, and *a person who struggles with mental illness*, to describe their own identities and life experiences. Here, in this passage, I added the term *mental illness* because it is the specific terminology that Matt used in the interview and I wanted to stay as close to his words as possible. I am not adding new meaning, rather affirming his way of defining himself. I also use the word *illness* when discussing medicalized discourses and the regulation of human experience.

potential to be transformative because it “endorses change and fluidity ... the potential ... to trouble deeply engrained binaries around male/female and straight/gay-lesbian [and] ... to shake up taken-for-granted notions of sex/gender” (p. 1365). Polyamory affords people the flexibility to transform their personal relationships, conceptualize themselves in non-normative ways and conduct their relationships in ways that resist normative and regulatory concepts of genders and sexualities. I extend these normative labels to include the binary of healthy and sick.

I situate this dissertation within the current debate on polyamory and sexual orientation and use the narratives to support Klesse’s (2014b, 2016, 2017) argument that resisting the move to define polyamory as a sexual orientation (proposed by Tweedy, 2011) preserves the transformative potential of polyamory. This dissertation embraces polyamory’s multiple subjective meanings and provides evidence that people who identify as asexual and mentally ill strategically frame polyamory in ways that allow them to transform their relationship formations. It further demonstrates that people who identify as anarchist and or queer, also frame polyamory as part of their radical politics because of its potential to disrupt sexual normalcy.

This dissertation also contributes to the growing scholarship on polyamory by expanding our knowledge of polyamorous subjectivities as they intersect with a range of genders (including transgender, trans, gender-neutral, gender-fluid and tomboy), sexualities (including heteroflexible, pansexual, queer), classes (including poor, lower class and lower middle-class), and abilities (including mental illness and learning disabilities). Further, unlike many other studies that take place in large metropolitan cities (Klesse, 2007; Pallota-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003; Sheff, 2005), and online (Robinson, 2013), this study presents narratives from people who

live in the same city and frequent many of the same public spaces.¹⁴ This dissertation situates sexualities and sexual normalcy as always interconnected and mutually constituted through genders, races, ethnicities, abilities and all other social identities and acknowledges that a person's experience of polyamory - and non-monogamies in general - relates to their unique experiences of privilege and oppression.

While the diverse articulations of genders, sexualities, identities, and polyamories are a strength of this study; the lack of racial and age diversity are limitations of the study. Participants were mostly young (20-40 years), overwhelmingly White, with one participant claiming his Metis status and identity, and only two participants were parents. The lack of racial and age diversity may be a result of where the posters for the study were distributed. I hung posters describing the study in various coffee shops in the downtown core of Guelph, at the local LGBTQ2+ resource centre called OutOnTheShelf (OOTS), and throughout the student centre at the University of Guelph. The downtown core of Guelph, the university, and OOTS may be spaces where younger people spend time, which can explain why the participants of this study are younger. However, the sampling technique does not explain the lack of racial diversity of this sample. I specifically hung posters at the university, a space that I have experienced as more racially diverse, to increase the racial diversity of the sample of participant. In the end, I was not successful.

The interviews were an average of 2.2 hours in length and took place between August 2011 and March 2012. In total, I collected over 46 hours of interview material from 21

¹⁴ Although the most individuals in the study did not know each other, they were spending time in some of the same spaces in Guelph. The main public spaces identified by majority of the participants as comfortable poly-spaces were: The Cornerstone, The Red Brick Café (downtown location), The Albion Hotel, and the Guelph Public Library (downtown location).

participants. Even though I asked a range of questions relating to polyamory, this dissertation centres on the portion of the narratives that focus on how the participants define polyamory in general and in relation to their self-concept. I conducted all of the interviews, completed the transcription and the analysis of the narratives. All participants were forthcoming with the intimate details of how they define and live polyamory providing me invaluable narratives about polyamory.

The participants of this study and their narratives, are vivid in my memory. I continue to be touched by the participants' trust in me as a researcher and for the experiences they shared with me. Even though I do not share all of the stories from the participants, my intimate relationship with the narratives have most definitely affected my understanding of portions I do share. Cavanagh (2011) articulates a similar experience when she describes her methodological choices in her study on *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination*. She explains her experience in this way:

Although I hope to give voice, recognition, and affirming space to those who have been interviewed. ... There are many fascinating stories and narratives that do not appear in the final version but that informed my readings of what has been included and analysed in this book. (Cavanagh, 2011, p. 24)

Each interview I conducted was unique. Some participants required more structure and noted that they were happy to have my questions to help guide them, while others provided long narrations of their thoughts on and feelings about polyamory. Every interview has a place in my mind and in my heart. Some of the participants were more descriptive, others more analytic, and still others were full of laughter. While I recall each interview with detail, one interview stands out to me because we laughed for almost two straight hours. This interview was so much fun and flowed so

naturally that it holds a special place in my memory, even though the laughter did make the transcribing challenging at times. The stories the participants shared with me are so important to me that I have struggled to do them justice. I have often wondered and worried that they might be disappointed in me for how I represent them or how I use their stories. Josselson (2013) explains it this way:

I have learned to bear the guilt of writing about people who have shared themselves with me. ... In the end, though, our participants are usually more important to us than we are to them. We fade from their memories. But they are central to our work, and we spend hours with their interview texts; in fact, we often build our careers on what we learn from them. They stay with us throughout our lives. (p. 181)

I can state without a doubt that the stories the participants shared with me will stay with me for the rest of my life. I am deeply grateful for their trust in me, the time they took to meet and do the interviews, and for sharing their stories about polyamory with me.

The meanings of polyamory presented in this dissertation emerged over a span of about nine years. The passage of time and my years of reflection on the narratives and the topic, play an important role in producing the insights I share. The questions of “how do you define or describe polyamory?” and “do you think of polyamory as part of who you are, or as something you do, or?” were formulated a decade ago. At that time, I did not fully understand just how important these questions would become to me or how much they would offer to a discussion on the definition of polyamory. As I mentioned earlier, my interest in these questions emerged from my own experiences with polyamory and my academic interest in how people cognitively frame their identities. I placed these questions early on in the question set (see Appendix A) because I thought it made sense to first define polyamory before getting into a discussion about a range of

topics relating to polyamory, such as relationship constellations, boundaries, and so on. Looking back now, I see how much I learned from my participants and how this research has expanded my own views on polyamory in particular, and identities in general.

If I am honest, when I began my interviews, I thought I knew, at least for the most part, how people would define polyamory because I had read extensively on polyamory and had first-hand experience with polyamorous relationships. However, by the sixth interview, my assumptions were challenged. One interview, stands out in my mind because it shifted my thoughts so dramatically. There are moments from the interview with Sage that are so vivid in my mind's eye, that to this day when I think about asking her the questions "How do you define polyamory? What does polyamory mean to you?" I still feel a ball of emotion in my belly. Sage answered my questions by saying, "It's probably a definition that shifts a lot, but, right now, I think it means treating my friends like lovers and my lovers like friends." This articulation of polyamory caused me to reflect, both in the moment of the interview, and for years after. In the moment, I felt a sort of panic accompanied by thoughts such as "Oh no, you didn't expect this answer. Your questions assume that your participant's definitions are static and stable over time. Maybe my other questions won't work for Sage or other participants?" And then, I recall feeling silly because Sage's definition made so much sense to me in that moment that I could hardly believe that I had not anticipated it. I have thought a lot about this exchange and about my feelings of discomfort and embarrassment, and, I believe what threw me off was that Sage recognized that her definition of polyamory shifts and changes, and she was completely at ease with this notion. I think I learned important concepts about polyamory, and about definitions in general, through this and other moments like this one. Not only can polyamory mean different things to different people, polyamory can mean different things to the same person over time. Of

course, I understood this concept to some degree: that people's conceptualizations of themselves and the world, shifts and changes over time as they encounter new experiences, and evolve through interactions. What I was less familiar with though, was the acceptance of this notion as something positive and comfortable. As I reflected on the idea that a person's definition of polyamory can be flexible, even from one day to the next (as Sage explained), I began to recognize that I had a deeply engrained assumptions associated with the concept of *consistency over time*. I am not sure where these ideas come from, but the ideas of being consistent in character are considered a good thing, it means that a person with a consistent character is someone you can trust and rely upon. For me, the idea of having one consistent partner over a long period of time, what we typically call monogamy, is associated with strength, determination, and loyalty. Upon reflection, I realized that this same positive framing of the notion of consistency is also associated with our identities. For example, I came out in my early 30s, people often asked me "when did you know you were gay," and I have always struggled to answer this question. My answer has typically been something like "I'm not exactly sure, to be honest." However, I know exactly what people were getting at with this question. People expect sexuality to be something that is consistent and stable over one's life. So, given I currently claim a queer sexuality, people assume that I must have been queer since birth, and I either did not fully understand myself or I was hiding my "true self." I understand that many people describe this consistency over time, but for me, it has not been clear. When I hesitate to answer this question, people say "oh, so you're bisexual?" and I say "no, that doesn't fit for me." My experience is that people feel a sense of comfort in the idea that our sexuality, sex, and gender stay consistent and aligned over time. When ideas are consistent over time, we say that they "stand the test of time," meaning they are consistent and true. When people change their minds a

lot, we call them “fickle” and “confused” rather than “flexible thinkers” or “creative.” When people change their sexual partners regularly, we often say they are “sluts” or “afraid of commitment.” That Sage was comfortable and settled with the idea that her concept of polyamory changes regularly stuck with me. Not only did Sage’s definition cause me to rethink what I thought I knew about polyamory, it also caused me to think about my interview questions.

After my interview with Sage, I reviewed my interview questions and to my great surprise, and disappointment, some of my assumptions came to light. I had worked hard to develop open-ended questions that would not lead my participants or narrow their ideas. Even as I tried to keep my own assumptions out of the questions, Sage’s insight illuminated my assumptions. For example, after reviewing my questions I realized there were questions that only allowed for two answers. Initially I was asking people “Do you consider yourself to be a poly person, or do you consider polyamory to be a practice?” This question assumes only two possibilities; it asks the participants to describe their polyamorous identities within a binary system. No matter how actively I tried to leave certain concepts (such as the binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality) out of my questions, they are so implicit in our cultural concepts, they found their way into my questions nonetheless. I was reminded of Foucault’s (1976/1978) theory of power; “power is everywhere” (p. 93), and I could not step outside of power and look at it objectively.

The realization that I was blind to my own bias was very important because it signaled a shift in the formulation and presentation of my interview questions. I changed the question to convey an openness to multiple answers. While Sage’s interview and her definition of polyamory were key in shifting my interviewing techniques and questions, I did not fully appreciate at that time just how deeply they would shift my understanding of polyamory, in particular concerning

the concept of consistency. Coming to this deeper realization only came about because I had the time to reflect, think, and rethink. In this study, the length of time over which this study has taken place has been an advantage because it allowed me to extend and expand my understandings of polyamory.

If I had completed these interviews, paid someone to transcribe them and had then written them up in the span of a year or two, I believe I would have missed some of the important insights that emerged from the narratives because I would not have had as much time to reflect. Doing my own transcription also played a role in augmenting and deepening my reflexivity. Transcription takes a lot of time and requires the researcher to listen to sections several times and to reread sections for accuracy and for meaning. It is common for researchers to hire research assistants to transcribe their interviews for the sake of time. However, completing one's own transcription has benefits. Josselson (2013) explains:

I like to do my own transcription, as this puts me back in the interview moment, when I can pause and reflect on what I am hearing in a way that I couldn't do with the participant in front of me. (p. 176)

For me, this meant that I had to relive the discomfort of that moment in Sage's interview (and moments from other interviews) several times. With each reflection and reliving of the interview, I gained a more complete and complex understanding of the meanings in the narratives. In addition to re-experiencing the interviews, doing the transcription myself extended the length of time it would take to complete my study. Had I written my dissertation prior to reading Tweedy's (2011) argument about framing polyamory as a sexual orientation or Klesse's (2014b, 2016, 2017) counter-arguments about resisting such a move, I would have missed the opportunity to extend what I learned from my participants to this debate.

I was still in the process of transcribing the interviews when I read Klesse's (2014b) argument that opposes applying a sexual orientation model to polyamory. Upon reading Klesse's argument, I immediately made the connection between his argument and subjective meanings of polyamory communicated by the participants of this study. Not only did the participants in this study support Klesse's argument that polyamory has many meanings, but they provided examples of the transformative potential that polyamory affords people – what we risk losing if we were to narrow the definition of polyamory. Last, I think that the length of time it took to complete this study afforded me the opportunity to understand how to apply the concepts of polyamory to my methodology.

Understanding the flexibility of polyamory on a deeper level, along with the concept of multiple partners, allowed me to apply this concept to the methodology of this study. The application of methodological polyamory, a term and approach I explain in more detail in Chapter Three, gave me the freedom to blend several methodological approaches in a unique way that worked for this study and resist the constraint of sticking to one method. In the end, I draw upon grounded theory, autoethnography and narrative analysis and lean on the concepts from queer theory and whiteness theory that work to enrich this study and position my argument. I recognize that blending methods is not new, however, for me, methodological polyamory was not just about blending methodologies, but rather it was about applying a flexible mindset that allowed me to consider a range of possibilities. Naturally, this approach was not without its challenges. My previous training in quantitative methods and analyses regularly caused me to question my methodological choices. Not only did I spend considerable time reflecting upon the narratives, I also considered and reconsidered my approaches to the interview process, transcription and analysis. Part of understanding the flexibility of polyamory allowed me to

consider a range of approaches and to try what worked.

While my analysis of the narratives from this study focused on the participants' definitions of polyamory, the participants also narrated their experiences of navigating polyamorous relationships. With respect to sexual boundaries and expectations in polyamorous relationships, there is no universal approach. The narratives of the people I interviewed suggest that polyamory unfolds depending on how many relationships a person has, and how those people like to share their intimacies, bodies, and sexual play. All aspects of the relationships are negotiated amongst those participating so that sleeping, sexual, co-habitation, domestic, and parenting arrangements could vary widely depending on the choices of the individuals involved in a polyamorous constellation.

To better understand the subjective meanings of polyamory that emerged from this study, it is important to understand the cultural context through which these meanings were created. Recognizing that narratives shift and change over time brings to mind that so too does sexual normalcy shift within cultural contexts and over time. This study takes place in a specific geographical space at a particular time in history. I use the current and ongoing debate about sexual education curriculum in Ontario, as a way to situate and contextualize these narratives and as a way to gauge sexual normalcy in Ontario.

Cultural Context of the Study: Political Debates on Sex-Ed in Ontario

What does sexual normalcy look like in Ontario? A recent example of the persistence of sex negativity in Ontario is the political resistance and conflict that arose over updating the sex-education curriculum in the Ontario Public Elementary Schools. This practical example provides a window into the cultural context of the study and it confirms that heteronormativity, homonormativity and mononormativity continue to be strong regulatory mechanisms in Ontario.

In 2015, the Ontario Liberal government updated the sex-education curriculum¹⁵ to reflect the social world that children and young teens currently face. After consulting with professionals and parents, some of the changes made in the updated Health and Physical Education (H&PE) 2015 version added material that taught children consent, the dangers of sexting, sharing personal images via texting, and social media. The curriculum added basic information about gender-identity, sexual orientation, and a wider range of family structures and diversity in relation to race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and sexualities. After all, in 1998, most students were not arriving at school with a smart phone in hand and same-sex marriage was not yet legal in Canada. The goal was to update the curriculum to provide students with the tools to safely navigate social media, to make sense of their sexual and gender development and better understand the diverse family constellations around them. The H&PE (2015) curriculum was implemented in 2015 only to be repealed in 2018 by the Ontario Progressive Conservative (OnPC) party (“Ontario’s Sex-ed,” 2019).

During the 2018 provincial election, the OnPC made repealing the H&PE (2015) sex-education curriculum one of their campaign promises. The *For The People: A Plan For Ontario* (2018), the OnPC campaign platform stated the OnPC would “Respect parents: Restore Ontario’s previous sex-ed curriculum until we can install a new one that is age appropriate and based on real consultation with parents” (OnPC, 2018, para. 9). This framing suggests that teaching children about sexual diversity, same-sex families (even though same-sex marriage has been legal in Canada for 14 years at this point) and gender diversity, was somehow considered disrespectful to some parents. The fact that challenging this curriculum was a campaign promise

¹⁵ Prior to the change in 2015, the last major update to the Ontario H&PE Elementary curriculum was in 1998 (“Ontario’s Sex-ed,” 2019).

demonstrates the social anxieties and sex negativity that persisted in Ontario in 2018 and it suggests that polyamory likely falls far outside of sexual normalcy.

An important aspect of the system of sexual hierarchy to which Rubin (1984) draws our attention is the “struggle over where to draw the line” (p. 282, Figure 2). The political conflicts over the Ontario sex-education curriculum demonstrate the line drawing aspect of the sexual hierarchy in action. The conflict over the curriculum is a direct result of differing opinions of where the line should be drawn. I have heard people ask many questions about this curriculum such as wondering where we (I assume they meant the people of Ontario) should draw the line with regards to what we teach our children about sexuality in publically funded elementary education: “We teach about reproductive sex, but is teaching about sexual desire too much?” “We teach about differences amongst families and across relationships, but then is it over the line to discuss the variations of sexualities, genders and families?” Apparently, these are the types of questions the OnPC government considered. The conflict over this curriculum appears to be bound up in defining what is considered “good,” “normal,” and “natural” sex (to be taught to our children) and what information is considered “bad,” “sick,” and “dangerous” sex (to be kept away from our children as a protective measure).

This recent conflict over the sex-education curriculum demonstrates a “major area of contest” (Rubin, 1984, p. 282, Figure 2) over where to draw the line and it is an example of the production of discourses about sex in Western culture and more specifically in Ontario. When the government wrote the H&PE (2015) they sought the advice of professionals (pediatricians, child psychologists, educators, police) to help them decide how to write sex into our elementary school curriculum. These professionals represent what Foucault (1976/1978) names as institutionalized powers of medicine, psychiatry and education that produce discourses of

sexuality, which in this case is the sex-education curriculum. This process of consultation, writing and teaching of the curriculum constructs sexual normalcy and is what Foucault names *incitement to discourse*.

The conflict over the updated H&PE (2015) sex-education curriculum tells us about contested issues about sexuality; the curriculum itself reveals the discursive reproduction of heteronormativity and homonormativity.¹⁶ The curriculum presents information about sexes, genders, gender-identities, and sexual orientations in a way that stabilizes the binary of male/female, masculine/feminine. The glossary defines gender as “A term that refers to those characteristics of women and men that are socially constructed” (p. 231), gender-identity as “A person’s sense of self, with respect to being male or female” (p.231), sex as “the category of male or female, based on characteristics that are biologically determined” (p. 236), and intersex as “a term used to describe a person whose sex chromosome, genitalia, and/or secondary sex characteristics ... are determined to be neither exclusively male nor female” (p. 232). All of these definitions of sexes and genders work to reproduce the binary sex-gender system (Butler, 1990) that is the foundation and framework of heteronormativity.

Once the OnPC party came into power in 2018, they quickly moved on their campaign promise and repealed the updated H&PE (2015) curriculum. This controversy demonstrates that sex negativity continues to play a major role in the culture of protecting children. Knowledge about sexualities continues to be constructed as potentially dangerous for our children and

¹⁶ I have analyzed H&PE (2015) version of curriculum because it was the version that created controversy and was repealed in 2018 because it contains sections about sex, gender, and sexuality. The OnPC government has recently reinstated a new version of sex education curriculum that reintroduced much of the information that was in the contested version.

discussions that deviate even slightly from sex in relation to reproduction or disease, continue to be shut down and deemed inappropriate.

The narratives of this study emerged in social context where information about sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual orientations are seen as potentially dangerous topics for children. Given the tensions relating to these topics, it seems clear that polyamory and non-monogamy in general fall outside of sexual normalcy in this context. In 2019, the OnPC have reinstated a curriculum similar to the 2015 version (H&PE, 2019). The point I want to make here, is that sex negativity is so persistent in Ontario, that politicians use campaign strategies that rely on its existence.

Chapter Summaries

In this section I have introduced the argument that polyamory is understood in diverse ways that afford polyamorous people transformative potential in their lives. I have situated this research in the current debate that considers the pros and cons of applying a sexual orientation model to polyamory. This dissertation argues that we should resist defining polyamory as a sexual orientation (dis-orienting polyamory) because we risk losing the radical and transformative potential of polyamory. Using grounded theory, autoethnography and narrative analysis, this dissertation argues that we must resist the move to define polyamory as a sexual orientation because it will narrow the definition of polyamory, exclude more flexible forms of polyamory and privilege one form of polyamory which will work to normalize and regulate sexualities. I have introduced the application of methodological polyamory and have articulated my choice to draw on a range of methodologies including autoethnography, narrative analysis, and grounded theory.

In Chapter Two, I introduce the 21 participants by providing a rich description of each participant, highlighting their intersectional positions. I further provide tables that summarize various characteristics of the participants. I chose to present the participants early in the dissertation because this study is grounded in their narratives and form the foundation for this dissertation. My hope is that each reader is able to garner a sense of each participant and their contributions.

In Chapter Three, I present my narrative of the study and explain my use of methodological polyamory. Methodological polyamory is a term I use to represent the mindset that helped me blend the methods of this study in a flexible way. I also present my reflections and episodic stories that inform the reader of my subjectivities in relation to choices I made for the study. This chapter outlines my approach to finding participants, conducting interviews, transcribing the narratives, and conducting the narrative analysis.

In Chapter Four, I present a review of the major academic contributions on polyamory. I argue that the academic literature on polyamory defines polyamory, its practices and identities in a range of ways. There is no consensus on the definition of polyamory in the academic literature. I end this chapter by presenting the current research that contributes to the debate on defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. I situate this dissertation on the side of the debate that argues against the move of defining polyamory as a sexual orientation.

Chapter Five presents the results of the narrative analysis that focus on the diverse meanings of polyamory. Polyamory is consistently described as a consensual non-monogamous relationship practice, however, beyond this, people who practice polyamory define and understand polyamory in a wide range of ways; there is no single unified definition of polyamory or description of polyamory as a relationship practice. The narratives reveal that participants

have spent considerable time reflecting on how polyamory relates to their self-identity. Some participants understand polyamory as an identity, others as a practice and still others had yet to develop a framework of polyamory in relation to their self-concept. I argue that some of the participants' conceptions of polyamory reproduce sexual normalcy by privileging love and invoking essentialist claims; whiteness is exposed through some of their definitions of polyamory. Other participants conceive of polyamory in ways that allow them to resist sexual normativity by including non-sexual partners in their polyamorous constellations and by using polyamory to transform their relationship power. The narratives reveal that definitions and conceptions of polyamory simultaneously resist and stabilize heteronormative and homonormative monogamy.

Chapter Six presents my reflections and conclusions of the study. I present a section that provides an in-depth autoethnographic reflection that explores my intersectional positions, pre-occupations with identities both in my life and as they relate to the academic study of psychology. I detail my own identity struggles and how they have played a role in this study. I conclude that the definitions and subjective meanings of polyamory that emerge from the narratives support Klesse's (2014b, 2016) argument that we must resist defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. Dis-orienting polyamory works to preserve the radical potential of polyamory, its transformative potential in people's lives and resist further regulating sexualities in Western culture.

Chapter Two: The Participants

The criteria used to select participants for this study included age and experience with polyamory. Participants had to be adults (18 years of age or older) and have been in at least one polyamorous relationship. Because I was interested in exploring narratives specific to Guelph, I accepted individuals who lived in Guelph, or, individuals who were partnered with someone who lived in Guelph. Of the 21 participants, 19 were residents of Guelph, and two participants lived in Hamilton and they spent considerable time in Guelph with their poly partners who were residents of Guelph. Although the description of the study encouraged people of all cultures, religions, ethnicities, races, genders, sexes and sexualities to participate, I was only able to conduct interviews in English (see Appendix B).

Participants: A Rich Description of Each Narrator

The following are descriptions of the participants whose narratives about polyamory form the foundation of this dissertation.¹⁷ I assigned and used pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of participants. The participants were not told the pseudonyms and each participant's narrative is considered independently, even if they were in a relationship with another participant of this study.

Josephine

Josephine is a 46 year-old queer woman, who expressed dissatisfaction with the confines of the category of woman, yet also feels comfortable in women's spaces and with being labelled a woman. She would prefer to live in a world where people were not classified by their gender.

¹⁷ I use the participant's exact wording for identity labels and terminology in the descriptions of the participants and in the summary tables in the following section.

Josephine has been poly¹⁸ for over 30 years and recalls that she was practicing polyamory before she even called it polyamory because this terminology did not exist at the time. Prior to polyamory, she used to describe her relationships as open, consensual, honest relationships with more than one person. Josephine expressed that had she known the term polyamory, she should would have likely labelled herself this way all of her life. She identifies as White, able-bodied, middle-class, and grew up in a hippie-ish kind of family with a strong connection to nature. Josephine has been living in Guelph for approximately five years and has participated in poly relationships with people from Guelph for several years prior to moving to Guelph. Josephine is living in a long-term common-law relationship. This relationship has always been polyamorous.

Danni

Danni is a 36 year-old tomboy, who defines her sex as female but does not understand her gender to be woman. Her norm is to wear men's clothing and she feels this sets her apart from most women. Danni grew up in Southern Ontario and has lived in several places throughout Ontario. While Danni was not raised with a religion, she identifies herself as spiritual now. Danni identifies as a White, able-bodied, middle-class, queer tomboy who grew up in a lower-middle class home where money was tight at times. She feels most comfortable labelling her sexuality as queer because she believes that other labels such as *lesbian* or *dyke* are too narrow and do not allow her the flexibility to have the occasional crush on a boy¹⁹, or to play with boys at sex parties. Danni has been in polyamorous relationships for approximately 10 years and identifies as a polyamorous person but admits that she is “pretty in the closet about being

¹⁸ Many participants use “poly” as a shortened form for “polyamorous.”

¹⁹ Danni used the term *boy* to refer to adult men who she found attractive.

polyamorous.” While Danni is in a committed relationship and currently does not have any other partners, she lives on her own and continues to consider herself as polyamorous.

Brittany

Brittany is a 25 year-old, White, able-bodied woman who defines her sex as female and her gender as woman. She attended some classes at the university but found her program to be a poor fit so she has decided to work for a while and focus on some of the hobbies she enjoys. Brittany explained that she occasionally finds women attractive; however, she is mostly attracted to men. She feels most comfortable labelling her sexuality as heteroflexible.²⁰ Brittany is married to a man and has been in polyamorous relationships for approximately 6 months. Brittany was born in Ontario and grew up in a very small town in Central Ontario in a middle-class family. She was not raised with a religion and does not currently practice a religion. Brittany lives below the poverty line and is working part-time through a temp agency. Brittany did have the opportunity to travel abroad for one year and now calls Guelph her home. She has lived in Guelph for four and half years.

Mark

Mark is a White, straight, able-bodied 26 year-old graduate student of the sciences who grew up near Guelph and has lived in Guelph for 5 years. Mark explained that while he is currently living the life of an impoverished student, he grew up in a middle-class family. Mark maintains the atheist perspective with which he was raised. Mark is married to a woman and has considered himself polyamorous for about 3 years. In Mark’s words “I am poly by nature and

²⁰ Brittany uses the term heteroflexible to describe her sexuality. She explains that she is mostly attracted to men, but she is also attracted to some women and is open to all attractions. She views her sexuality as flexible and not fixed.

polyamory is something I do.” Even though Mark has successfully participated in monogamous relationships, he expressed that they tend to feel incomplete.

Alex

Alex is a White, able-bodied, 20 year-old trans male²¹ who moved to Guelph a few months ago to begin his studies at the university. Alex was born in a larger Ontario city but has grown up in a mid-sized Ontario town in an upper middle-class family. While Alex was not raised in a religious family, he describes his family as very ethical. Alex defines his sex as female, his gender as male and explains that he is trans male; Alex expressed “It’s a little bit interesting, but it feels right.” Alex identifies as polyamorous and has relationships that are intimate, committed and non-sexual that he considers to be polyamorous and equally important to relationships that include sexual intimacy. He considers himself to be a *collared submissive*²² to one of his poly partners but does not equate this dominant-submissive dynamic to being polyamorous, rather it is something he and his partner bring to their polyamorous relationship.

Sage

Sage is a White, able-bodied, 27 year-old queer female who was born in a larger Ontario city and grew up in a mid-sized northern Ontario city. Sage previously lived in Guelph for one winter, and recently returned for employment in the last few months. Even though Sage feels comfortable labelling her sex as female, she has not “really worked that [gender] out yet.” Sage struggles with the label of woman because the label is “so defined in opposition to masculinities.” Defining her sexuality as queer allows Sage to have the freedom to be her unique

²¹ Alex explained that he is part of Kink culture and he is a trans (transgendered) person who identifies his sex as female and his gender as male. He expressed that he is most comfortable as a trans male.

²² Alex explained that a collar is a symbol of his commitment of submission to his dominant partner who is part of his polyamorous constellation.

self without being defined by her body or anatomy. Sage is attracted to most genders, but not cis-gendered women as much. She stated that she is especially attracted to trans-men and queer masculinities. Sage also identifies as an anarchist and thinks that polyamory and anarchism are connected and overlap in relation to concepts of autonomy, self-determination, compassion and rebellion. Sage had difficulty pin-pointing when she began to identify as polyamorous, as she feels that she was always non-monogamous but did not have a language for it, in the same way that she has always been an anarchist.

Emma

Emma is a White, able-bodied, 23 year-old graduate student in the sciences. She was born in an Eastern European country and immigrated to Canada in her childhood. Her family was quite poor in her country of birth, but is considered middle class in Canada. Emma was raised Orthodox Christian but now considers herself to be atheist and has found science to be the framework that works for her. She describes herself as having a scientific mind and after much reflection came to the conclusion that monogamy did not make sense as it was the source of much of the conflict in relationships. Emma identifies her sex and gender as female. Emma labelled herself as asexual for several years, and now, she identifies as a person who has a very low sex drive. When she does encounter an attraction, it is for men. Emma explained that she is at odds with the label of polyamory, and tends to prefer to label herself non-monogamous. While she consented to being labelled polyamorous as a participant in this study, she explained that in Guelph, there is a poly community and a full culture surrounding polyamory that she does not relate to. Emma does not have a problem with the definition of polyamory itself, but prefers to use the term non-monogamy in Guelph, as tool to navigate what she describes as the identity politics of the poly community in Guelph.

Jamie

Jamie is a White, able-bodied, 36 year-old female who has lived in Guelph for approximately 11 years. Jamie was born in Ontario in a lower middle class family and while they did not have a lot of money, her parents and family are well-educated and value higher education. Jamie moved to Guelph when pursuing a graduate degree and chose to continue to live in Guelph with a long-term partner because she likes the relationship and also really likes the mix of university and small town feel of Guelph. While Jamie was not raised with any particular religion, she is currently intrigued by Buddhist teachings. Jamie is comfortable labelling her sex as female but is less comfortable with identifying her gender as female. She chooses to describe her gender as “mostly female,” because she doesn’t always identify with the idea of female; sometimes she is a little more male but mostly she thinks of herself as gender neutral, despite continuing the use of feminine pronouns. Jamie identifies her sexuality as *pansexual*²³ and rejects the term bisexual because she thinks it is limiting as she is attracted to all people on the spectrum. Jamie also identifies as *kinky*²⁴ and more specifically as a *switch*.²⁵

Lani

Lani is a White, able-bodied, 27 year-old female who lives outside of Guelph, but has a relationship with two people in Guelph and spends considerable time in Guelph with her partners. Lani was born and raised in a lower middle-class, Protestant Christian home in a larger city in Ontario. She describes her current situation as lower-middle class and identifies as Pagan. Lani describes her sex and gender as female and her sexuality as bisexual or pansexual,

²³ *Pansexual* is used to describe a person whose attractions to others is not limited by sexes or genders. The term is also used by other participants in the study.

²⁴ Jamie used the words *kinky* and *S&M* (Sadomasochism) interchangeably as she described herself.

²⁵ Jamie explained that a *switch* is a person in the Kink community who enjoys the roles of both dominance and submission.

depending on the community in which she finds herself. Lani finds “everything you can conceive of” as attractive and does not limit her sexual relationships in any way. Lani explained that she feels “freer” to be open about her relationships and sexuality in Guelph, even though she lives in a much larger city than Guelph. She mentioned that she believes Guelph is very open and that a trans friend of hers believes Guelph to have a very inclusive environment. Lani has identified herself as polyamorous for approximately seven years.

John

John is a White, able-bodied, 29 year-old male. John was born and raised in a large city in Ontario. He was raised Anglican, but this was not a strong influence in his life then and now, as he does not identify with any particular religion. John is currently middle class, and enjoys a similar lifestyle to when he grew up. John is comfortable labelling his sex as male, but defines his gender as fluid and androgynous and uses masculine pronouns. He also identifies his sexuality as pansexual as he does not limit his desires or attractions. John has been in a poly relationship for at least seven years; however, it is only in the last few years that he has had more partners. In the past, his primary partner had relationships with various people, but he has only recently found a partner in addition to his primary partner.

Sabrina

Sabrina is a White, able-bodied, 22 year-old female who was born and grew up in a low-income co-op in British Columbia. Sabrina studies science and has lived in Guelph for just over three years now. As a student, Sabrina finds money to be somewhat tight. Sabrina defines her sex and gender as female and labels her sexuality as heterosexual; however, she mentions that she

would place herself at the 80% or 90% of *The Kinsey Scale*²⁶ toward the hetero side. In her teen years Sabrina identified as asexual and explained that asexuality transitioned her into accepting that people can separate love and sex – because this is what her experience has taught her. As an asexual person, polyamory was a convenient model for her because it took the pressure off her to be sexual with people she loved and she did not experience jealousy when her partners were sexual with other people because they were simply acting on their natural desires. In her late teens to early twenties, Sabrina’s sex drive ‘kicked in’ and she no longer identifies as asexual; however, she does continue to have polyamorous relationships. Sabrina has been in polyamorous relationships for approximately five years. In fact, all of the relationships that Sabrina has had to date, have been polyamorous.

Corey

Corey is a White, able-bodied, 31 year-old woman who initially came to live in Guelph for university and has now lived in Guelph for nine years. Corey was born and grew up in a middle-class family in a small town near Guelph. She and her partner now live below the poverty line, but she is happy with their ability to manage the resources that they have. Corey is comfortable labelling her sex as female, but struggles with the label of woman, even though it is a label that she claims. She questions the meaning a lot and finds at times, in trans spaces in particular, that she is more comfortable using the pronouns “they” instead of “she.” Corey

²⁶ The Kinsey Scale was developed by Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy and Clyde Martin and used in their research on sexuality when they conducted sexual histories with thousands of Americans in the 1940s and 1950s. The scale is a six point continuum scale with “exclusively heterosexual” at one end and “exclusively homosexual” at the other. This scale took people’s behaviours, thoughts and attractions into consideration and identified people who did not have any sexual activity or attractions as “X”. The scale was developed as their research determined that not all people fit into the categories of heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual; people’s sexual attractions and behaviours were not always consistent or aligned. The findings of this research were published in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953 (Kinsey Institute Indiana University, 2019).

identifies as queer and labels her primary relationship as queer. In her primary relationship, the rules surrounding gender and sexuality, what it means to be masculine and feminine, are very flexible. Corey is free to pursue relationships and encounters. Corey had identified as polyamorous for approximately nine years.

Jordan

Jordan is a White, able-bodied, 30 year-old trans-guy²⁷ who initially came to Guelph for university and has been living in Guelph for approximately 11 years. Jordan was born in a mid-sized town in Central Ontario and grew up in a small town in central Ontario in a lower middle class family. Jordan has identified as polyamorous for approximately nine years now and trusts his heart to lead him where he should go. He is currently in relationships with both men and women and labels his sexuality as queer because he is open to all possibilities. Jordan was not raised with any particular religion and does not practice a religion now. Jordan is currently working a few part-time jobs and lives below the poverty line.

Matt

Matt is a White, 32 year-old male who describes himself as having mental illnesses.²⁸ Matt was born in a large city in Ontario and grew up in large cities in his lower middle-class family. Matt previously lived in Guelph and is now returning to pursue education. In total, Matt has lived in Guelph for about five years. Matt currently lives in a shared living arrangement and describes his financial situation as poor. Matt identifies his sex and gender as male and his sexuality as queer. He sees himself as queer both in the types of relationships he has and in his

²⁷ Jordan explained that he is a female-to-male transsexual who prefers the term *trans-guy*.

²⁸ Matt and Julian used the term *mental illness*, to describe their psychological struggles. Throughout the dissertation, I generally use *mental health struggles*, instead of using medicalized terminology. However, I do use the terms mental illness when describing Matt and Julian's narratives and when I am discussing the medicalized labels and regulated identities.

sexuality. Matt identifies as an anarchist and thinks that anarchism and polyamory are connected through the concept of consent. He also thinks that in Guelph, there is an assumption of polyamory within the anarchist community. Matt considers himself polyamorous; however, he identifies his mental illness as the most salient part of his identity and considers his attitudes about polyamory to be based on his understanding of his illness and what he can contribute to relationships. While Matt sees sex, gender, and sexuality as irrelevant when considering partners, he is primarily drawn to and feels a connection to people who have experienced severe mental illness.

Hannah

Hannah is a White, able-bodied, 26 year-old woman who has returned to Guelph to complete her undergrad degree. Hannah was born in Africa and continues to be closely tied to her family there. She came from an upper middle-class family and lived in both Africa and Ontario, but mostly grew-up in Ontario. She has had the opportunity to travel and live in Europe as an adult. While Hannah is typically read as White, she continues to feel a close tie to Africa. Hannah identifies herself as a cis-gendered woman; she is comfortable identifying her sex as female and her gender as woman. She defines her sexuality as queer and has had many queer relationships in her adult years, so much so, that the current relationship that she is in with a cis-gendered man, feels weird to her. Hannah also defines her sexuality as kinky and she has been in and out of polyamorous and open relationships for the last five years. At one point, she identified herself as a dyke, but now is finding that queer is a better fit because she does enjoy sex with cis-men.

Kamila

Kamila is a White, able-bodied, 21 year-old female who was born in and grew up in a large Ontario city. She was raised in a single-income, lower middle-class family, with her mother and grandmother. She was raised Roman Catholic and practiced this religion regularly until she was an adult. She does not have any negative feelings toward religion, but doesn't think it is right for her. Kamila has enjoyed travelling Canada and learning about organic farming and lifestyles. She has recently moved to Guelph for university and really enjoys the community feeling of Guelph. Kamila is comfortable labelling her sex as female; however, she struggles with labelling her gender as woman. There have been times in her life that she has seriously considered the option of having a sex change, but, then, she is not necessarily comfortable with the gender identify of a man either. Kamila's sense of gender is neutral and she is comfortable not choosing a specific label for her gender; however, she is read as female and typically uses female pronouns because it is easier in social situations. Kamila labels her sexuality as *open* because she is open to sexual and intimate relationships with all people. However, she finds that not labelling her sexuality makes other people feel uncomfortable and so at times she has used bisexual or pansexual to describe her sexuality for other people. Kamila has been in polyamorous relationships since the age of 16 and feels that poly relationships make her happy because they bring more people with whom she can love and share her life.

Jeff

Jeff is a White, able-bodied, 34 year-old man. He was born in Guelph but did not grow up here. His family moved to the far North and then returned to live in a small Ontario town near Guelph. In his adult years Jeff has travelled and lived in many places, he has lived across Canada, Europe and South America. He returned to Guelph about two years ago and has been

working various part-times jobs. Jeff identifies as a cis-male and is comfortable with labelling his sex as male and his gender as man. He identifies his sexuality as straight. Jeff's experiences with monogamy have not always been positive. He believes it is unrealistic to think that one person can meet 100% of your needs in a relationship. He is currently in a primary relationship with a woman and they have been polyamorous for the past year. Currently, their relationship is more open with each of them dating other people and having some casual sexual encounters; however, neither of them has another partner at this time.

Eileen

Eileen is a White, able-bodied, 24 year-old female who recently moved to Guelph for university. She was born in a large Ontario city and shortly after, her parents moved to the far North where she spent most of her childhood. She returned to Central and Southern Ontario during her early teenage years with her family. Eileen believes her family is middle class because she never wanted for anything, but she does not know her family income because her parents are very private about financial information. Eileen was not raised religious, but in her early teens she began attending church with some of her friends and she became a Born-Again Christian. Eileen completed a degree in Theology and is now pursuing another degree in Guelph. Eileen identifies her sex and gender as female and her sexuality as straight. She has been identifying as polyamorous for the last year. Practicing polyamory and experimenting with her sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage goes directly against her Born-Again Christian beliefs and Eileen is currently working to sort out her belief system in relation to her sexuality. Eileen expresses great comfort and happiness living a polyamorous life.

Julian

Julian is a 21 year-old Métis, cis-gendered man who came to Guelph to attend university close to three years ago. Julian was born in Western Canada, has lived on both Canadian coasts and in several other provinces. He spent a significant portion of his childhood and adolescence in Manitoba and while he enjoys the feel of Guelph, he does miss the Manitoba Métis culture. Growing up, Julian attended the Anglican church and describes his family as culturally Catholic but not in an imposing way. He no longer considers himself Christian and uses the label Agnostic to loosely describe his current beliefs. Julian identifies as a person who is mentally ill and who has some physical issues but is physically mobile. He is part of the disability community and much of what he reads relates to critical disability studies. Julian identifies his sex as male, his gender as cis-male and his sexuality as queer. His attractions are exclusively to men and masculine trans men, however, he does not feel comfortable identifying as gay. Nonetheless, he uses the term gay when people do not understand the term queer in relation to sexuality. Julian identifies as polyamorous and currently lives with two of his partners.

Lisa

Lisa is a White, able-bodied, 23 year-old woman who moved to Guelph for university and has lived in Guelph for approximately four and a half years. Lisa was born in a large city but grew up in a small Ontario town that is not far from Guelph. She was primarily raised by her mother and there were financial struggles early in her childhood. After her mother acquired more education, she was able to find better employment and is now middle class. Lisa was raised Protestant Christian and has been spiritual her whole life. Currently, she identifies as Pagan and is very active in her local Pagan community. Lisa identifies her sex and gender as female and has never questioned these labels. She identifies her sexuality as straight and has been in a

polyamorous relationship for about six months. Lisa has a specific learning disability and explained that she has learned many strategies to help compensate for this. She is doing well in her education with the use of accommodations.

Paul

Paul is a White, able-bodied, 46 year-old male who was born in Eastern Europe and immigrated to Canada with his family. He grew up in a large city in Ontario in a working class immigrant family and describes his current experience as middle class. Throughout his adult years, Paul has travelled to many places in Canada as well as Europe and Africa while maintaining a home base in Ontario. Paul was not raised with a religion and now considers himself a spiritual person in a non-conventional way. Paul is comfortable identifying his sex as male, but he struggles with the confines of the masculine gender because he feels he has a deep understanding of the feminine and embraces the feminine within himself. Paul referred to his gender as being left of male. Paul tends to find himself at odds with most labels. While many people would call him straight, he prefers to say that he is attracted to women but leaves it open. Paul does use the term polyamorous to refer to his relationships but he prefers to describe himself as a person who is open to intimate, loving and sexual possibilities. He thinks that when such possibilities present themselves, they should not be denied. Paul has been in polyamorous relationships, or what he used to call open relationships, for over 25 years.

Participants: Summary Approach

The following section is an overview of some of the characteristics of the participants as a group with respect to age, sex, gender, sexuality, ability, race, ethnicity, class, education, parental status, and ability. Initially, my plan was to only provide rich descriptions of the participants and resist presenting the summary data that is typically found in quantitative and

qualitative research methodology sections. My hope was, that by refusing to label and categorize the participants, I would resist reifying these identities and labels back onto my participants. Given one of my goals in this project is to directly challenge the construction of labels and identities of polyamory, I was reluctant to use those categories in my writing. After deciding to implement methodological polyamory, I was no longer limited to only one approach. Given Western culture's investment in identity labels, it was not surprising that the participants often used identities to describe themselves and communicate their experiences. I found myself in a predicament; how do I write about the participants' identities and labels in a way that honours the participants, yet challenges cultural assumptions about categories? Shannon and Willis (2010) describe this dilemma in their essay on theoretical polyamory: "One of the things we have learned through reading queer theory (and living queer lives!) is to be suspicious of labels. Still, we require a certain amount of signification in order to communicate our ideas" (p. 438). Shannon and Willis (2010) decided to add a caveat in their essay and address their dilemma in this way:

any labeling that we do within this piece should be recognized as fluid and not static. By the time the reader actually sits down to read this essay, we may well have developed new interests and political commitments. Like non-monogamous sexual practices, a non-monogamous theoretical outlook should recognize that relationships do not always endure. (p. 438)

I have chosen to follow Shannon and Willis' example and take the opportunity to make note about the use of categories within this study. Both a summary of the description of the participants and rich descriptions of each of them as the narrators of this study are provided. I want to emphasize that I use the labels and categories that emerge from the narratives even as I

challenge their existence. I consider all categories of sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and ability to be fluid as they are socially, historically, and culturally constructed. They shift and change through experiences and are mutually constituted within their contexts.

The ages of the participants (Total $n=21$) ranged from 20 years to 46 years-old with an average age of 28.8 years. The majority of the participants were in their 20s with fewer in the 30s and only a couple in their 40s (see Table 1). The average number of years practicing polyamory was 7.8 years, with a range of six months to 30 years (see Table 2).

Table 1
Age of Participants

Age Range	n
20-29 years	13
30-39 years	6
40-49 years	2

Table 2
Years Practicing Polyamory

Year Range	n
0-5 years	8
6-10 years	6
11-15 years	2
16-20 years	0
21-25 years	1
26-30 years	1

At the onset of the interview, the participants were asked to describe their sex, gender and sexuality. I used open ended questions to ask about personal characteristics and identities so that I would not limit the participants answers or sway them to use my language. Participants described and defined their sexes, genders and sexualities in a wide range of ways. Of the

participants, 95% described their sex within the binary of male/female, while just over half of the participants (62%) identified their gender within the binary of man/women or male/female. Two thirds of the participants (67%) described their sexuality as other than heterosexual or straight (see Table 3).

Table 3
Sexes, Genders and Sexualities of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>
Sexes		Sexualities / Sexual Orientations	
Female	14	Heterosexual	6
Male	6	Heteroflexible	1
Transguy	1	Open	1
Genders		Pansexual	2
Woman	6	Pansexual Submissive	1
Man	3	Pansexual / Bisexual	1
Female	2	Queer	8
Male	2	Straight	1
Transman	1	Polyamorous	0
Transguy	1		
Gender Neutral	1		
Mostly Woman	1		
Gender Fluid	1		
Not Sure Yet	1		
Tomboy	1		
Left of Male	1		

Most participants were born in Ontario ($n=16$) with two participants born in British Columbia and three participants who were born outside of North America. The majority of participants ($n= 17$) reported growing up middle-class while fewer participants ($n=11$) reported their current class to be middle-class (lower, middle and upper-middle) (see Table 4). The most common relationship status reported by participants was “living alone” with “married” and “common-law” relationships also being common (see Table 4).

Table 4
Relationship Status, Parental Status and Class of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Relationship status	
Common-law	4
Live alone	8
Live with a partner	1
Live with roommates	1
Married and living with spouse	4
Did not identify a relationship status	2
Parental Status	
Parents living with children	2
No children	
Class growing up	
Poor	1
Working class	1
Lower class	2
Lower middle class	9
Middle class	6
Middle-upper class	2
Class Currently	
Poor	3
Working class	0
Lower class	5
Lower middle class	6
Middle class	4
Middle-upper class	1

One participant identified his race as Métis with the remainder of the participants identifying their race as “White.” There was more variation when participants identified their ethnicities; however, most ethnicities are European (see Table 5).

Table 5
Race, Ethnicity and Ability of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Race	
White	20
Métis	1
Ethnicity	
British	1
Canadian	4
Dutch/English	1
Czech	1
European	1
French	1
German	1
Irish/Scottish/English	1
Manitoba Metis	1
Scottish/English	1
Scottish/Irish	1
Ukrainian	1
Ukrainian/Irish	1
Western	1
Did not identify ethnicity	3
Ability	
No Disability	18
Learning Disability	1
Mentally Ill	2

All participants had completed high school with many participants having completed post-secondary diplomas, degrees and graduate degrees (see Table 6). Majority of the participants had some post-secondary training with 62% of the participants having a completed post-secondary diploma or degree.

Table 6
Education Level of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Education level	
Completed high school	6
Completed college diploma	2
Completed some university courses	2
Complete a bachelor degree	8
Completed a master's degree	2
Completed a doctorate degree	1

When asked to identify their profession or their work, just under half of the participants identified as students ($n=10$). Six of the participants worked in professional positions such as teaching and working in the helping professions. One participant was a full-time factory worker and another worked between a labour position and sales. One of the participants worked in information technology.

Participants reported a range of religious practices and spiritual beliefs (see Table 7). Seven participants established that they were not religious, while three participants identified as atheists.

Table 7
Religious and Spiritual Affiliations of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Religious / Spiritual Affiliation	
Agnostic	1
Born-Again Christian	1
Pagan	3
Spiritual	1
Spiritual Buddhist	1

The participants of this study provided large amounts of information that expands our understanding of the definitions and conceptualizations that are polyamory. This research could not be possible without their narratives.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The Method: Methodological Polyamory

Shannon and Willis (2010) playfully apply the concept of polyamory to their theoretical project of queering anarchism. They use the metaphor of polyamory “to play with theory” (p. 437). Shannon and Willis decided to draw from many theories for their analysis and termed this approach *theoretical polyamory*.

Theoretical polyamory, then, is the belief that we can have multiple partners when it comes to political theory. One theory could not possibly adequately describe the complexity of our relations of ruling. One theory could never hope to prescribe the “proper” mode of resistance. Moreover, it is problematic to suggest that such a “proper mode” could even exist given the ways that hierarchies emerge sometimes in very random ways. Those things said, there are benefits to having polyamorous relationships that illustrate quite well what this might mean for theory. (p. 438)

Schippers (2016) takes a similar approach to her project as she situates herself as a polyqueer scholar stating “I refuse to commit myself to one and only one theory or methodology ... each perspective, theory, and method brings something unique and essential to the table” (Schippers, 2016, p. 28). As part of her polyqueer methods, Schippers also writes theory across a range of writing genres with the goal of highlighting the interconnections of monogamy, gender and race as she investigates the potentials of polyqueer relationships.

Similar to Shannon and Willis’ (2010) and Schippers’ (2016) approach, I applied the metaphor of polyamory to the methodological approach for this study and call this approach

methodological polyamory.²⁹ Methodological polyamory frees the researcher to use traditional methodological approaches in unique ways with the goal of exploring the complexities of the issue at hand. In this way, I have drawn from several traditions and have applied these methods in a range of ways. Grounded theory, autoethnography, content analysis, paradigmatic analysis of narratives, and narrative analysis are all methodologies that have informed my methodological polyamory. I recognize that many studies use blended methods, and in the end, my choices of methods are not exceptional. However, coming from such a quantitatively structured background, the process of allowing myself the flexibility to explore traditional methods and use them in ways that worked for the study and participants, was itself exceptional, for me. I quickly found myself applying the concepts of polyamory to the process of working through

²⁹ To my knowledge, methodological polyamory is a new term. I use it to describe how I blend methods and methodologies by using the concepts of polyamory to foster a flexible mindset to make methodological adaptations throughout this study. The goal of methodological polyamory is to afford the researcher the flexibility of blending methods to achieve a deeper, more complex understanding of the object of study and for the researcher to be reflexive of their methodological decisions and openly share these with the audience. What made it “polyamorous” for me was that I directly applied the concepts of polyamory (flexibility, multiplicity, openness and honesty) to the research process, in particular when I found myself uncomfortable with the confines of methodological approaches, and when I needed to adapt the research process along the way. In the introduction (pp. 34-36) I discuss how I came to recognize that I had inadvertently built-in certain assumptions into my questions. I discuss how after interviewing Sage, I realized that my interview questions needed to be reworded to open up the possibility for more articulations of polyamory to emerge in subsequent interviews. Changing the questions and allowing myself the flexibility to follow the lead of the participants during the interviews often felt uncomfortable for me. I felt pulled toward maintaining a standardized approach to questioning participants (likely from my training in psychometric testing) and pushed to be more open to adapting the questions (flexibility) or asking the same question in different ways (multiplicity). Another example of methodological polyamory is my blending of grounded theory and narrative analysis in this study; I present several stories as the products that emerged from the interviews instead of articulating a central theory. In these ways, I understand methodological polyamory to be both the process of implementing the concepts of polyamory to this study and also as a product that emerged out of doing this study. I think this approach can be applied at the outset of a project, and can apply to other types of projects. In addition to blending methods and being flexible during the implementation phase, the researcher must also be prepared to apply the polyamorous concepts of openness and honesty by making themselves accountable to their audience by detailing their methodological process. Methodological polyamory requires the researcher to be reflexive and openly detail any changes they make throughout their study. The goal of methodological polyamory is to garner a rich understanding of experience and is distinct from triangulation because it does not seek to corroborate evidence. While I applied the concepts of polyamory to the process of the study, I did not use the term until I had spent considerable time reflecting on this study and after I read Shannon and Willis (2010) and Schippers (2016). Both Shannon and Willis, and Schippers apply the concepts of polyamory to their projects, albeit in different ways than I do. Unlike Shannon and Willis, I do not apply this concept to theory in general, and unlike Schippers, I do not specifically invoke a queering of methods as Schippers does with her *polyqueer* method (p. 28).

methodological choices for the study and not about attaining a specific result of using a specific number of blended methods. In the same way that practicing polyamory does not require a person to have multiple, simultaneous, loving and sexual relationships at all times, applying a methodological polyamory did not place requirements on my methodological choices, rather it allowed me to let go of structure and expectations. Despite this, letting go of structure and expectations was challenging for me at times. The idea of methodological polyamory grew out of my initial struggles of conducting the interviews and I elaborate more on this struggle when I discuss the interview process.

In the same way that polyamory spontaneously emerged in my own life and helped me adapt to my life circumstances, methodological polyamory arose out of the moment when my approach to the interviews became too rigid. I quickly accepted the flexibility that the concept of methodological polyamory afforded me, even as applying it was a struggle at times. The push and pull between allowing flexibility and imposing structure and following rules, resurfaced several times throughout this project; narrative analysis and applying autoethnography would also create tensions for me along the way.

The term *narrative* is often used in a very broad sense by qualitative researchers and carries a range of meanings (Polkinghorne, 1995). In this study, when I use the term narrative, I am using it in this broader sense to refer to all of the discourse produced by the participants when they answered the research questions, engaged in conversation with me during the interview and also when they told their life stories. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews and my encouraging of participants to expand and elaborate in their own self-directed ways, the narratives from this study are a product of questions, conversations and storytelling. In the section of this chapter where I detail the approaches that I used to extract meaning from the

narratives, I explain the application of paradigmatic analysis of narrative data and narrative analysis because I used both of these approaches which were developed by Polkinghorne (1995).

Autoethnography “is a form of narrative research that seeks to systematically analyze the researcher’s personal experience embedded in a larger social and cultural context” (Kim, 2016, p. 123). I draw from this tradition by including my own experiences, subjectivities and struggles with sexualities, identities, and polyamory. Reflection and reflexivity are at the heart of this approach and flow through this project on several levels. While I do draw from my own limited experiences of polyamory and the years of conversations and research I have done about this topic,³⁰ I also reflect upon my subjectivities as they relate to applying methodological polyamory to this study. The process of applying methodological polyamory is documented throughout the study as I share my questions, reflections and feelings with the reader. I have also chosen to write my reflections so that I may be conscious of my subjectivity as I undertake this research and so my readers may hold me accountable for the politics of my knowledge production.

Ronai (1995) presents a layered approach to autoethnography as an ongoing and changing process. She describes the process of writing a layered account of autoethnography in this way:

When I write about my social world, I codify myself on paper. I produce an ad-hoc self ... reflecting and changing my words in a reflexive manner. I write myself, I edit myself, interacting with the self I wrote by objectifying it, judging it, and rewriting it in response. ... The writing subject interacts with the written object. The written self is

³⁰ To provide some context here, these conversations, research, and relations occurred close to two decades ago.

adjusted or rewritten in response to changes in the internal dialogue about the self.

(p. 399)

Ronai highlights the shifts and changes that come from and through the internal dialogue the researcher has with the self through the process of applying autoethnography. I draw attention to this aspect of autoethnographic writing because this process - the dialogue between the written subject and object - has been ongoing in relation to this study for a decade. Further, this is a process that never ends because the rereading of experience and dialogues we have with ourselves continue on after the ideas have been written and codified. While I have written myself into this project, it is important to remember that even though my words on this paper will remain constant, my future reflections and ideas are bound to change and shift. This point also applies to reading the narratives of the participants in this study. The narratives, written in this study, codify the meanings the participants presented at the time of the interview; participants have most certainly shifted their perspectives since they shared their narratives with me. Given this process, what can we learn from these narratives? What do these narratives represent? I suggest that these narratives represent a still frame of a concept in flux as it is constructed through these narratives. Each narrative gives us access into a moment in time, the participant's perspective or their experience expressed through conversation with me. The narratives also provide stories of polyamory that explain motivations and choices that the participants made along their polyamorous journey. These narratives can teach us the many ways that polyamory is imagined, negotiated, storied and constructed in and through the social realm. Further, these narratives can form the basis of theory construction that is grounded in the narratives of people who practice polyamory.

This project applies a grounded theory to the analysis of the narratives with the intent of participating in what Glaser and Strauss (1967/2006) called “*theory as process*; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product” (p. 32). Glaser and Strauss explain that grounded theory as a method can take many forms but they emphasize the *discussional form* of grounded theory:

The discussional form of formulating theory gives a feeling of “ever-developing” to the theory, allows it to become quite rich, complex, and dense, and makes its fit and relevance easy to comprehend. On the other hand, to state a theory in propositional form, except perhaps for a few scattered core propositions, would make it less complex, dense, and rich, and more laborious to read. It would also tend by implication to “freeze” the theory instead of giving the feeling of a need for continued development. (p. 32)

The central goal of this project is to generate a discussional form of theory about polyamory based on the narratives of the participants and my own experiences and reflections to increase the complexity and density of conceptualizations of polyamory. To imagine that these narratives produce something that is unchanging and stable in quality would be to freeze the theory of polyamory, which is not my intention. As I highlight the ever-changing quality of these polyamorous narratives, I place myself in the midst of the ongoing and active process of theory discussion, production and development.

The Place: Guelph Ontario

Why Guelph? Why did I choose to do a narrative study about polyamory in Guelph? Why not choose a larger city or metropolis for the study? Will there be enough polyamorous people in Guelph to conduct this research? People (even some participants) asked these questions of me as I conducted this study. I certainly asked myself the same questions as I pondered each

step of the study. The first answer that usually came to mind was straightforward. I had access to a few people practicing polyamory in Guelph who were interested in participating in my study, so it made sense to do my narrative study there. For quite some time I thought the answer was that simple; however, after living this study for several years,³¹ I began to understand the answer to “Why Guelph?” was far more complicated and personal.

Like many Ontario cities, Guelph began as a small rural town in the early 1800s, though the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation of the Anishnaabek Peoples were the original stewards of the territory on which Guelph is now situated. The downtown core continues to reflect the purposeful planning of its founder John Galt and is alive with thriving businesses, social venues and the marketplace (City of Guelph, 2020).

Approximately 132,000 people call Guelph their home (City of Guelph, 2020). Guelph’s ethnic make-up is Eurocentric as a result of a large influx of Europeans who moved to Canada to escape post WWII poverty in Europe. Although once a small Ontario working class industrial town, Guelph changed with the establishment of the University of Guelph in the 1960s. Many professors moved to Guelph to work at the university, thereby creating a much larger middle class than previously existed. Today, the university remains one of the largest employers in Guelph, and it brings approximately 20,000 students to the city each year. The university students are active in city events and help to shape Guelph’s economy and culture, which focus on agriculture, horticulture, festivals, and the arts. Politically, Guelph has tended to elect Liberal Party government leaders. In 2000, Guelph was the first city in Canada to have three levels of

³¹ The interviews were conducted in 2011-2012.

government positions (federal, provincial, and local) held by women (Stead, 2002). In 2018, Guelph elected the Green Party of Ontario's Member of Provincial Parliament.

Guelph is a community-oriented city. In 2012, the Market Square community gathering space was completed in the downtown centre located in front of Guelph City Hall. Market Square is an active community space lined with local restaurants, coffee shops, businesses and hosts a community skating rink in the winter and a splash pad in the summer. It is common for this space to be used for community events, festivals and political gatherings. For example, it is in this space that I attended a vigil for the families of victims that lost their lives in the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in June 2016. Market Square is also the space where women gathered and marched in solidarity with women all over the world on January 21, 2017.³²

My first memories of Guelph are from my late teens. I would venture off to Guelph to visit one of my high school friends who was attending the University of Guelph. Through my reflections, and re-readings of my own history, I believe that it is during this time that I began to develop my affinity for Guelph. I believe my attraction to Guelph grew out of the freedom that I experienced when I was in Guelph. I attended a private, Christian high school where the religious and spiritual views of my family were taught. These views included living a disciplined life which translated to abstaining from a range of things which included sexual activity before heterosexual-marriage, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco and dancing. In my youth, when I took road trips to Guelph to visit my high school friend, I broke the rules with which I was raised.

³² I want to make note that there are many different community events that take place at Market Square in Guelph, ON. I make note of some of the feminist gatherings to signify that feminists and the LGBTQ2+ community are comfortable to gather and express their views. My experience is that such events typically have hundreds of people in attendance.

In my early adult years, Guelph became a space where I explored, tested boundaries and began the work of understanding myself as a woman. In addition to my personal experiences, an important event occurred in Guelph that emboldened the sense of freedom that I felt there. In July of 1991, Gwen Jacob decided to break the rules by walking down several Guelph streets topless. Jacob was charged and convicted of committing an indecent act by exposing her breasts in public spaces. Jacob fought to appeal her conviction and, in 1996, her appeal was granted and she was acquitted (*R. v. Jacob*, 1996). Jacob's act of civil disobedience challenged the sexist interpretation of law that required only women to cover their breasts in public space in Canada. I distinctly recall thinking how brave Jacob was to bare her breasts publicly and how her act of civil disobedience would change my life as a Canadian woman. This political act strengthened my draw to Guelph and my sense that Guelph was a place where I could test the waters, and where women could push social boundaries and make social change. Guelph became a feminist space of resistance for me – although I doubt I would have worded it in this way at that time.

My attraction to Guelph deepened over time and, during my early adult years, Guelph was the place where I felt free to dress, party, play and be whatever I wanted to be. It is the place where I met and fell in love with the father of my two beautiful sons, where I attended my first Women's Studies class, and where I have spent time with the great loves of my life. It is the place where I first felt most comfortable living my queer sexuality and speaking openly about polyamory. Over my adult life, I have been pulled back to Guelph over and over again, for one reason or another. Recently, I made Guelph my home.³³ Upon reflection, it is clear to me that I have a longstanding love affair and deep attachment to Guelph. Clearly, choosing to conduct my

³³ Guelph is currently my home, but for much of the study, I lived approximately two hours north of Guelph.

narrative study in Guelph was as much about me as having access to participants for my study. Lastly, Guelph became the place for my study because a few people I knew who were polyamorous lived in Guelph and specifically told me they wanted the opportunity to tell their stories of polyamory. These requests gave me the final push to investigate polyamory in Guelph. I started this study knowing three polyamorous people from Guelph; over the course of the study I met 18 more polyamorous people who were excited to share their stories with me.

The People: Finding Participants

At the onset of searching for participants for this study, I visited *Out On The Shelf* (OOTS), the local LGBTQ2+ resource centre located in the downtown core of Guelph, and spoke with a few volunteers who worked there. I described my study and asked if they knew of any spaces in Guelph that were known as polyamorous space. These individuals had no knowledge of such space, but they did assure me that there was a polyamorous community that existed in Guelph, even if it did not exist in an organized way with a dedicated meeting space. The volunteers encouraged me to make contact with the Guelph Resource Centre for Gender Empowerment and Diversity (GRCGED) at the University of Guelph and to pin up my posters on available message boards in downtown Guelph. The support I received from the volunteers at OOTS was invaluable and their assurance that I would find participants for my study was most encouraging.

I created an information poster (see Appendix A) that briefly described polyamory, the inclusion criteria for the study, and my contact information. OOTS circulated my call for participants in the Fall 2011 issue of their newsletter. I hung posters at the University of Guelph

throughout the University Centre.³⁴ I met with the Coordinator of the GRCGED and posted information posters about my study on their bulletin board. GRCGED is a resource centre that “advocates for safety, wellbeing, diversity, inclusion and education within an intersectional framework with empathy and compassion” (GRCGED, 2020, para. 1). I also met with a student representative from Guelph Queer Equality (GQE) to describe my study and ask the GQE to let their members know about my study. GQE was a “queer student-run special status group on campus. ... like a club but with a dry erase wall, a budget line for condoms, and ‘Trans Babe’ buttons. We have a library, free safe-sex supplies, free menstrual products, and more” (Guelph Queer Equality, 2020, para. 1). The representative from GQE invited me to attend events at Queer Identities Week³⁵ to promote my study. I attended the “Queer Sex-Ed: The Sex-Ed You Never Got In High School” workshop and made an announcement about my research.

I also contacted the organizer for the Guelph Kink Munch which is a monthly social gathering of the Kink community. I spoke with the organizer who offered to pass along information about my research at their next gathering. I emailed the organizer a copy of my study description (see Appendix B) to share with anyone he thought might be interested in participating in the study.

I created an email address guelphpolystudy@gmail.com to keep all of the communication and correspondence for the study in one place.³⁶ Typically, a prospective participant would email

³⁴ The University Centre at the University of Guelph is a student-centered space with a cafeteria, hair salon, a pharmacy, a pub, the Guelph Resource Centre for Gender Empowerment and Diversity (GRDGED), the student newspaper and much more. I chose to place my posters in this space because there is generally a high volume of student traffic and community visitors in this space.

³⁵ Queer Identities Week (QIW) is a yearly event at the University of Guelph that celebrates the diverse sexualities and gender identities around the world. The week includes a wide range of educational and social events focusing on celebrating queerness. QIW is sponsored and organized by GQE, GRDGED and other student groups at the University of Guelph.

³⁶ This email address continues to be active and I am the only person who has access to this information. I continued to maintain communication with participants through this email account throughout the writing of this dissertation.

to ask for details about the study. I then replied with the longer description of the study (see Appendix B) and answered any questions they had posed.

I began recruiting participants for my study by contacting three polyamorists who I knew socially and who lived in Guelph. I emailed each one a description of the study (see Appendix B) and invited them to participate and to forward the study information to any other people they knew who might be interested in participating. Creswell and Poth (2018) identify this sampling approach as the snowball technique. Twenty-two people emailed me to inquire about the study and all agreed to be interviewed. One participant cancelled their interview at the last minute because they were re-locating and would no longer be in Guelph or available to meet for an interview.

The Interview Space

Once I had a group of people interested in participating in my study, I located and leased an office for conducting the interviews. It was important to me that the space was suitable so that the participants would feel comfortable to speak openly about their lives. I wanted the participants to feel safe and know that their privacy and anonymity would be protected and I concluded that I would not be able to make the participants feel at ease in a public space or by entering their homes.

As I considered the importance of selecting a private space that would facilitate honest and thoughtful disclosure from the participants, I realized that I was drawing upon my counselling knowledge – I was thinking like a therapist. The knowledge that I gained through my Masters training in counselling, along with eight years of experience doing personal counselling provided me the necessary insight about my role in helping to establish rapport with the participants. I looked for a space that would help establish trust between myself and each

participant, a physical space that would foster an openness for the interviews. This space needed to make them feel both physically and emotionally safe while maintaining a professional esthetic. I also considered accessibility for participants who did not own cars and individuals with a range of bodily abilities.

After exploring shared work spaces, I rented office space in the Guelph Healing Centre (GHC) on Norfolk Street in the downtown of Guelph. The GHC is an older brick home that has been renovated and now provides two stories of office space available for professionals to rent. People who enter this space are typically seeking a range of professional services including psychotherapy, massage therapy, and nutritional consultation. The office I rented was furnished with a desk, a couch, a coffee table and comfortable chairs. There was a central waiting area for clients. This office space was private, professional, warm and inviting. For the period of 10 months or so, this office space was the place where I had the privilege of participating in conversations with polyamorous people and document their narratives.

The three participants who I knew prior to the onset of this study requested that I interview them in their homes. Given they each had private space available in their homes and because I was comfortable entering their private spaces, I agreed. Prior to securing the location at the GHC, I conducted one interview at a rented private office space at 10 Carden St. (now renamed 10C) and another interview took place in a private workspace at the University of Guelph at the request of the participant.

The Process

There are several ways that I could have gathered information from participants. I could have emailed questions to the participants, have them complete a questionnaire or participate in a focus group. I decided to conduct one-on-one interviews for a few reasons. First, given my

training and comfort with a range of interview styles, I believed that I had the skills to foster a positive, interpersonal exchange with the participants. Second, I thought that meeting the participants and having a personal exchange would increase the likelihood of gathering narratives rich with intimate meaning. Josselson (2013) posits, “the fully human encounter with participants is what enables people to tell us the often intimate details of their biographies and psychological states” (p. 12). Last, the interview relationship requires the researcher to participate in the research relationship. The narratives produced through the interview are co-constructions (Josselson, 2013), require the researcher to be reflexive, and prepared to learn from the participants. I was excited to participate in the interview process with participants; I was eager to further explore meanings of polyamory.

The interviews were all conducted in person and were digitally recorded. The recorder was small and exceptional at recording sounds from a distance so I was able to place it out of the way so that it was not distracting. Participants consented to being recorded and were made aware when recording began. Even though participants were given permission to ask that I turn the recorder off at any time during the interview, I did not receive any such requests. Due to the length of the interviews, which were two hours on average, it was common to have one or two breaks during the interview. The recorder was typically turned off during breaks.

My first step upon meeting a participant was to establish the legitimacy of the study and to provide verification of my identity. I accomplished this by introducing myself to the participants, presenting them with my student picture identification card and requesting that they read my ethics approval letter from the university. After this, we reviewed the consent form (see Appendix C) and I addressed any questions or concerns they had before they signed the form and gave me permission to begin the interview process.

I distinctly recall my initial interchange with one participant. After we met, entered the office and reviewed the instructions, he said “oh good, so you aren’t some scary person who is going to murder me!” This comment opened up a brief conversation about how he felt he had actively taken a risk to come to the interview because it was important to him to tell his story about polyamory. He described feelings of apprehension as he walked to the office preparing to meet a complete stranger and have an intimate conversation. He provided me feedback about the space and thanked me for choosing a professional and welcoming space and for immediately offering identification and a description of the study. This conversation confirmed for me that at the least one of the participants perceived participating in this study as a risk and I was relieved that I had developed a process to reassure participants.

I began the interviews by telling the participants a part of my story. I provided biographical information about myself, as well as my social positioning; describing those parts of myself I think make me who I am. While this introduction typically took 10 minutes, it took longer with participants who asked me questions. It is during this part of the interview that I identified my whiteness, sex as female, gender as cis-woman, and my sexuality as queer.³⁷ I briefly described the importance of my mother identity and explained my personal experiences with polyamory and many years of experience observing the polyamorous constellations of close friends. Prior to asking the participants to disclose their information, I had already shared a bit about myself. As I disclosed some personal details, I was careful not to discuss specific views or

³⁷ I use the word *queer* in several ways throughout this project. I use the word queer to describe my sexuality, as an umbrella term to describe sexual practices that counter sexual normalcy and in reference to queer theory. I currently identify my sexuality as queer. At times, I have labelled my sexuality as lesbian or bisexual, however, at this point in time and given my geographical location of Guelph, queer seems to be the most accurate and comfortable way to describe my sexuality.

opinions relating to the interview questions as I did not want to lead them, or encourage any particular views about polyamory. My goal was to establish trust with the participants by first trusting them with my personal information.

I began my interviews by sharing part of my own narrative for two reasons. First, as I would ask them to trust me with the details and narratives of their lives, I believed I should be willing to share some of my own. Second, I wanted to provide the participants with a narrative model that they could follow in the event that they were nervous and unsure of the types of information we would discuss throughout the interview. The following is an example of one of my opening narratives that describes who I was in 2011 when conducting the interviews.

I grew up mostly in the Niagara area, I married a guy in my early 20s and we moved up North in a nice little community and town of 17,000 people. I have lived there now for just over 15 years, I had a strong connection to Guelph, being that my ex-partner was here and we spent time together here, but I also have many friends that are here. I was raised in a pretty strict religious home, went to private Christian schools and so on and so forth. I'm not religious now, I certainly don't practice a religion of any type, I guess, I do practice some Pagan forms of spirituality. I am now married again, to a woman. Between the two of us we have five children, there's lots of stuff going on at home. And a dog who is our baby. We've been married for over three years and we live in suburbia. I have been in poly relationships in the past, not now, and not for any real particular reason. Maybe, I don't know, my life is just too full. I maintain a queer positive, poly positive politics. I identify as lesbian although I also identify as queer. My main area that I study academically, is sex, gender, and sexuality - what I teach and what I'm interested in. I guess I have become interested in poly out of my own personal experiences but also

through meeting other people, and also because I know people [who are polyamorous now] and it seemed like a project that would work.

My goal was to conduct the interviews in a semi-structured format. As mentioned earlier in the section on methodological polyamory, the structure of the interviews ranged from structured, to semi-structured and conversational. At no point did I stop any of the participants from narrating their experiences, even if their narrative shifted away from the original intent of the question. After reflecting on the sixth interview and consciously shifting my interview technique to be less structured, most of the remaining interviews were much less structured. For example, when I asked participants how they defined or described polyamory, their answers ranged from a few sentences to lengthy, detailed answers. I allowed the interview to progress as a guided conversation rather than a structured interview. In some cases, participants provided long, personal narratives about their relationships and experiences. I actively listened, providing occasional verbal acknowledgements and cues to let the participants know that I was paying attention. I did at times mirror their words back as a technique to clarify that I was understanding them correctly. Such phases of the interview are what Kim (2016) refers to as the *narration phase* (p. 167). In these phases, the participant narrates their experiences and the interviewer restricts their interventions, keeping interruptions to a minimum and allowing the narrator to control the conversation. In some cases, participants would narrate and inadvertently give me the answers to dozens of my questions all at once, even before I had the opportunity to ask them. When they were done, we typically entered the *conversation phase* (Kim, 2016, p.169). The conversation phase is when I would ask for clarifications or examples from participants. At times, participants asked me questions and I did my best to answer their questions but not draw them away from the conversation at hand. At times, the narrations of the participants led us into

conversations where I was able to ask more in-depth questions, at times exploring issues that I had not expected to explore. The interviews transitioned back and forth between the narrative and conversation phases.

Some interviews were more structured because a few participants seemed to be more comfortable with a structured format and they were more reluctant to elaborate on their answers without formal questions. A few participants expressed that they appreciated having the questions because it made it easier for them to know how to focus their answers. In general, as an interview progressed, most participants became comfortable expanding their answers and expressing their views and personal reflections on issues and ideas at hand. Others narrated for large portions of the interview providing storied episodes of their lives. Occasionally, participants would check-in with me to confirm that they were providing me with information of interest. I encouraged participants to tell me what they thought was relevant in the way that was most comfortable for them while assuring them that there were no “right answers” or “right ways to answer” the questions. Even though I had a list of questions and a process for building rapport, I followed the participants’ lead and encouraged them to narrate rather than requiring them to answer my pre-determined questions in the prescribed order.³⁸ In many cases, the interviews generally followed the order of my questions, while a few interviews took on a unique shape and flow.

Early in the interviewing stage, I found myself struggling with the lack of uniformity to the interview process and the nagging thoughts relating to my opening narrative in the interviews. I spent considerable time reflecting upon my discomfort. I kept having a nagging

³⁸ In a couple of cases, I emailed the participants after the interview to ask a question that was missed, or to ask for clarification.

feeling that I was doing the interviews wrong, yet I was purposefully conducting them in an open and flexible manner. I came to the conclusion that my many years of training in quantitative statistics and psychometric testing contributed to the discomfort I was feeling, even though I had long ago abandoned the notion that a researcher can be objective.

Through my studies of gender and feminist studies, I have expanded my appreciation for methodologies and research approaches that allow the researcher to move away from strict control and standardization. As part of applying methodological polyamory to this study, I purposely selected a semi-structured interview format because I wanted participants to have the flexibility to speak beyond my questions and potentially lead me into conversations about polyamory that I had not anticipated. I recognized that my own subjective perspective of polyamory would inevitably inform my construction of questions and could limit the conversations that I would have with participants. While I actively chose to use a research approach that would afford participants the freedom to elaborate, narrate and question, I was still uneasy as I began the interview process. As I reflected on and struggled with my anxieties about the narrative interview process, I began to shift my understanding of the whole process. I shifted from the expectation that I would solicit information from my participants, to the deeper understanding of the interviews as collaborative conversations that produced meaning. As the researcher, I was implicated in the co-construction of the definitions and meanings of polyamory (Kim, 2016, p. 169).

Understanding the interviews as a collaborative process increased my ease with the process and I became excited about inviting participants to collaborate with me during the interviews. I openly gave participants permission to comment and inquire about any or all aspects of the study, including my questions. Taking this approach played an important role in

the process of my interviews because the feedback that I received from participants shifted and changed the questions and how I asked them from participant to participant. In fact, my participants pointed out some of the biases and underlying assumptions in my questions; they caused me to reflect and rethink some of my questions. For example, when I asked the question “How do you understand polyamory to be different than monogamy?” Danni, one of the participants answered in this way:

I just [consider it] as the spectrum, right, like I find, for me getting into a relationship is about wanting to develop and support someone else's and your own life ... for me that's what a relationship is about, and that would be true for monogamy or polyamory ... so I don't know if I see them as directly opposite things.

While Danni did not directly challenge the wording of my question, her answer highlights the underlying assumption of the question. This question assumes that the participant believes there is a difference between polyamory and monogamy. For subsequent interviews, I rephrased that question to be open to wider range of interpretations. This example brings to light how it is impossible for researchers to remove themselves from their research. Even though I had worked to develop open-ended questions that did not lead the participants and did not provide them with a particular structure or way of conceptualizing an issue, I did not entirely avoid doing so.

Over time, I became more comfortable with this collaborative process of producing knowledge in the interviews, in fact, it became more dynamic and exciting. I began to realize that these narratives were like painting a picture of polyamory with my participants. Even though I only interviewed one person at a time, and the narratives are independent narratives of polyamory, they are also interconnected. As the researcher, I constructed the interview questions, guided the interview process, and engaged in productive conversations with each participant. In

this way I am one of the factors that connects the narratives. However, as I participated in the collaborative conversations with participants, my own views were reinforced, sometimes challenged and certainly broadened. The information that one participant would present to me would directly affect my conceptions of polyamory and in a sense change me so that when I entered the interview with the subsequent participant, I brought with me knowledge that was partially produced through other interviews and conversations.

The Transcription

I told each of my participants that I would be the only person transcribing their narratives. When I made this proposal, I did not I completely understood the depth of this commitment. I had done transcriptions in the past when studying psychotherapy and also for projects for grad classes. However, I had never completed this volume of transcription before. Making this commitment was driven by my desire to keep the participants' information private. I believed that the participants would feel more comfortable knowing that I was the only person listening to their interviews because they had the opportunity to meet me and know the person they would trust with their personal narratives. In addition, I had a deep desire to know these narratives intimately. I knew that completing the transcription of the narratives would provide me with the deepest understanding of them. So, I made and kept the promise to be the only person who would transcribe the narratives. The process of transcription was long and unfortunately, speech-to-text technology was not advanced enough in 2011 to be helpful.

Initially, I attempted using a process called embodied transcription (Brooks, 2010). This approach to transcribing involves using voice-recognition software; the researcher listens to the participants words and then repeats them, out loud and the computer software transcribes the voice-to-text. Brooks (2010) posits that this method allows the researcher to be a conduit of the

narrative, to actually speak the words of the participants and thereby deepen the researcher's understanding of the participants' position. This method was very appealing to me because I had heard the interviews already, but this would allow me to speak the interviews also.

Unfortunately, I had to abandon this approach because the voice-activated software did not transcribe my voice accurately. In the end, I listened to and transcribed the interviews myself using a transcription pedal and abandoned the use of assistive technology.

It was my belief that the most important part of the transcription was accuracy. I wanted the narratives and conversations to reflect what was said and exactly how it was said. I transcribed by including every word including all of my own words and non-word interjections that I muttered to let the participants know I was hearing them. Every single mutter such as “uh, huh” and “yah” and “uhm” were transcribed for complete accuracy of the narratives. I did not transcribe the full interviews, rather, I focused on the questions and answers relevant to definitions and conceptualizations of polyamory. My first experience with the narratives was in the interviews. Second, I listened to the interviews prior to transcription. Third, I transcribed large sections of the narratives exactly as they were in the recordings. Last, I completed a full review of the transcription and corrected any errors or omissions to make certain they were accurate.

My goal was to present the narratives in their exact form because I did not want to alter the intended meaning of the narrators or impose my own meanings on to their narratives. However, after careful consideration, I became concerned that presenting the narratives in exact form could be very distracting for readers because they would have to sift through all of the disfluencies of the text. After all, the readers of this dissertation do not have the advantage of having been present for the interviews, listening to the recordings, or completing the

transcription of the narratives. I decided to edit the narratives and stay as close to the narrators exact words as possible while removing disfluencies and non-sense interjections that do not add meaning to the narrative. My concern about presenting the unedited narratives was that it may in fact make it more difficult for the reader to understand the intended meaning of the narrator.

In order to improve the readability of the narratives I followed the best practices for transcription (SPOHP Style Guide, 2013) and edited the narratives. I removed words that did not add to the meaning of the text such as “uhm” and “yah” and I removed repeated words unless it was clear that the emphasis was intentional. I did not edit grammar, sentence structure or word choices as I wanted to stay as close to the narrators exact words as possible. Here is an example of the type of editing that was done. The following is the answer to the question “How do you describe or define polyamory?”

Unedited version: how would I define it? Uhm, I would definitely, I would explain
that uhm, it’s basically, uhm, having more, more than one relationship
(Liane: mhm) I guess. Having more than one love.

Edited version: I would definitely, I would explain that it’s basically, having more, more
than one relationship, I guess. Having more than one love.

The Analysis: Narrative Inquiry

While I struggled with the volume of work involved in doing the transcription myself, in the end, I believe that doing the transcription myself was an integral part of the analysis of the narratives. Listening to the narratives so many times and carefully transforming these spoken narratives to text required my astute attention to each participant’s selection of words and phrasings within their narratives. While I did not intentionally plan to analyze the narratives while I was transcribing them, the analysis began at that point. I found myself stopping the

transcription to write notes about the themes and concepts that were emerging from the narratives.

After the transcription process was completed, I uploaded the narratives to NVIVO10 software to continue the analysis of the narratives. The software allowed me to read through the narratives and identify themes as they emerged from the narratives. Although I used computer software to help me in my analysis, I did not use any of the pre-set “search” or “theme” functions as part of my analysis. I used the software to structure my analysis and not to replace or augment my analysis. Because my interviews yielded a range of textual discourse such as direct answers to questions, storying and conversations, I applied methodological polyamory to my analysis by using a variety of approaches to analyzing the narratives.

The questions for the interviews formed the basis of the topics I was interested in researching and became the focus of the interviews with participants. I read across the narratives one question at a time and created the themes of content as they appeared in the narratives. As I went through this process the themes grew and expanded and sub-themes emerged. This approach is most commonly referred to as conventional *content analysis* (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and was used throughout my analysis of the narratives. Once the content analysis was complete, the focus of the analysis moved from the content of the narratives to the interconnections among the narrative themes. During this phase of the analysis, development of grounded theory grew and expanded to include connections among themes that included the plots, events and actions within the stories. This is when the analysis shifted from focusing on content to meanings of polyamory that emerged through the stories. Polkinghorne (1995) describes the approach in this way:

A story is a special type of discourse production. In a story, events and actions are drawn

together into an organized whole by means of a plot. A plot is a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed. ... “The king died; the prince cried.” In isolation the two events are simply propositions describing two independent happenings. When composed into a story, a new level of relational significance appears. The relational significance is a display of the meaning-producing operation of the plot. Within a storied production, the prince’s crying appears as a response to his father’s death. The story provides a context for understanding the crying. (p. 7)

Because I encouraged the participants to elaborate on their answers and freely tell their stories, the analysis of the narratives needed to move beyond content so that the relational significance could be understood.

The storied episodes provide much more than mere elaboration of a concept. They provide explanatory knowledge; the discourse produced through a story is temporally situated including people’s actions and a plot (Polkinghorne, 1995). Polkinghorne (1995) outlines two different approaches to analyzing stories. *Paradigmatic analysis of narratives* occurs when the researcher analyzes storied narratives and “attends to the features or attributes that essentially define particular items as instances of a category” (p. 10). The approach goes beyond basic categorization and includes how various categories interconnect and relate to each other. The second approach to analyzing storied narratives is called *narrative analysis*:

The outcome of narrative analysis is a story ... a life story, or a storied episode of a person’s life. In this type of analysis, the researcher’s task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose. The analytic task requires the researcher to develop or discover a plot. (p. 15)

This form of analysis answers a different question than the paradigmatic approach to analyzing narratives. The stories produced through narrative analysis allows the researcher to consider the why and the how of their narrator's actions.

Polkinghorne's (1995) method of narrative analysis presents a method of synthesis whereby the researcher produces the stories from a wide range of information including public media, personal interviews (including interviews of family and friends of the person at the centre of the story), journals and documents. I use Polkinghorne's narrative of analysis in a very specific way in that I only drew from the storied episodes of narratives and stayed close to the participant's exact wording. For example, I focused on the explanatory knowledge that emerged from the narratives and highlighted sections such as "I am polyamorous because I am anarchist." In this example, the participant told me a story about why they are polyamorous. They went beyond defining or describing polyamory and moved into explaining their motivation for becoming polyamorous.

Throughout the analysis of the narratives, I chose not to privilege those concepts and descriptions of polyamory that were presented at a higher frequency by participants. My experience with qualitative analysis is that researchers often prioritize those themes and ideas that appear more frequently in the narratives. I suspect that this comes from the notion that a higher frequency of a phenomenon is understood as more noteworthy or a more substantial finding. However, when researchers choose to pay more attention to those ideas that are mentioned more often, they may ignore those ideas presented less frequently and thereby create a hierarchy of the ideas. Researchers can potentially marginalize those ideas that are mentioned less, as though they are less true or less representative or outliers of the phenomenon in question.

The purpose of this study is to explore the many meanings, concepts and stories that are constructed as polyamory through these narratives rather than to describe the lived experiences of a particular group of people. These narratives do not, and cannot represent all that is polyamory. They can be used to reflect on, expand, and complicate the ideas of polyamory and to explore individual experiences of polyamory. Considering all the concepts that were explored in the narratives ensures equal consideration of concepts, and resists creating a hierarchy based on my own idea of what is important in relation to polyamory. I acknowledge that even as I struggle to resist privileging certain concepts and imposing a structure to these narratives; the themes, and the concepts are always mediated through my multiple selves. They were constructed through conversations I had with people who practice polyamory, are retold here by me, after I have spent much time (close to a decade) reflecting and reconsidering them for the purpose of this research.

I have applied a methodological polyamory to this study by using the concepts of flexibility and multiplicity that I learned from studying and practicing polyamory to approach the methods of this study in a less rigid way. This approach allowed me to draw from several traditional research methodologies and practices in a variety of ways. I believe that implementing methodological polyamory worked to facilitate the interview process and analyze the rich narratives that emerged from this study.

Chapter Four: Literature Review

Grounded Theory and Reviewing Literature

Applying a grounded theory to this study meant making decisions about when and how I would conduct a literature review of the extant concepts relating to defining and framing polyamory. In their original work on grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967/2006) argue that the researcher must not complete a literature review prior to collecting and analyzing the data, as a precautionary step. They assert that this approach will keep the researcher from inadvertently imposing theories and concepts they gathered from the literature. In addition to avoiding biasing the analysis and interpretation, a researcher applying grounded theory should avoid the use of literature to form hypotheses or predictions. Rather, the researcher uses the literature review to position the grounded theory produced through the research after the fact. In a strict sense, this would mean that the researcher conducts the research, analyzes their data and discovers the grounded theory prior to reviewing the literature. Over the years, Strauss would deviate from this position and advocate reviewing the literature early in the research process (Dunne, 2011).

Dunne (2011) argues that leaving the literature review until after the data analysis is complete is not a workable approach for many researchers and for PhD students in particular. Most researchers, including students, must use a review of the literature to justify their ethics, grant and dissertation proposals. In addition, any researcher that has researched a field extensively or has personal experience with the concepts in question would be disqualified from using this approach. Dunne (2011) posits that there is a growing consensus that achieving a middle-ground approach on this issue is necessary and proposes reflexivity as the “mechanism to counteract the possible negative impact of early engagement with extant literature on the grounded theory research process” (p. 118).

When I initially presented my dissertation proposal, I reviewed the literature on polyamory and I planned to complete an ethnographic study of polyamory in Guelph (see Appendix B). My original goal for the interviews was exploratory and so I asked the participants a wide range of questions, which means that I did not have a hypothesis or argument in mind when I conducted the interviews. When I was nearly done transcribing the narratives, I realized I had an enormous amount of data and I decided to shift the boundary of my research investigation and to focus the study on the narratives alone. The concept of methodological polyamory allowed me to be flexible in my methodology and focus on the rich narratives without feeling that I had failed in the executing my original research plan. After completing my interviews and the narrative analysis, I conducted an updated review of the literature and found that the narratives from this study were well positioned to inform the important debate about defining polyamory as a sexual orientation.

It is noteworthy that the definitions and subjective meanings about polyamory emerged from the narratives before I knew they would be important. I did not ask the participants what they thought about defining polyamory as a sexual orientation because the interviews were completed prior to Klesse (2014b) publishing his first paper that argues against this move. Further, I did occasionally use the term “sexual orientation” with the participants. For example, if a participant was uncertain about my questions “How do you describe your sexuality?” I would substitute the words “sexual orientation” for “sexuality.” In approximately 46 hours of interviews, not once did any of the participants refer to or even allude to polyamory as a sexual orientation.

The following overview of literature presents the research and arguments that relate to defining and describing polyamory. I place the review of the literature after the methodology

section of this dissertation to remind the reader that I applied a middle-ground approach to the study (Dunne, 2011). Further, I do not use the overview of the literature on polyamory as a way to predict or form hypotheses; I review the literature that is relevant to the concepts of polyamory that emerge from this study.

A review of the academic literature on polyamory reveals that polyamory is an unstable object of study – there is no consensus with regards to its meaning(s), relationship practices, identities or politics (Klesse, 2014, 2016, 2017; Tweedy, 2011). Polyamory is typically described as a relational style in which people participate openly and consensually in multiple loving, intimate, and sexual relationships concurrently (Cook, 2005; Frank & DeLamater, 2010; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2006; Robins, 2004; Zell-Ravenheart, 1990). Love, honesty, full disclosure and consent about sexual partnering and practices by each partner are common values in polyamorous constellations (Benson, 2008; Easton & Lizst, 1997; Emens, 2004; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2006, 2007; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2004), yet there may be multiple interpretations of what it means to fully disclose and negotiate consent within each polyamorous constellation and even within each situation. Klesse (2017) notes that there are several key differences in the way that polyamory is defined. In his presentation he outlines the various ways that polyamory has been defined; polyamory has been defined as:

a practice (Lano & Parry, 1995, Oxford Dictionary Online, 2007) ... a relationship model (Sheff & Hammers, 2011) ... a lovestyle and relationship orientation (Anapol, 2010) ... a relationship philosophy (Emens, 2014; Haritaworn et al., 2006) ... an identity (Barker, 2005) ... a discourse (Klesse 2006, 2007) ... and a sexual orientation (Tweedy, 2011). (Klesse, 2017, 5:20)

For a brief moment, let us consider some of the relational possibilities afforded by broadly defining polyamory. Some polyamorous constellations comprise of several people living independently, while others centre on two or three core partners who live together who also have relationships with people outside of this core group. Polyamorous people might include casual sexual encounters in their practices of polyamory while others restrict relationships to loving committed relationships. Some polyamorous people include non-sexual partners, while others are sexual with all of their partners. Polyamorous constellations might be completely open with shifting, flexible boundaries for forming new relationships. Alternatively, individuals could choose to have a closed polyamorous constellation with two or more other people and label their form of polyamory *polyfidelity* (Klesse, 2006). These examples are but a few ways polyamorous relationships could play out. Simply imagining the possibilities associated with people's understandings and conceptualizations of polyamory as it relates to their partners (relationship expectations and boundaries), to themselves (identities and self-concept), and their culture (non-monogamy within a monogamously oriented culture), it becomes clear that polyamory can represent a wide range of lived experiences. Given all of these possibilities, it is noteworthy that none of the participants from this study defined polyamory as sexual orientation or sexuality.

While the academic literature on polyamory presents a range of experiences that are constructed as polyamory, the literature does provide distinctions of what polyamory is not. Polyamory is often distinguished from other non-monogamous cultures and practices such as swinging (Sheff, 2005, 2006) and BDSM (Bauer, 2010) because it emphasizes intimacy and love as central components in sexual relationships (Klesse, 2006; Sheff, 2005, 2006), with some polyamorous communities placing additional emphasis on community values (McDonald, 2010). Swinging, in contrast, is presented as a non-monogamous practice where the goal is typically to

preserve the primary couple's loving, committed, intimate and sexual relationship while having recreational sex with other couples, for the most part (Phillips, 2010). Phillips (2010) explains the dyadic containment of swingers in this way:

The committed dyad forms the hub from which all recreational sexual activity begins for most swinging couples, who go to great efforts to present themselves as a couple, thus simultaneously protecting the dyad. Unlike some polyamorous communities, swingers are less committed to a sense of community. (p. 72)

Monogamy remains the foundation of swinging relationships; the swinger is sexually non-monogamous but emotionally monogamous (McDonald, 2010; Phillips, 2010). Bauer (2010) suggests a similar dynamic in BDSM communities:

‘Open relationship’ may be more accurately described as emotional monogamy with sexual and/or BDSM non-exclusivity, if the openness is solely directed at sexual and BDSM encounters with third parties. This model seems to be the most common among BDSM queers and by some it is considered non-monogamy, by others emotional monogamy. (p. 146)

In contrast to most swinging and BDSM practices, polyamory encourages deep intimate bonding with all partners, whether they are in long-term committed relationships or more casual ones (Klesse, 2006; Phillips, 2010; Sheff, 2005, 2006). Having said this, there are likely individuals who perceive their swinging and BDSM practices to be more relationship and community based. The rather small amount of academic research on non-monogamous practices and cultures in general, likely does not present a full or complete picture of non-monogamous practices. Further, that these non-monogamous practices (polyamory, swinging, BDSM, open-relationships etc.) overlap is quite probable as similar behaviours and practices may be labelled differently and

understood through different frameworks and social positions. For example, one couple may understand their sexually intimate relationship with another couple as polyamory – a primary couple having a meaningful relationship with another polyamorous couple that may last for years. However, another couple may label the same type of relationship situation as swinging – choosing to swing with the same couples over a prolonged period of time rather than swinging with new couples regularly. Further, there are most likely people who consider themselves as participating in multiple communities at one time; a polyamorous person who is also actively involved in the BDSM community and occasionally enjoys attending swinging parties.

Polygamy and polygyny³⁹ in particular, are considered distinct from polyamory because “both men and women have access to multiple partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing it from polygyny” (Sheff, 2006, p. 621-622).

Polygamy is defined as a criminal act in section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada:

Polygamy

293 (1) Every one who

(a) practises or enters into or in any manner agrees or consents to practise or enter into

(i) any form of polygamy, or

(ii) any kind of conjugal union with more than one person at the same time,

whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage, or

(b) celebrates, assists or is a party to a rite, ceremony, contract or consent that purports to sanction a relationship mentioned in subparagraph (a)(i) or (ii),

³⁹ The online Oxford English Dictionary defines *polygamy* as “The practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time” and *polygyny* as “Polygamy in which a man has more than one wife.”

is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years. (p. 339)

In 2011, the Supreme Court of British Columbia reviewed the constitutionality of s. 293 and provided clarification of the interpretation of the law on polygamy in Canada. This case brought forward a discussion on the history of polygamy in Canada, North America and around the globe, and it also considered evidence (including expert testimony and testimony of polyamorous people) presented on polyamory as a non-monogamous practice in Canada. The Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association (CPAA) participated as interested persons in this case and presented evidence to the court. CPAA presented Strassberg's (2003) definition of polyamory to the court that distinguishes polyamory from traditional polygamy. Strassberg (2003) notes:

Contemporary practitioners have coined the names "polyamory" and "polyfidelity" to describe a wide range of partner arrangements that vary as to the number of people involved, the sexes of those involved, the sexualities of those involved, the level of commitment of those involved, and the kinds of relationships pursued. Imagined as a form of commitment which is flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the individuals involved, rather than a rigid institution imposed in a cookie cutter fashion on everyone, the new polygamy reflects postmodern critiques of patriarchy, gender, heterosexuality and genetic parenthood. Such a "post-modern polygamy" might occasionally look like traditional patriarchal polygamy, but it differs in important ways. For example, it could as easily encompass one woman with several male partners as it could one man with multiple female partners. It also includes the expanded possibilities created by same-sex or bi-sexual relationships, neither of which is contemplated by traditional polygamy. (pp. 438-441)

CPAA further presented information that defines polyamory as a practice that values relationships over casual sex, emphasizes sex-positivity, and the informed consent of all partners involved. The court considered evidence that positioned polyamory as an object of popular culture, legal scholarship and academic inquiry starting in the 1990s and that numerous polyamory community organizations exist in Canada and the US and internationally (Supreme Court of BC, 2011).

Upon considering the various arguments relating to polygamy and polyamory in relation to the interpretation of section 293 of the criminal code on polygamy, The Honourable Chief Justice Bauman concludes:

that properly interpreted, s. 293(1)(a) prohibits practicing or entering into a “marriage” with more than one person at the same time ... The offence is not directed at multi-party, unmarried relationships or common law cohabitation, but is directed at both polygyny and polyandry. It is also directed at multiparty same-sex marriages.⁴⁰ (Supreme Court of BC, 2011, p. 185)

In addition, Bauman acknowledges that polygamous conduct may look similar to some polyamorous constellations (one man in a polyamorous constellation with several women), but points to marriage as the distinguishing factor between these two practices. Polygamy is based on group marriage and polyamory is not. He advanced that “Polyamory is, I conclude, a largely secular phenomenon, as varied in practice as the imagination of its practitioners” (Supreme Court of BC, 2011, p. 194). So while polyamorous constellations may potentially overlap other non-monogamous practices (swinging, BDSM) in how polyamory is lived and even perceived by

⁴⁰ The online Oxford English Dictionary defines *polyandry* as “Polygamy in which a woman has more than one husband.”

outsiders, polyamory has been legally distinguished from polygamy.⁴¹

For the most part, the academic literature on polyamory defines polyamory broadly and flexibly, including polyamory in all of its forms and lived experiences (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004; Barker & Langdridge, 2010a; Haritaworn, et al., 2006; Klesse, 2007, 2014, 2016; Munson & Stelboun, 1999; Rambukkana, 2016; Sheff, 2005, 2006). Polyamorous discourses that contribute to a range of meanings of polyamory are considered by Klesse (2006) and also Tweedy (2011), who proposes framing polyamory as a sexual orientation for anti-discrimination legal purposes in the United States. With the emergence of this debate, the definition of polyamory itself became the focus of analysis in the academic literature. Tweedy’s publication opens up an academic debate about the pros and cons of narrowing the definition of polyamory so that it could be included under the label of a sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual). Robinson (2013) responds to Tweedy by arguing that monogamy/polyamory are better framed as strategic identities and Klesse (2014b, 2016, 2017) responds by reviewing the numerous negative outcomes potentially associated with narrowing the definition of polyamory and naming it a sexual orientation. Klesse (2016) firmly concludes that the negative outcomes (which will be discussed later in this literature review) outweigh the potential protections that polyamorous people might receive through anti-discrimination laws should polyamory be included in the definition of sexual orientation. While the academic literature involved in this debate is most relevant to this dissertation, the debate itself is best understood against the backdrop of the major publications on polyamory that have broadly defined polyamory since the

⁴¹ Barnett (2014) cautions that while the distinctions between polyamory and polygamy were made by the Supreme Court of British Columbia, polyamorists in Canada do not enjoy full protections under the law. In Canada, “polyamorists are ‘saved’ from explicit criminalization, but only as long as their community and its unions remain unrecognized. Polyamorists’ position as marginal citizens is reaffirmed” (Barnett, 2014, p. 63).

mid-1990s (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Barker & Langdridge, 2010a; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2007; Munson & Stelboun, 1999; Rust, 1996).

The academic literature published prior to Tweedy's (2011) article defined or described polyamory itself broadly and focused on other aspects of polyamory such as its connections to lesbianism and feminism (Munson & Stelboun, 1999), bisexuality (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Rust 1996), gay male and bisexual non-monogamies (Klesse, 2007), power and privilege (Haritaworn et al., 2006), non-monogamies in general (Barker & Langdridge, 2010a). Not only do these publications offer context and a foundation for assessing the debate about polyamory as a sexual orientation, they demonstrate the potential meanings of polyamory (as a practice, identity, sexual politics) available to us when we choose to frame polyamory in a broad and flexible way. While this overview of the literature is not exhaustive, it highlights some of the major contributions to the academic literature on polyamory that demonstrate the various definitions and diverse meanings of polyamory.

Polyamory as Second-Wave Feminist Resistance

The Journal of Lesbian Studies (JLS) published a double issue titled "The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex" in 1999⁴² that primarily focuses on polyamory and non-monogamy through a radical lesbian feminist framework that is characteristic of a second-wave, Western feminist approach. This anthology presents a range of writings on polyamory that define and describe polyamory in a various ways. There is no one single definition of polyamory, rather, the many meanings of polyamory are brought together for one specific purpose which is to deploy polyamory as a second-wave feminist politics that

⁴² This special issue from the JLS was also co-published under the same title by Harrington Park Press in the same year.

works to resist patriarchy. This work is an early example of how feminists used the flexible meanings of polyamory to shift the gendered dynamics of their intimate and sexual relationships.

The authors whose work is published in this double issue examine polyamory and non-monogamy through various academic, activist and artistic approaches. The issue includes essays that analyze the author's personal experiences (Dal Vera, 1999; Gartrell, 1999; Kitaka, 1999; Orleans, 1999; Zambrano, 1999), poetry (Dobkin, 1999), creative writing (Jay, 1999; Lusero, 1999; Sprecher, 1999) and fictional writing (Werhane, 1999). The authors have a wide range of educational backgrounds; some are scholars, while others are educators, counselors, and artists. What brings these varied articles together is their careful and sometimes comical consideration of the model of monogamy from a lesbian feminist perspective.

The title of this anthology positions polyamory as an umbrella-term to include open relationships, non-monogamy, and casual sex, and in many cases the words polyamory and non-monogamy are used interchangeably throughout this publication. In the introduction, Munson and Stelboum (1999) define polyamory broadly, "The term "polyamory" includes many different styles of multiple intimate involvements, such as polyfidelity or group marriage; primary relationships open to secondary affairs; and casual sexual involvement with two or more people" (p. 2). They also draw attention to the language used prior to the emergence of the term polyamory in the 1990s. In the 1960s the label *free love* was used, the 1970s brought the term *open relationships*, the 1980s it was *non-monogamies*; all of these terms, along with polyamory broadly refer to multiple concurrent sexual involvements and relationships. Even though the word

polyamory was not used in the 1970s,⁴³ Siegel (1999) uses the word polyamory to refer to her lesbian non-monogamous experiences from the 1970s. This suggests she understands polyamory as a term that could be used interchangeably with other terms that signified consensual practices of non-monogamy from earlier decades in Western culture. Siegel (1999) brings us back to the 1970s and described Emerald City's Matriarchal Village as "one place among many ... where lesbian villages emerged. ... were characterized by various sorts of 'non-monogamy,' harmonious and not" (p. 127). Emerald city's Matriarchal Village is the backdrop for Siegel's first experience with polyamory. Martin (1999) also makes a connection between lesbian polyamory of the 1990s to her previous experiences in the San Francisco lesbian subculture "as an excellent apprenticeship in the world of open relationships" (p. 135). Not only is polyamory defined broadly in this anthology, it is also used to refer to non-monogamous relationship formations from previous decades which were labelled otherwise. It is noteworthy that polyamory is not used interchangeably with the concept or experiences that we typically consider to be sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual).

While polyamory is broadly defined throughout this anthology, it simultaneously presents lesbian polyamory as distinct and unique. "This anthology assumes a premise that lesbian lives are different from those of men or heterosexual women, and that lesbians can be models of alternative ways of living" (Munson & Stelboum, 1999, p. 6). Stelboum (1999) further differentiates lesbian non-monogamy from heterosexual non-monogamy due to the fact that "its purposes are intrinsically related to the structures that characterize the wide variety of lesbian

⁴³ In *Polyamory in the News!* ... by Alan M., a blog article was posted "First appearance of the word 'polyamorist': 1953!" that identifies an excerpt from *Illustrated History of English Literature, Volume 1* by Alfred Charles Ward uses the word 'polyamorist' to refer to Henry VIII – albeit the word was used it did not refer to the same behaviour (loving, consensual and concurrent relationships).

lives. Lesbian non-monogamy can be a political statement that rejects the confining heterosexual models of monogamy as not applicable to the diverse nature of lesbians” (p. 45). Alternatively, Stelboun describes heterosexual non-monogamy as “a way to make a transition from one monogamous relationship into another monogamous relationship” (p. 45). Stelboun articulates a range of reasons that lesbians may choose lesbian non-monogamy, such as polyamory being a way to foster autonomy, extend friendships and avoid what she describes as the typical struggles lesbians face in monogamous relationships.

This publication constructs lesbian polyamory as an alternate relationship model that lesbians can choose as a way to challenge monogamy, which is considered to be a tool of patriarchy (Dal Vera, 1999; Stelboun, 1999; McPheeters, 1999; Teri, 1999; Zambrano, 1999). Dal Very (1999) describes “becoming a polyamorous lesbian” in this way:

I was 21 and life was full of possibilities. I was also discovering feminism. The idea that lesbians could create new ways of having relationships not based on possessiveness was very appealing to me. Many women-identified women were exploring non-monogamy, creating a world different from and better than the patriarchal limits we grew up with.
(p. 13)

This publication also draws attention to the pressures lesbians were experiencing within the lesbian community to follow the heterosexual model of monogamy (Mushroom, 1999). The heterosexual model is construed as a misfit for lesbians and the struggles (and failures) that many lesbians faced as they worked to successfully follow the model of monogamous coupling was considered proof that lesbians ought to consider alternate relationship models (Dal Vera, 1999; Munson & Stelboun, 1999; Teri, 1999). The tendency to practice serial monogamy with very short-lived relationships (Orleans, 1999; Munson, 1999; Teri, 1999), to move-in with one another

quickly (u-haul syndrome) (Kitaka, 1999; Munson & Stelboun, 1999) only to have this intense sexual flame burn out in a relatively short period of time when they stop having sex altogether (lesbian bed death), were all considered indicators that lesbians were not meant for monogamous coupling. “Lesbian bed death and the realities of lesbian merging are two other elements that enter into any analysis of polyamory: multiple intimate involvements can offer relief from both these problems” (Munson & Stelboun, 1999, pp. 2-3). Polyamory is prescribed as a liberating intervention for lesbians to resist assimilating their relationship models to heterosexual monogamy, remedy their relationship problems and directly challenge patriarchy. Some of the authors extend their rejection of monogamous coupling and the institution of marriage by taking an anti-gay marriage position (Kitaka, 1999; McPheeters, 1999; Teri, 1999).

McPheeters (1999) argues that monogamous marriage is not a natural relationship model but is instead a mechanism of the state that controls women’s lives and keeps them committed to the practice of private property that is the foundation of capitalism. “In conclusion, marriage is not a natural phenomenon, it is a state-defined institution that has roots in sexism and supports capitalism” (p. 203). McPheeters critiques the move to advocate for gay marriage and purports that instead of adding gay marriage to heterosexual marriage, we should abolish marriage altogether and consider alternate relationship models, such as non-monogamy, that are not connected to ownership. Both McPheeters (1999) and Teri (1999) argue that the structure of the monogamous couple and marriage are so ingrained in us that we struggle to imagine alternative relationship models. That lesbians would advocate for gay marriage was considered evidence that lesbians had internalized the marriage ideal and have been “brainwashed into the couple ideal” (Teri, 1999, p. 206).

In some cases, authors of this issue presented lesbian polyamory and non-monogamy as

essentialized identities and biologically determined by framing polyamory as a natural practice for some lesbians (McPheeters, 1999), dating back to pre-Christian matrilineal societies (Stelboun, 1999; Terri, 1999). Willey (2006) asserts that the photographs in this anthology use “sexually uninhibited primitivism” (p.541) to position non-monogamy as authentic and natural. Lusero (1999) describes polyamory as an identity that she considers similar to her sexual identity:

I just kept falling in love with women; it wouldn't stop. So I realized I was a lesbian. Now, I'm a lesbian trying to be in a monogamous relationship. But – I still keep falling in love with women. Finally, I have had to realize that I'm a polyamorous lesbian. (pp. 143-144)

For some of the authors, polyamory is the “naturally fitting” relationship model for lesbians because they are “polyamorous lesbians.”

While this publication considers a wide range of women's experiences, a closer look reveals that the majority of the narratives in this anthology are written by authors who were positioned as White, cisgendered, cissexual and able-bodied lesbians. Only a couple of the articles entered into a more in-depth intersectional analysis - although they did not use the language of intersectionality. Halpern (1999) addresses the biphobia within the lesbian community, naming it “the dirty linen of the lesbian community” (p. 163) and proposes that polyamory not only challenges women to work through fears of sharing partners and lovers, but that it also presents lesbians with the challenge of confronting their biphobia. Zambrano (1999) considers the intersections of gender, sexuality and race as she analyzes her indoctrination into monogamy through Latin-American culture. Based on her experiences in Latin-American culture, Zambrano argues that a paradigm shift can help Latina lesbians consider alternative relationship models to monogamy.

Even though this issue lacks the representation of a wide range of lived experiences, and

presents gender as the uncontested dichotomy of man/woman, it does provide us some of the earliest academic discussions about polyamory and non-monogamies. The term polyamory is used in diverse and flexible ways; it is interconnected and at times used interchangeably with constructs of open relationships and non-monogamous practices that lesbians used to challenge patriarchy and capitalism. Lesbian polyamory is offered as a radical feminist practice, relationship model and identity that challenges patriarchy and offers lesbians alternative ways of doing relationships.

Polyamory as Bisexual Politics

The literature on bisexuality and polyamory demonstrates that some people see a connection between their bisexual identities, bisexual politics and polyamory. The following research focuses on the meanings of polyamory that connects to and intersects with bisexuality. In addition, there are essentialized framings of polyamory that emerge from some of this literature.

Rust's (1996) survey research focuses on exploring how individuals who self-identify as bisexual form relationships. This study of monogamy and polyamory provides substantial data relevant to understanding polyamory, in particular as it relates to bisexuality. In her study, Rust found that monogamy as a primary form of partnership was mostly rejected by individuals who self-labeled as bisexual. She concludes that each polyamorous system is unique, providing support for the notion that polyamory is indeed a flexible and fluid relational system.

In the introduction of "Plural Loves: Bi and Poly Utopias for a New Millennium" (2004) a special double issue published in the *Journal of Bisexuality* (JB),⁴⁴ Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2004) identifies the value of attending to "the intersections of and convergences between bisexuality and

⁴⁴ This special issue from JB was co-published by Routledge under the same title in 2005.

polyamory” (p. 3). The articles published in this issue define polyamory in various ways, emphasizing connections to bisexuality and the bisexual movement. Mint (2004) highlights these interconnections here.

Both movements [bisexual and polyamorous] have grown from the same ideology, and they have shared a significant overlap of members and subcultures. In fact, the large number of bi people in the poly movement provides evidence that bisexuality is one of the major driving forces behind polyamory. In other words, polyamory was created and spread partly to satisfy the need for bisexual relationships structures. (p. 71)

Several other authors in this issue also argue that there is a link between polyamory and bisexuality (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004; Estep, 2004; Rambukkana, 2004; Robins, 2004).

Robins (2004) presents an essentialized perspective on both bisexuality and polyamory. She argues that monogamy is socially imposed on naturally non-monogamous bisexual tendencies by using her childhood experiences as evidence of natural, untarnished non-monogamy and bisexuality.

Rambukkana (2004) draws attention to the similarities of the politics of coming out as a polyamorous person (especially as a straight polyamorous person) and coming out as a bisexual. Each polyamorous person must navigate a divide that Rambukkana calls the “uncomfortable bridges”; the polyamorist stands between the divide of radical and mainstream just as the bisexual is between gay and straight. While this article specifically focuses on the politics of outing, Rambukkana does make note of the variety of polyamories that exist:

All this has led to what I like to think is a multifaceted, multi-traditional practice of polyamory, and to the conclusion that there are as many styles of polyamory as there are

polyamorists - with no single tradition being the sole factor influencing any particular group. (p. 146)

Rambukkana's (2004) framing of polyamory points to the diverse practices and understandings of polyamory as it relates to bisexual identities and relationship experiences.

Another theme that emerges from this double issue is the spiritual significance that polyamory holds for people who have lived and are living in intentional communities (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Konstanza, 2004; Ray, 2004, Sartorius, 2004). Several utopian communities that included non-monogamous and polyamorous practices were held up as examples of successful non-monogamous projects where love and selflessness remain the central focus of relationships (Konstanza, 2004; Ray, 2004; Sartorius, 2004).⁴⁵ Sartorius (2004) presents the Komaja community as an example of an intentional community where one's self-actualization is the central goal in partnerships and where group marriages (also called polyamory) are spiritual methods on the path to self-actualization. Sartorius notes:

Most of the people living bisexually are members of Komaja's tantric groups ... In Komaja one's sexual orientation is not of primary importance and neither is one's form of relationship. The most important thing to strive for is love: the passion of the heart. What counts is the culture of love, as the foundation for a new society. (pp. 90-91)

Polyamory is not the goal of this community but rather part of a spiritual process. Konstanza (2004) presents personal experiences of living in one of the Makaja polyamorous tantric circles called Cherry Blossom. Konstanza refers to polyamorous living as a practice of "responsible non-monogamy" (p. 123) and "group-marriage" (p. 124). Konstanza explains:

⁴⁵ Annina Sartorius (2004) reviews a brief history of several non-monogamous communities in the United States. Examples include the Oneida (1848-1878 with approximately 200 members), the Sandstone Retreat (1970-1974), Komaja (1978 – with 350 members) and the Kerista commune (1970-1991).

Tantra is not about sex. It is about virtues! It is about love, truth, honesty, consciousness ... We live together to practice these virtues and the one who is the best in virtues is ultimately the best in sex. There is no enjoyment of sex without virtues. (p. 128)

Polyamorous living is associated with the Komaja community and the spirituality practiced by its members. Robins (2004) considers a range of 1970s style intentional communities to investigate the non-monogamous contexts from which polyamory is thought to have derived its meaning, at least in part. Robins argues that concepts emerging from these communities have influenced current ideas of polyamory and provide examples of relationship structures and communities that can be used to create more inclusive communities. “My goal has always been for the next generations to have more options, so that we may each kiss whoever we want.” (Robins, 2004, p. 108).

Several authors writing in this double issue use their personal narratives as a foundation for their analyses of polyamory and non-monogamy (Bard, 2004; Rambukkana, 2004; Robins, 2004), while fewer contributors (Al-Zubi, 2004; Pollotta-Chiarolli, 2004; See, 2004) approach their questions by analyzing discourse. Overall, this double issue of *JB* provides important discussions and analyses about the connection of polyamory to bisexuality, spiritual practices and sexual politics. Although this issue makes important contributions to our understanding of the diverse practices of polyamory, it is similar to the double issue from *JLS* in the way it reinforces essentialized sexualities and its lack of consideration of relations of race, class, power and privilege. While Robins (2004) draws attention to race and class privilege by noting “that a variety of definitions [of polyamory] are now floating around. ... The current idea of polyamory was established in the context of a movement prevalently of white, middle-class people” (p. 107), a critical engagement of the implications of race and class privilege with respect to polyamory is

missing. In addition to a lack of engagement with race, Willey (2016) notes the primitivism that emerges from some of the articles in this double issue of JB; in particular those articles (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Anapol, 2004) that focus on utopian and pre-modern non-monogamous communities.

Polyamory, Power and Intersectionality

A third special journal issue on polyamory was published in *Sexualities* (2006). Haritaworn et al. (2006) broadly define polyamory as “a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously” (p. 515). In the introduction, the editors provide a brief overview of the small amount of literature published on polyamory thus far and they express their concerns about the lack of critical engagement with power and privilege. “Writers have neglected the violent racist, transphobic, ablest and bodyist context within which we all, as multiply positioned subjects, negotiate our sexual and partner choices” (p. 517). They further explain how they were surprised and dissatisfied with the academic work that they received from their first call for papers (CFP) and how they consciously shifted the trajectory of the issue by revising their CFP to emphasize the need for critical engagement on polyamory.

Our first call for papers yielded disappointing results. As a collective influenced by anti-racist feminism, we missed a critical engagement with difference. We were also shocked by the racialized new-age imagery in many of the submitted abstracts. We therefore revised our call for papers to focus even more on power relations within polyamorous and other non-monogamous encounters and scenes. (p. 516)

This move marks a particular moment in the academic study of polyamory, and as a result, Haritaworn et al. (2006) presents a journal issue that lives up to its title “Poly/logue: A Critical

Introduction to Polyamory.”⁴⁶

Haritaworn et al. (2006) review several concerns relating to the academic literature on polyamory at that time, identifying the self-help genre as one bias they see in the literature. They posit that within this work there is a lack of recognition that self-help discourses of polyamory have the potential to set up new forms of sexual normalcy and sexual regulation. Secondly, this genre advocates an “abstract individualism” (p. 519) and neglects considering the intersectional power relations. Last, they assert that a “universalistic model of affect” (p. 519) produced through this genre of academic work feeds into notions of the superiority of the West in regards to sexuality.

Drawing on Petrella’s (2007)⁴⁷ research, Haritaworn et al. (2006) propose that the theme of emotional work, that is commonly discussed in the self-help genre of polyamory discourses, reflects a Protestant ethic that positions polyamory as a superior relationship ethic. They argue that conducting analyses from the frameworks of whiteness and other dominant identity positions can be used to critically examine the universal model of polyamory and thereby help us consider the people and practices excluded by this model.

There is a range of critical work presented in Volume 9 of *Sexualities* (2006). Themes of critical engagement with theories of power and privilege run through this issue (Ho, 2006; Klesse, 2006; Noel, 2006; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Sheff, 2006; Willey, 2006). This volume of

⁴⁶ This is not to say that there were not any scholars thinking and writing critically about polyamory prior to this moment. Sheff (2005), Klesse (2005), Rambukkana (2004) are examples of work that were moving in the direction of critically examining polyamory. I draw attention to this moment because it signals a conscious and purposeful act of resistance to reproducing knowledge that ignores power.

⁴⁷ At the time of Haritaworn et al.’s (2006) publication, Petrella’s chapter “Ethical Sluts and Closet Polyamorists: Dissident Eroticism, Abject Subjects and the Normative Cycle in Self-Help Books on Free Love” was forthcoming in Alejandro Cervantes-Carson and Nick Rumsfeld (Eds), *Sex and Sexuality*. Tijnmuiden: Inter-disciplinary Press (with Rodopi).

articles challenges race and class privilege (Noel, 2006; Willey, 2006), explores hegemonic masculinities in polyamorous communities (Sheff, 2006), and traces the scientific racism of Western concepts of monogamy and whiteness (Willey, 2006).

Willey (2006) identifies heterosexuality and monogamy as the ideals of the Christian Nation and argues that they are juxtaposed to the Polygamic Races. As the basis for her argument, she analyzes historical writings that are foundational to Western concepts of sexuality and relationship formation, such as Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Further, she argues that the second wave of Western feminism contributed to the building of "anti-polygamic races" in its arguments against Mormonism and other forms of polygyny as relationship formations that oppress women. Willey (2006) concludes whiteness must be seriously considered: "I have sought to frame whiteness (both as hegemony in poly discourse and as a site of investment that reinforces compulsory monogamy) as a central problem for antiracists feminist theorists of non/monogamy" (p. 542).

In addition to Willey's (2006) work, Klesse's (2006) argument about the contested discourses of polyamory, are especially relevant to this dissertation. Drawing on empirical work from his ethnographic study on polyamory and non-monogamies, Klesse (2006) proposes that polyamory is a contested term. While he argues there is no single unified discourse of polyamory, he identifies strong themes of love and honesty that emerge from polyamorous discourses. When polyamory is framed as "responsible non-monogamy" it works to distinguish polyamory from other forms of non-monogamy and privilege it as ethical. "As a love-and intimacy-centred discourse polyamory can be presented as being superior to other forms of non-monogamy that emphasize more strongly the pursuit of sexual pleasure" (p. 578). Klesse notes that by attempting to distance their practice of polyamory from anti-promiscuity discourses,

polyamorists participate in the creation of polyamory's "others."

Barker and Langdridge (2010a) published a collection of academic essays and research articles about non-monogamous practices in Western culture. This publication responds to Haritaworn's et al. (2006) call for critical engagement with polyamory, and non-monogamies in general, as it is rich with academic work that addresses issues of power and privilege. For example, asexuality (Scherrer, 2010), disability (Iantaffi, 2010), trans (Richards, 2010), parenting (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2010), power mechanisms (Mint, 2010), privilege and the public sphere (Rambukkana, 2010), and therapy (Easton, 2010) are all considered in relation to polyamory specifically. This publication further considers cultural representations, intersections, distinctions and theory of non-monogamies in Western culture. While none of the articles in this collection specifically focus on the definitions of polyamory per se, they speak to the wide range of ideas and practices that continue to be associated with polyamory.

Polyamory as "Sexual Orientation"

Emens (2004) argues that monogamy continues to be compulsory in Western culture and that relationship practices such as polyamory are considered maladaptive and unhealthy. In her argument about monogamy's law, Emens (2004) lays the foundation for framing polyamory as a sexual orientation when she states "The suggestion of an essential poly identity presents intriguing possibilities for a politics based on an ingenuous or a strategic essentialism through which polys could try to build an image of themselves as a discrete minority" (p. 350). In 2011, Tweedy published an article in the *University Of Cincinnati College Of Law Scholarship and Publications* titled "Polyamory as Sexual Orientation." Tweedy's (2011) article examines the possibility of including polyamory under the legal definition of sexual orientation. The intended goal of this move would be that polyamorists be protected by the same anti-discrimination

employment legislation that currently protects Americans from discrimination based on sexual orientation. However, Klesse (2016) notes the gains would likely be minimal because these protections would only apply to a small group of polyamorists and would also narrow the definition of polyamory.

Tweedy's (2011) analysis begins by defining polyamory as "a preference for having multiple romantic relationships simultaneously" (p. 1462). Further in her article, Tweedy considers the various ways that polyamory is understood and lived and expands the meaning of polyamory by explaining that, for some people, polyamory is a lifestyle and for others it is a theory that emphasizes feminist ideals.⁴⁸ Tweedy adds that polyamory is a relationship-based practice that involves the full knowledge and consent of all partners and distinguishes polyamory from "more casual types of non-monogamy such as swinging" (p. 1479). Last, she notes that polyamory is often connected to bisexuality. While Tweedy's definition emphasizes that polyamory is a preference, she presents a range of ways that polyamory is understood and acknowledges the variations in practices and meanings of polyamory in Western culture. In addition to reviewing the current meanings of polyamory, Tweedy also reviews the current meanings of sexual orientation.

Tweedy (2011) establishes the current definition of sexual orientation by comparing the legal definitions across the United States at that time. Based on this review, dictionary definitions of polyamory and the Federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Tweedy contends that "sexual orientation is almost universally understood to signify whether a person is attracted to members of the same sex, the opposite sex, or both sexes" (p. 1463). Tweedy concludes that this

⁴⁸ Tweedy (2011) draws on Emens' (2004) article "Monogamy's Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence" where Emens lists five main principles of polyamory "self-knowledge, radical honesty, consent, self-possession, and privileging love and sex over other emotions and activities such as jealousy" (p. 283).

evidence suggests that there is “cultural agreement that the term sexual orientation describes the sex of those to whom a person is attracted. The salience of the term in our culture in turn implies that the sex of the objects of each person’s attraction says something important about her or him” (p. 1465-1466). Tweedy points out that the essentialist basis of the definition of sexual orientation helps people gain legal protections but that it also has negative outcomes as it “may whitewash the richness and complexity of LGB identity in order to project a more monolithic identity that will be presumably saleable in a courtroom” (p. 1470). Drawing on Foucault (1976/1978) and Butler’s (1990) work, Tweedy identifies the essentialized approach to defining polyamory as a sexual orientation to be problematic because as an identity it is a product of late nineteenth century (Western) sexual regulation (Foucault, 1976/1978) and is further constructed through performance (Butler, 1990). Despite recognizing the downsides to the current definition of sexual orientation, Tweedy proposes expanding the definition of sexual orientation to include additional sexual preferences and thus include polyamory under this definition. In addition, Tweedy also indicates that opening up the definition of sexual orientation to include other preferences (such as polyamory) could end up weakening human rights legislation that typically treat sexual orientation the same as race – what is considered an essential human category and identity under the law.

Tweedy applies a model of embeddedness to polyamory and concludes that polyamory is “at least moderately embedded as an identity” (p. 1514), suggesting that at least for some people polyamory is a more permanent and essential identity. While Tweedy does consider the drawbacks of the politics of essentialized identities, she nonetheless recommends integrating polyamory as sexual orientation into legislation. Tweedy’s provocation inspired arguments among scholars and advocates of polyamory; Robinson’s (2013) findings and Klesse’s (2014b,

2016, 2017) arguments challenge Tweedy's argument about applying a sexual orientation model to polyamory.

Robinson's (2013) study investigates how bisexual women frame monogamy and polyamory. This study demonstrates that bisexual women (trans inclusive) strategically shift their identities between monogamy and polyamory. These results challenge the argument that polyamory is an immutable identity. Robinson concludes that "viewing monogamy and polyamory as strategic identities, rather than fixed sexual orientations can enable health care practitioners to avoid making facile assumptions about the sexual practice of their clients" (p. 34). Robinson (2013) opposes Tweedy's (2011) proposal to define polyamory as a sexual orientation and suggests that conceptualizing monogamy and polyamory as strategic identities rather than sexual orientations would be more productive for health care workers who support bisexual women.

Klesse (2014b) postulates that the academic literature defines polyamory in several ways with a more recent turn to defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. Klesse traces discourses of sexual orientation as they relate to important debates from the fields of sexology, social sciences and sexual politics in Western culture. He further reviews the theories of sexual orientations and critiques of this approach of classifying and organizing sexual desire and identities because such approaches uphold the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality. Last, Klesse presents several compelling arguments that outline the potential negative outcomes of defining polyamory as a sexual orientation through law. Defining polyamory as sexual orientation will likely reduce its transformative potential and ability to disrupt the binaries of the sex/gender system and would achieve legal protection for a small minority of the people currently practicing polyamory.

Klesse (2014b) argues that defining polyamory as a sexual orientation would work to distinguish

polyamory as a specific sexual minority and would create even more divisions amongst various practices of non-monogamy and reduce the potential for building alliances across all non-monogamous practices. Klesse (2014b) states:

Advancing the equation of polyamory with sexual orientation, therefore, carries significant risks. It gives away the unruly potentials of polyamory and narrows the discursive terrain for articulating a more radical politics around non-monogamy and polyamory. (p. 95)

Klesse (2016) argues that “the mobilization of polyamory as sexual orientation legitimizes a deeply engrained way of thinking about sexual identities and desires, which continuously produces outsiders. ... Sexual orientation discourse will reify and limit not only poly subjectivity, but also poly relationality” (pp. 1365, 1366). Klesse (2016) again concludes that defining polyamory as a sexual orientation can only achieve selective protections for polyamorists at best.

In Klesse’s (2017) keynote lecture “Polyamory-Identities, the Law and Sexual Orientation Thinking,” Klesse outlined several ways that polyamory has been defined in the academic literature. Klesse (2017) is

interested whether it is worthwhile to conceptualize polyamory as a sexual orientation for the sake of pragmatically advancing a kind of a rights agenda around consensual non-monogamy and polyamory, as a means to get towards a social, cultural and legal recognition of polyamory as [an] alternate relationship. (Klesse, 2017, :50)

Klesse critiques this approach and outlines the range of risks associated with such a move. He notes that discourses of sexual orientation rely on the binaries of sex and gender and that they emerge out of a history where same-sex desire was pathologized and researchers sought to

identify the origins of homosexuality. Klesse reminds us that the sexual orientation research “mostly has been taking place in a cultural environment which has been hostile to same-sex desire” (Klesse, 2017, 28:22). Klesse cautions that including polyamory as a sexual orientation could reduce polyamory’s potential to disrupt the binaries of sex and gender because sexual orientation discourse is based on rigid categories of sex and gender. Further, it invokes an argument of nature, which can work to depoliticize polyamory as a transgressive practice and or identity. Defining polyamory as a sexual orientation brings us closer to the argument that “we should be protected because it’s [polyamory] natural. It’s nature, and because it’s natural, it’s normal” (Klesse, 2017, 38:50). However, arguing that polyamorous people deserve rights because polyamory is natural, works to privilege certain practices of polyamory and creates deeper divides amongst other forms of consensual non-monogamies in Western culture. It could further reduce the possibility of building a coalition politics across a range of consensual non-monogamies.

This dissertation is positioned within the debate about the meanings of polyamory and more specifically the debate about applying a model of sexual orientation to polyamory. The narratives that form the basis of this dissertation demonstrate a wide range of conceptualizations that are all framed as polyamory.

Chapter Five: The Narratives

Introduction: The Diverse Subjective Meanings of Polyamory

The 21 narratives that I gathered through interviews provide a variety of definitions and conceptualizations of polyamory. The narratives demonstrate that polyamorists resist⁴⁹ heteronormative and homonormative monogamy in various ways based on their diverse understandings of polyamory; polyamory means different things to different people. Polyamories that are flexible, validate non-sexual partners, and increase personal freedom - all which challenge mononormativity. However, even as participants define polyamory, and negotiate their polyamorous identities in ways that challenge sexual normalcy, their conceptions of polyamory also reproduce certain aspects of heteronormative and homonormative monogamy by privileging love and making essentialist claims.

So what is polyamory? All of the narratives describe polyamory as simultaneous intimate romantic relationships with more than one partner, and involving informed consent from all people involved in the relationship constellation about the nature of their roles and relationships. Beyond these two foundational aspects of polyamory, people describe polyamory as having many purposes and iterations. There were no other consistent aspects or conceptualization of polyamory across the various narratives.

I asked participants how they understand polyamory in relation to their sense of self. Do they consider polyamory as part of their identity, or as a practice, or in a completely different

⁴⁹ I am defining resistance as daily acts of living that counter and challenge dominant discourses and cultural prescriptions of sexuality, gender, family, and kinship systems. Participating in these daily acts are in and of themselves acts of resistance even if the actor is not intentionally participating in them for political or ideological reasons. I even consider participants who have chosen polyamory solely because of their own personal preferences and comforts to be participating in an act of resistance because the act of constructing polyamorous constellations directly challenges heteronormative and homonormative monogamy in Western culture.

way? Based on the participant narratives, the following sections outline the diverse ways that participants construct meanings of polyamory in relation to their self-concept. I gave consideration to all of the framings and conceptualizations of polyamory and polyamorous identities, even if a particular aspect was brought up by only a single narrator.

For the most part, the narratives demonstrate that people engaged in significant self-reflection as part of the process of integrating polyamory into their self-concept. Participants who claim a polyamorous identity typically provide a rationale for having come to this conclusion. Participants present experiences, behaviours, thoughts, and emotions in relation to polyamory and monogamy as a form of evidence that substantiates their polyamorous identity and likely promotes the development of a polyamorous self-concept.

Honesty and Consent in Polyamorous Relationship Constellations

The importance of honesty and consent is highlighted in all 21 narratives. Participants were clear that polyamory is not cheating because polyamory is practiced with their partners' knowledge of other relationships and with their partners' consent. According to the narratives, the practice of polyamory involves disclosing intentions, desires, and details about relationships to other partners. In her narrative, Hannah explains that her understanding of polyamory "encompasses being in relationships with people where there's understanding [that it's] open and honest and consensual." Lani explains that polyamory is "a consensual relationship between more than two people."

Having open and honest relationships that involves communication with partners is an important aspect of having polyamorous relationships for all participants. For Josephine, this means that all of the people who are involved in her polyamorous constellation are not only

aware of the various relationships that others are having, but they are also supportive and accepting of these relationships. Josephine explains:

Being open and honest, that's sort of the key things: being open and honest [and] consensual. Everybody knows everything about everybody, and it's all clear, and everybody is fully on board and knows ... how things go and what the main kind of underlying ideas are around [the relationship] and that sort of thing.

Sage explains that polyamory not only requires honesty but also a significant amount of communication and care. While being open and honest is the goal of polyamorous relationships, it does not necessarily mean that these conversations and confessions of desire and love are easy. In her own words:

Polyamory requires a whole lot of honesty, and a whole lot of communication when approaching a lover or partner about issues of the heart, it's so so so important to do so with open ears and with compassion and sometimes, sometimes it just hurts.

Sage explains that it is more than just being honest with partners and informing them about other relationship interests or attractions. Polyamory is about valuing the relationship with each partner enough to take the time to communicate and work through any emotional reactions that partner(s) may be having. Polyamory is about each individual being committed to sharing information with each partner with kindness and consideration for individual feelings and emotional reactions. This narrative emphasizes the complex relationship interactions that some forms of polyamory require. To commit to attending to the needs and desires of all members in the polyamorous constellation would mean a significant commitment to having complicated negotiations with partners to work through emotions and relationship dynamics. I imagine that this would require a significant time commitment and would require members to have strong

social and communication skills so they could successfully navigate their polyamorous relationship constellation.

Polyamory is About Forming Loving Relationships

All participants describe polyamorous relationships as having, or potentially having, multiple simultaneous relationships. Many participants emphasize that these relationships ought to be loving and emotionally close to be defined as part of a polyamorous constellation. Here are a sampling of the types of definitions of polyamory that arose in the narratives. Note the emphasis in these narratives is not only on having multiple partners simultaneously, but that the relationships are loving, intimate, and emotionally connected:

Sage: Polyamory would maybe be the act of loving, emotionally, physically and spiritually on a number of levels with a number [of] different people.

Danni: So for me, polyamory would be, doing relationships in a kind of loving and respectful way, potentially with multiple partners.

Lani: I break it down, like poly meaning more than one from Latin, and amory meaning love. So, I have more than one love.

Jordan: I usually explain it to people as, being able to share your love with multiple people at the same time.

Lisa: I would definitely explain that it's basically, having more than one relationship. Having more than one love.

Brittany: [Polyamory is] just multiple, simultaneous, loving relationships.

Mark: Informed consensual relationships with more than one person at a time, romantic relationships.

Jeff: The polyAMORY part [Jeff's emphasis], the amory, the amorous, the love part, the emotional. That's usually what I find or understand to set it apart, it's not just the physical, consent to go and do something physical [sexual], it's-it's biggerrrrr, harderrrr. More complicated!

Jeff's narrative clearly emphasizes the loving and emotional aspect of polyamory. He draws a distinction between consensual non-monogamous loving relationships and consensual sexual encounters. Several participants made similar distinctions, that polyamory is about love and is more than, or bigger than, consensual recreational sex with multiple partners. I noted this emphasis on love and wondered why it was so important for them to emphasize love and relationships as key defining features of polyamory. All participants express that they saw nothing wrong with people practicing other forms of consensual non-monogamy, it's just that for them, polyamory was about love and not recreation. I reflected on this connection between polyamory and love. I wonder, if on some level, prioritizing love as a key feature of polyamory is about framing polyamory as a more acceptable or maybe respectable practice? Several participants align their polyamory with the concepts of love and commitment that are typically associated with monogamy. Were they doing this because it made polyamory a more acceptable option for them? On some level, might they understand polyamory to be morally above other non-monogamous practices?

I do not think that the participants would say that polyamory is morally superior compared to other consensual non-monogamous practices. At no point did any of the participants state that everyone should be polyamorous. However, their narratives privilege love and demonstrate that concepts of sexual normalcy are deeply ingrained in their concepts of polyamory. Even when participants actively conduct their relationships in ways that challenge

sexual normalcy, their concepts of relationships continue to be bound by normative concepts of monogamy.

The emphasis on love reinforces Klesse's (2006) argument that polyamorists invoke normative discourses of love and commitment as a way of setting polyamory apart from other practices of non-monogamy that work to create a hierarchy among non-monogamies.

Rambukkana (2015) further draws attention to the hierarchies of power and privilege as they relate to non-monogamies in the public sphere and agrees with Klesse (2006) that polyamorists often construct polyamory as the moral and superior non-monogamy in comparison to other non-monogamous practices. Both Willey (2006, 2016) and Rambukkana (2016) propose that discourses of whiteness are bound up in discourses of polyamory, framing polyamory as the superior (White) practice of non-monogamy compared to polygamy which is presented as the criminal and inferior (racialized) practice of non-monogamy. In this sense, the narratives work to reproduce the hierarchy of non-monogamies. This is one of the ways that whiteness reveals itself in the study.

Not only do participants describe polyamorous relationships as loving, but a couple of participants also present a particular view of love. This view posits that humans have a limitless amount of love and hence the capacity to love more than one person intimately and simultaneously. Constructing love as limitless allows for the addition of other partners without diminishing the love that exists in any current relationships. Corey explains this view of love as follows: "I would say that our ability to love and to give in an emotional and spiritual and sexual way is not finite. ... it's not a pie that you sort of give all to one person."

Jordan proposes that love has the ability to expand as it includes more partners. In this way, Jordan constructs polyamory as increasing our love capacity:

I really think that our hearts are not things that are to be divided up into little tiny pieces and that you can only like, once your heart is filled with one person, that nobody else can come in. I think that hearts and love is something that can expand, and keep expanding, and bringing more in, and having love just keep growing. Rather, than, this idea, that if I'm in love with one person and then I have an attraction for somebody else, that means that I love this [first] person less ... like the cup's only so big that once it's that full with love, you can't put any more in. I don't really see that or understand it [that way].

Both Corey and Jordan's narratives present love as limitless and shareable. Their narratives propose that the practice of polyamory is a way of expanding the capacity for love.

Heteronormative and homonormative discourses of monogamy emphasize that each individual should seek one person with whom to have a life-long loving and intimate relationship that fulfils all emotional and sexual needs. For Corey and Jordan, polyamory is about rejecting the notion of "one true love" or a "soul mate." Even though Corey and Jordan's definitions of polyamory privilege the concept of love, their framing of love as expansive challenges mononormativity.

Constructing love as limitless challenges the myth of "one true love" that we associate with heteronormative and homonormative monogamy and marriage. The normative approach in Western culture is to limit intimacy, sexual encounters, and romantic love to one person at a time. If we share this love with someone other than our spouse or monogamous partner, we risk diminishing and tarnishing the love bond that we have with our one true love. Breaking the bond is about breaking the promise to stay monogamous, and thereby destroying the best, deepest and most special love that can apparently only happen between two people. Corey and Jordan's narratives propose that sharing love with more than one person does not diminish love, rather is

causes it to expand and grow. The idea that love is limitless challenges heteronormative and homonormative notions that love must be preserved and shared with one special person. In their view, not only is it possible to share and expand one love, it is beneficial to do so.

Participants also express concepts of community and family in relation to their exploration and building of loving relationships. John describes polyamory as an extended family and Kamila describe it as building a community. For each, polyamory is about having a group of people who you love, and with whom you are connected, and share emotional and sexual intimacy.

John explains that polyamory is “almost an extended family ... it’s not any different really, it’s just more [relationships],” and Kamila shares that she sees polyamory as “building your own small community ... with individuals you want to be romantically or intimately involved with.” In other parts of the narratives, John did explain that this sense of extended family that came along with polyamory did not mean that the polyamorous constellations were all harmonious and cohesive. Families have conflict and polyamorous families are no different.

Polyamory is Flexible and is Redefined for Each Constellation of Relationships

Each narrative explores a different iteration of polyamory. Each participant describes their unique polyamorous constellation of relationships. Some of the participants explicitly state that polyamory is different for different people. Each participant expresses their perspective on polyamory, and recognizes that people understand polyamory in diverse ways and may choose to apply the concept to their relationships in a variety of ways. This contrasts with the concept of monogamy which is generally understood as sharing intimacies and having sexual relations with only one person within the confines of a marriage or committed relationship.

Julian defines polyamory generally as “any relationship set-up where the relationship is open to members having more than one partner” while also emphasizing that a pat definition is difficult because polyamory can be understood and practiced differently by different people. Jamie expresses that polyamory can be “everything from having one partner in casual relationships with other people to having fully fledged full relationships.”

Corey provides several examples of relationship constellations that she considers to be polyamory. Corey explains that polyamorous relationships could vary in terms of commitment, level of intimacy, and time spent together. She also specifies that polyamory shifts and changes as the relationships do. Corey explains:

There are many different ways to be poly. For different people there are different ways that they structure their relationships. Within relationships things can shift and change so that three people could be in a relationship together and not have any outside relationships. [Or] that two people can be in a relationship together and one person has outside relationships [that vary]. Or two people are in a relationship and each of them have ... more casual relationships. Or more relationships that have sexual relationships but are a little more limited [in] emotional intimacy. Or it could be people having many partners where there is not one [relationship that is] defined as the sole or primary [relationship]. It can be having two different partners where there's not one defined as, as the sole or main or primary [relationship] that it can be having two different partners that you value equally.

Julian, Jamie and Corey point out the flexibility and adaptability of polyamory. I submit that this is a critical aspect of polyamory because it allows people the freedom to create and recreate their relationships in ways that work for them given the particular mix of people in their constellation.

The flexibility of polyamory frees people to reject the traditional relationship structures that are based on the binaries of sex and gender that prevail in heterosexual and same-sex monogamous relationships. Further, they no longer have to commit to one particular relationship structure over time because the flexibility of polyamory offers many ways for forming relationships.

Polyamory is not prescriptive. It does not require people to follow a particular relationship structure or to even emphasize the same ideals across their polyamorous systems.

My own experience of polyamory is that it emerged in my life because it provided me, and my partners, a way of forming relationships that allowed us to imagine something different from what society had to offer – something other than heterosexual and homosexual monogamy. In a sense, I came to the practice of polyamory because it gave me the flexibility to navigate a particular situation in my life. Over time, I met more polyamorous people who all adapted polyamory to their needs and life circumstances. None of our polyamorous constellations of polyamory looked the same nor did we necessarily define or practice polyamory similarly. Embracing all of the ways that polyamory is understood and lived increases its transformative potential because it allows people to adapt their understandings and practices of polyamory as their lives and relationships shift and change.

Polyamory De-centers Sex by Affirming Non-Sexual Partners and Relationships

Sexual intimacy and the performance of sexual acts is often expected as part of normalized monogamy. As such, non-sexual relationships are excluded or ignored as committed partnerships by people who practice monogamy. Polyamory has the advantage of validating non-sexual relationships and including them in polyamorous constellations. Validating non-sexual relationships directly challenges the requirement of sexual desire that is a foundational assumption of heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Alex's narrative explores what it means to have a non-sexual polyamorous partner or partners. Alex explains that his non-sexual polyamorous relationships are emotionally connected in significant ways and are experienced and understood to be different from a friendship. He describes this relationship as bonding, and likens it to the deep love and commitment one has for a sibling or a family member. Alex explains that he is limited by the English language to describe his feelings about his non-sexual polyamorous relationships, and that "brother" is the closest word he can find to explain this relationship and distinguish it from friendship. The following is an excerpt from Alex's narrative:

Alex: Polyamory would be, when you find yourself capable of loving multiple people, or, being in relationships with multiple people, not necessarily sexual but, definitely heavily in love, intimate in a way. Sexually no. Comfortable enough that you can nuzzle them and just like, climb, get all in their business all the time without it being an awkward thing.

Liane: So even if you are having your relationship that is not sexual, you see it as different than a friendship?

Alex: Definitely. It doesn't feel like a friendship by any means. That's what I have with James and typically we define ourselves as brothers because that's the closest thing in the English language to describe how close we are and yet how definitely non-sexual it is. During the beginning of our relationship we both were kind of confused because we were very much in love with each other but it was very non-sexual and we're just looking, and we would go like "I would never make out with you, but I love you" but what, what? What? And then we figured out, oh, this is what is happening. Ok. And then we moved on.

Liane: And so how did you define what it was that was happening?

Alex: Just love, pure and simple. Love, loyalty and a sense of I must protect this one, I must be with this one, I must always, always, always, this person is so important to me I can't not have them in my life.

Alex goes on to explain the confusion that both he and James experienced as they fell in love without having sexual desires or sexual attraction. Alex clarifies that both he and James enjoy participating in sexual acts with others, it is just that they do not have sexual desire for one another. Alex places as much importance, if not more importance on his partnership with James than he does on other relationships that include sexual intimacy within his polyamorous constellation.

When Sage describes polyamory, she also draws attention to the importance of non-sexual relationships. Sage explains that friendships could hold the same importance for her as those relationships that include sexual intimacy:

Sage: It's probably a definition that shifts a lot, but, right now, I think it [polyamory] means treating my friends like lovers and my lovers like friends. Finding an equal footing for different kinds of relationships to coexist and to hold their own independent importance in my life ... To me, a partner is someone I can do projects with, push my own boundaries with.

Liane: Are they necessarily sexual?

Sage: Nope.

According to Sage, she does not need to prioritize or privilege one type of relationship over other relationships in her polyamorous constellation. Because of polyamory she can organize her relationships in ways that do not privilege relationships that include sexual acts over non-sexual

friendships and relationships. Her relationships are about spending mutually beneficial time together, and are about emotional trust and personal growth. While Sage explains that she shares sexual intimacy with some of her partners, sexual intimacy does not make the relationship more important than those relationships that do not include sexual intimacy.

In our conversation, Josephine also explains that she has a non-sexual partner who is part of her polyamorous constellation:

I mean there's people like, like the guy who I got the email from this morning who I have an intense loving relationship with him and he's poly, and I'm poly and you know we're never gonna have a sexual relationship, but I would still consider that to be part of the whole poly system.

Josephine goes on to explain that she knows other polyamorous people who also have non-sexual polyamorous partners and that these relationships are “intense, intimate relationships, but just not sex.”

Lisa explains that she also has a non-sexual partner who she considers to be part of her polyamorous constellation. Lisa states that she has two romantic relationships and that one is sexual while the other is not – “I'm very much spiritually involved with somebody else but it's non-sexual, but to me it feels polyamory anyway because I love both of them.” Polyamory allows Lisa to expand her partnerships and love to more than one person simultaneously, without it depending on sexual attraction or acts to define the relationships. It further allows her to integrate her spirituality into her polyamorous constellation.

For Sabrina, being polyamorous allows her to have committed and loving relationships without feeling the pressure to engage in sexual acts. Sabrina explains that she identified as asexual when she was younger, and now identifies as having a very low sex drive. Sabrina

originally took to searching on the internet to better understand her lack of sexual desire. She found the term *asexual* to be useful when trying to explain to people that she did not feel sexual attraction or desire for other people. She explains, “it [polyamory] sort of gave me a framework so that I didn't totally feel like I was totally abnormal. And I wasn't forcing myself to go and kiss people.”

Despite Sabrina’s lack of interest in participating in sexual acts with others, she did continue to want to form deep, loving, and intimate relationships. Initially, Sabrina dated people online as a strategy that allowed her to form relationships but avoid having physical contact. When her online partner became sexual with someone else, Sabrina began to understand that she separated the ideas of sex and love and was comfortable with knowing her partner was sexual with another person, but not with her. Sabrina credits this experience as her introduction to polyamory:

I guess the asexual thing transitions me into accepting other people having a separation because I have it separated. Like sex and love were separable ... Accepting that I am romantically attracted to somebody who will go off and have sex with someone else is a very convenient model for me because I don't have to have that pressure on me, and they don't have to repress anything that comes natural to them, and no jealousy arose. Like if he goes off and makes out with my friend, that's fine. So I guess that's where I started to come into polyamory.

Sabrina explains that she believes that most people feel sexual desire and want to participate in sexual acts with their romantic partners. Monogamous relationships place her in a dilemma because of the expectations for her to participate in sexual acts. This expectation makes it difficult for her to find a partner who accepts her and the implications of her low sex drive.

Sabrina came to polyamory because she wanted to ensure her own desires for a non-sexually intimate relationship were being acknowledged and met; while also ensuring that her partner's needs and desires for sex were being met outside of their relationship if needed.

Sabrina explains that she considers love and romance to be separate from sexual acts and she believes that it is this ability to separate love and sex that allows her to avoid experiencing jealousy. While Sabrina once identified as asexual, she explains that more recently she has shifted to calling herself a person with a low sex drive because in her later years she did develop sexual desire, and found that very occasionally, she enjoys being sexual with other people. Despite this shift, she continues to be able to separate love and sex and does not struggle with jealousy in her polyamorous relationships.

Sabrina's narrative reveals the transformative potential that polyamory offers people who identify as asexual, have a low sex drive or have little interest in participating in sexual intimacy with their partners. In Western culture, sexual desire is celebrated in practically every way one could imagine. In particular, I would say that the existence of sexual desire is an assumption that underlies intimate adult relationships. I suspect that most people anticipate and expect sexual intimacy to be an integral part of their romantic relationships, especially in monogamous relationships – monogamy by definition implies only one sexual partner. This assumption alone likely alienates people who are asexual from forming romantic relationships. It further works to distinguish them as flawed because they are missing the key ingredient required for a romantic relationships. In a culture that normalizes the connection between sex acts and marriage or committed relationships, people who want committed loving relationships without sexual acts may be viewed as lacking something; they may even be seen as disordered or abnormal. In

contrast, the same asexual person can participate in a polyamorous constellation because polyamory affirms a wider range of relationships, including relationships that are not sexual.

Polyamory is a relationship practice that allows people to transform relationship dynamics and even their own roles within their relationships. Sage transforms her relationship structure and dynamics by creating her polyamorous constellation in a way that establishes “equal footing” among all members in her polyamorous constellation, including friendships and non-sexual relationships. Her approach to forming polyamorous relationships resists prioritizing one person above all of the others. Sage’s narrative demonstrates one of the ways that practicing polyamory can transform power dynamics within relationships and challenges mononormativity. Sage’s practice of polyamory de-centers “the couple” and removes the sexual imperative associated with monogamy. According to Alex, Sage, Josephine, Lisa and Sabrina, polyamory makes room for all types of people and forms of relationships; polyamory legitimizes intimate relationships that exclude sex by placing them on equal ground with other relationships.

Five participants from this study include intimate non-sexual relationships and friendships in their polyamorous constellations. By affording the same level of validity to their non-sexual relationships as they do to their sexual relationships, these participants displace the requirement of sex as a legitimizing factor of their relationships. Displacing the requirement of sexual acts further works to challenge a fundamental assumption about sexual performance that is associated with heteronormative and homonormative monogamy. It disrupts the hierarchy of intimate relationships by placing intimate non-sexual relationships on the same level as intimate sexual relationships. For example, consider Alex and his relationship with James. Alex distinguishes this relationship from close, committed friendships and claims he is “deeply in love” with James despite there being no sexual attraction between them. By including and

validating non-sexual partners in his polyamorous constellation, Alex challenges heteronormative and homonormative assumptions about sex acts and relationship legitimacy. Josephine and Lisa also prioritize non-sexual partners in their relationships, as did Sage. Sage's narrative goes even further than including non-sexual partners to prioritizing friendships in her polyamorous constellations. Sage explicitly expresses that polyamory allows her the freedom to "[treat] my friends like lovers and my lovers like friends. Finding an equal footing for different kinds of relationships like to coexist and to hold their own independent importance in my life." Sage's narrative not only legitimizes non-sexual relationships but it conveys that she actively works to treat all relationships with equal importance. Sage actively resists prioritizing sexual relationships over other relationships in her polyamorous constellations. This act directly challenges heteronormative and homonormative monogamy and the assumption of the "naturalness" of sex and desire as always connected to intimacy. De-centering sex in polyamorous relationships is also an act that dis-orientes polyamory and opens up the possibilities for transforming normative conceptions of sex and gender in intimate relationships.

Polyamory Offers Transformative Potential to People with Mental Health Challenges

Matt expresses that he thinks of polyamory as a relationship practice and not necessarily an identity. Matt extends that his way of relating to people makes polyamory a good relationship choice for him because of his mental illness:

[polyamory is] a type of relationship that I participate in ... I think [pause] it's more [that] my way of relating to people [in relation to his mental illness] is really changeable and harder to define, and that works in polyamory a lot better [than monogamy].

Matt explains that because he has a mental illness, his mood and behaviour can change frequently and drastically and this can be difficult in monogamous relationships where only one

person provides all of the relationship support. At times, Matt can withdraw from his relationships for months leaving his partner(s) emotionally isolated. Sometimes this change means leaving his home and entering a treatment program. The idea of being in a monogamous relationship causes Matt significant anxiety because he fears he may desert his partner in his times of emotional struggle; he knows that these times require him to withdraw and care for himself. In a polyamorous relationship, there are more people involved in the relationship constellation and should he need to withdraw or need extended time away, there are other people who can support each other. Matt communicates that the self-care he participates in during psychologically challenging times involves distress and often emotional disconnection. He stresses that the most significant part of his identity is his mental illness and that polyamory is the best relationship format for him because of his mental illness.

Polyamory is an alternative form of relationship that allows Matt to transform his intimate and sexual relationships in ways that support his mental health, and decreases his anxiety because he knows that he can withdraw from the relationship and his partners can support each other in his absence. Matt's choice of relationship structure is strategic because he is able to transform his experience of intimate and sexual relationships, shifting away from fear and anxiety to a healthier form of relationship. In this way, polyamory shifts the focus away from Matt's mental illness and struggles with monogamous relationships, to his ability to be a fully functioning partner within his polyamorous constellation because polyamory affords more room for him to negotiate his unique boundaries without the burden of anxiety. Further, because polyamory has a flexible relationship structure, there is more room in the relationship for everyone to negotiate their unique boundaries. Matt's narrative brings light to a particular strategic aspect that polyamory offers that it not discussed much in the academic literature. His

narrative demonstrates the potential that polyamory offers people who have mental health challenges because polyamorous relationships potentially provide more support and care for the people who need to withdraw and focus on self-care.

Matt's narrative was emotionally moving. He shared very intimate aspects about his mental health and the relationship challenges he experiences on a regular basis. With my counselling training and experience, I was comfortable listening to and empathizing with Matt's struggles. I continue to be so thankful for Matt's candor and articulations of polyamory as a relationship practice that supports him in forming relationships. I have often heard clients express a deep sense of guilt because their disability brought stress and strain to their loved ones. In counselling, it was common for me to hear people turn their anger and frustration inwards because they felt like a failure and a burden to the people that they love. When I heard Matt describe how he uses polyamory, I was amazed at both his insight and ability to use polyamory to reformulate his relationships in ways that helps him gain independence by taking responsibility for his psychological self-care. Matt uses polyamory to transform his position within his personal relationships; by rejecting monogamy, he also rejects feelings of anxiety, guilt, and inferiority.

Matt's narrative demonstrates the transformative potential that polyamory affords people who have mental health challenges (and potentially people with disabilities), the transformative potential to reclaim power and self-determination in their relationships. To my knowledge, Klesse (2016) does not specifically consider the transformative power of polyamory as it intersects with ability, but his argument can certainly extend to include Matt's situation. In my view, Matt's narrative supports Klesse's (2016, 2017) argument that we should resist defining polyamory as a sexual orientation. A narrow definition of polyamory as a sexual orientation

would exclude a range of current practices of polyamory and would create more divisions amongst non-monogamous practices. Polyamory could lose “what many poly-identified people argue [is] ... the most radical – point about polyamory is that it refuses to provide any prescriptive or normative mould for how consensual non-monogamy or polyamory should be practiced” (Klesse, 2016, p. 1365). In Matt’s situation, applying the sexual orientation model to polyamory would exclude his practice of polyamory. Dis-orienting polyamory preserves Matt’s strategic deployment of polyamory as it relates to his mental health.

Polyamory and Casual Sexual Encounters

While all participants agree that polyamory involves multiple relationships, often occurring simultaneously, some participants are more specific about the nature of their relationships and find it important to distinguish between “committed partnerships” or “casual encounters.” Many participants explain that polyamorous relationships are longer-lasting relationships rather than short-term, casual sexual encounters. The most common distinction is that polyamory is about forming relationships and not “hook-up culture” or about seeking “one-night-stands,” casual encounters or recreational sex. For Eileen, polyamory is distinguished by serious, long-term relationships:

If you’re polyamorous or if you’re involved in polyamory, in my mind, you seek to have ... two or more relationships. Preferably, in my mind, long-term and / or reasonably serious, but they’re formal defined relationships you’re not just going out to hook-up with people. You’re looking for a stable, a relatively stable relationship ... I draw a bit of a distinction between an open relationship and polyamory. Open relationship is two people in a relationship, and they have the right to see other people as they see fit, either as

hook-ups or as other formal relationships, so open relationships just kind of divides that particular area.

Paul makes the same distinction as Eileen; he considers polyamory to be about relationships that involve emotional connection and not about seeking regular casual sexual encounters:

Paul: [Polyamory] would not be something like one night stands, going out to the bar on a weekly basis or anything like that. It would be more relationship based so there would be a sense of caring.

Liane: Also sexual relationships?

Paul: Absolutely!

For some participants, the element of commitment plays into how they distinguish between polyamory and what they call “open relationships.” Danni explains that in her experience, polyamory feels different from an open relationship, because “I’ve seen in some [polyamorous] communities, a concept of an open relationship which is a bit more of a carte blanche, “fine - you can fuck other people because that’s what you want to do.” She clarifies, that for her, open relationships are more about recreational sex. According to Danni’s definition, in an open relationship a person has “complete freedom” to enjoy casual sexual encounters. Danni’s description implies that polyamorous relationships do not allow complete freedom to have casual sexual encounters with people outside the polyamorous system unless such encounters have been negotiated in advance. It suggests that there are expectations for relationship formations and sexual intimacy, within and outside of some polyamorous constellations.

Brittany also describes open relationships as being more focused on recreational or casual sexual encounters:

[In] an open relationship ... the primary couple, or whatever you want to call it, they just

kind of have casual things on the side, but I would probably label [that] as you've got an open relationship. If that then did develop, like one of their relationships developed into a more kind of committed long-term thing, then you've kind of wandered into more poly territory. ... I know it works for some people but it makes me kind of twitchy because it feels really rigid and uncomfortable, and you can't always control your emotions.

While Danni describes an open relationship as having complete freedom to do as you wish with other people, Brittany's understanding of an open relationship means there is an expectation that the relationship is not emotionally connected. Brittany explains that making this distinction in relationships would be incredibly difficult because emotional connections can form unintentionally. Since polyamory allows for emotional connections and even love, Brittany feels more comfortable in polyamorous relationships.

Jeff describes polyamorous relationships as being open with limitations set by negotiated boundaries and expectations. Jeff also makes the distinction between emotionally connected encounters and sex. He explains that polyamory is not about casual relationships. He defines the difference between polyamory and open relationships in terms of the boundaries that are set in a polyamorous relationship constellations. He defines an open relationship as similar to Don't ask – Don't tell,⁵⁰ with a focus on sexual acts. He clarifies that in a polyamorous relationship "you can be romantically or emotionally involved with more than one person" and that boundaries are

⁵⁰ *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* is a phrase that originated from a policy implemented in the U.S. when former President Bill Clinton attempted to challenge the anti-gay ban for military service in the U.S. military. *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* became law in 199 and meant that military personnel were prohibited from asking (Don't Ask) closeted gays, lesbians and bisexuals about their sexual behaviour, however, if the person disclosed their non-heterosexual activity voluntarily, they broke the Don't Tell part of the law and they would be subsequently discharged from military service. This law was not fully repealed until 2011 by former President Barack Obama (Bateman & Summers, 2015). In the case of Jeff's narrative, the phrase is being used to signify a relationship agreement that allows for members to form other relationships without negotiating permission or disclosing details with their partner(s).

negotiated among the people in a polyamorous constellation. He stresses that even if a polyamorous relationship might be perceived as open, it is not, and that a polyamorous relationship “is not just go fuck whoever you want.”

Although many narratives explicitly enumerate the differences between polyamory and open relationships, not all participants make this differentiation. Josephine explains that before using the term polyamory, she would refer to her relationships as open:

For many years before I learned about that term [polyamory], because I didn't know it for long time, I just considered that I had open, loving consensual honest relationships with more than one person. ... and that's just how we worked and then somebody said to me “oh so you're poly,” and I'm like, “oh sure yeah it seems to fit.” So, I think I had the relationships first and then came across the term.

Josephine's practice of having “consensual honest relationships with more than one person” remained consistent over the years despite the change from labelling relationships as open to labelling them as polyamorous. Unlike several participants who whose narratives construct polyamory as distinct from open relationships, Josephine uses the terms open and polyamory interchangeably. These contrasting narratives demonstrate the diverse meanings that are defined as polyamory and how practices that people label as polyamory may overlap practices that people label in other ways.

Contrary to participants who define polyamory as exclusively focused on committed relationships, other participants include casual sexual encounters in their definitions and descriptions of polyamory. Jamie explains that although she does not like to be sexually involved with someone unless she is in a committed relationship with them; her definition of polyamory includes “everything from having one partner in casual relationships with other people to having

fully fledged full relationships.” For Jamie, she sees forming emotionally connected relationships as a personal preference, rather than a requirement or expectation of polyamory. While polyamory includes a wide range of relationships of varying levels of commitment, each constellation is unique and based on the personal preferences of its members.

In another example, Brittany explains that she considers less committed types of casual sexual relationships to be part of polyamory:

[Polyamory] doesn't preclude kind of casual relationships and “friends with benefits” set-ups. I know some people that define [polyamory] where it's only that committed loving [relationship] and, they don't like putting the term polyamory on it if they are open to other types of kind of less committed relationships, but for me, as long as you also kind of like at least entertain the possibility of [commitment], then sure, [it's] poly.

Brittany's definition of polyamory includes casual encounters given they are emotionally connected and have the potential to become fully committed relationships. Brittany notes that other polyamorists exclude less committed relationships and sexual encounters from their definition of polyamory. Brittany's definition of polyamory focuses more on the possibility of commitment than the casual nature of a sexual encounter.

Jamie and Brittany's narratives construct polyamory as including casual sexual encounters and relationships. Jamie explains that her preference is to form more committed relationships but that her personal preference does not narrow her definition of polyamory; she recognizes that other polyamorists include casual sexual encounters and that there are a range of ways the people define polyamory. Brittany's definition of polyamory includes “casual relationships and friends with benefits set-ups.” Brittany identifies emotional connection rather than the casual nature of a relationship to be a factor that distinguishes polyamory from an open

relationship. A relationship may be casual yet very deeply and emotionally involved. There are various ways of framing casual sexual encounters within polyamory that directly affect what behaviours, relationships and encounters people include in their polyamorous constellations.

The inclusion and exclusion of causal sexual encounters in the definition of polyamory is an example of how polyamory can be understood in contradictory ways. What is acceptable in one person's polyamorous constellation might not be acceptable in another person's polyamorous system. However, the negotiable nature of polyamory means that individuals who practice polyamory can finesse each relationship to suit their own needs and those of their partners. It means that people can practice polyamory in a variety of ways depending on a person's situation and view of relationships at the time. It demonstrates that polyamory is flexible and adaptable and has the potential to be applied in many ways and in many circumstances.

Polyamory as Individual Freedom

Four of the participants emphasize the importance of promoting personal freedom and resisting control imposed by partners as their primary reason for practicing polyamory. These narratives emphasize a type of love and relationship structure that resists having any assumptions about relationship expectations. Emma describes polyamory as extending freedom to others by refusing to put limits on one's expectations of other people. She constructs polyamory as a way of helping and supporting people as they work toward their life goals. Her perspective of polyamory reinforces concepts of self-determination:

If you really care about somebody, I feel like you want to support them in the kind of lifestyle that they want to live instead of putting limits on their life or trying to describe to

them what you think their life should look like ... So I guess for me it's the ability to freely have any kind of relationship with another person that makes sense or that works. Lisa explains that the idea of controlling other people's life choices or holding them back makes her feel uncomfortable. She shares that discovering polyamory was really nice because "I've always been afraid of getting into a relationship and then having the other person afraid to have relationships with other people because I don't really want to hold people back from having relationships with other people."

Emma explains that polyamory allows freedom and does not limit the choices of partners. The freedom Emma associates with polyamory is a freedom that is afforded all people in her polyamorous constellation. Having freedom to pursue additional relationships makes Emma feel most comfortable in relationships and also keeps her appreciation for her partners alive:

One of the things is that feeling of being limited ... through being limited I feel like we have a tendency to take our partner for granted because we get used to their positive behaviors and what they provide for us ... but having the chance to be with other people ... puts my relationship into perspective, *every single time*. It just kind of resets that appreciation back [to where things were at the beginning of the relationship].

Knowing that polyamory extends the freedom for partners to leave the relationship should they choose, helps Emma see her partners with fresh eyes and helps her resist developing expectations of her partner(s) including the assumption that they will not leave the relationship. The freedom Emma experiences in her polyamorous relationships encourages her to cherish her partners in the way we often do when we first begin a relationship:

I really believe in freedom, and I want to be with somebody solely for the reason that they want to be with me and I want to be with them, *that's it*, I don't want there to be any other reason.

Personal freedom is a priority for Emma in relationships and she considers the promise of staying together for life (that is typically associated with monogamous relationships) to be limiting. Emma wants to rest assured that the people who are in relationships with her are there because they are choosing it today and are not in the relationship because of a promise that they made years prior. For Emma, the freedom and flexibility that polyamorous relationships can afford is part of maintaining an authentic relationship where individual freedom is celebrated:

People choosing individuals who are not a good match for them, but making that choice for life and not being able to [make a change] that's ... being monogamous, that's not a true choice, because you're limiting. How can you know, if you haven't explored those other relationships?

Following Emma's articulation, leaving a polyamorous constellation when it no longer meets a person's needs is framed as positive change, in comparison to the negative framing that is typically associated with leaving a monogamous relationship. In heteronormative and homonormative monogamy, leaving is a failure and a betrayal because the goal is to stay together. Emma emphasizes that instead of staying together at all costs, the goal of polyamorous relationships is about living authentic relationships.

In addition to emphasizing the freedom and authenticity in relationships, Emma highlights that she wants to maintain independence as a person while in relationships. She explains that she does not want to become defined by her relationship, but rather as the person she is:

I don't like being associated with another person. I don't like being seen as being dependent on another person. ... I don't like the idea of going to a party and someone saying like "oh how's Tom doing? Where is he?" Tom is his own person. I'm not really responsible for what he is doing or where he is.

Emma emphasizes the importance of personal freedom and independence in relationships in general, and considers polyamory to be a relationship practice through which she can attain and maintain freedom and independence while fostering her relationships. In this sense, Emma is using polyamory as a strategy for having relationships that preserve her independence and help her resist becoming enmeshed with her partner.

Sage also explains that for her, an important part of polyamory is resistance to defining or controlling another person's sexuality, choices, or formations of relationships. Her conception of polyamory centers on self-determination and freedom:

[I] want to politicize my definition of polyamory by saying that it's the idea that one person can't control or define the sexuality of another person. Poly, I think implies a certain amount of freedom, or like equal freedom among the participants.

For Sage, polyamory is a way of having relationships that fall in line with her core values of anarchism. She explains that because she identifies as an anarchist she works hard to create and sustain relationships based on principles of anarchy. She explores those ideas in the following narrative after being asked if she sees polyamory as being connected to her politics:

Totally, I think I was always non-monogamous, though I didn't necessarily have the language for it, but I was always an anarchist too [chuckling] when I think about, I can think of several instances growing up, where, I just exhibited strong compassion for other children, or nonhuman animals, or the environment, to the point where it would bring me

to tears. That is what informs my politics today, it's so fundamentally about compassion, and then there's this rebellious side to it where the rebellion is against a culture that prescribes how people could and should relate to one another. ... One of the fundamental tenants of anarchism [is] autonomy and self-determination [so] it makes sense that people would have the freedom to enact their desires in a way that makes sense to them, and it's, compassionate and all those other things as well. ... That autonomy and self-determination, compassion, rebellion, they fit together. Anarchism and polyamory overlap in those ways - ideally in their most ideal forms [chuckling].

Sage practices polyamory as a way of aligning her relationships with central tenets of anarchism, such as freedom and self-determination. She claims polyamory as an identity and practice that is political because it resists control over bodies and promotes freedom. Sage also identifies compassion as an important ingredient of polyamory as she is sensitive to the power dynamics that often exist in relationships and strives to create relationships that increase freedom and autonomy for others.

For Sage, the practice of polyamory is akin to an act rebellion. She sees polyamory as a form of civil disobedience against state and institutional powers that place control over bodies, over how sexual desires are enacted, and how people relate to one another. Sage considers monogamy and marriage as the normalized and prescribed approaches to committed relationships in Western culture, she believes that practicing polyamory defies these prescriptions and increases individual freedom.

Matt also indicates similarities between polyamory and anarchism. He identifies himself as part of the anarchist community in Guelph and explains that in his experience, polyamory connects to anarchism because both go against social norms. He experiences an implicit

assumption that if you are part of the anarchist community, that you are probably also polyamorous. Matt identifies the overlap between anarchism and polyamory in that they both resist mainstream approaches to forming relationships and encapsulate elements of rebellion.

Matt also identifies a connection in the way anarchists and polyamorists conceptualize and practice consent. He expresses a discomfort with the assumption of consent that typically underlies monogamous relationships that when two people commit to each other in a relationship, there is an assumption that each has a certain “right” to the other person’s body. Matt rejects the idea that in a committed relationship there exists a named or unnamed agreement that partners only share their bodies in intimate or sexual ways with each other. Matt describes polyamory as a way to fight the assumptions of monogamous consent and access to each other’s bodies because in polyamorous relationships consent is regularly renegotiated:

I think that “mory” [of polyamory] is more like short-term contracts, for the sexual part of it, like kind of single contracts being made [each time two people are intimate]. ... I really don't like the assumption [of] consent where it exists elsewhere. ... I don't know if necessarily by really fighting these assumptions of consent you suddenly have polyamory, but that's where it goes in my head.

Matt’s definition of polyamory emphasizes increasing freedom and self-determination for all members within the polyamorous constellation. This means that Matt increases determination over his own body as he frequently renegotiates consent to sexual acts and access to his body on a regular basis. Matt contends that it is vital for him to renegotiate consent and access to bodies in his sexual relationships because there are times when he finds himself in a vulnerable state due to his mental illness and he needs his partners to understand that he often does not want sexual

contact at such times. The regular negotiation of bodies gives Matt a sense of security and self-determination because polyamory helps him regularly renegotiate boundaries with his partners.

Matt and Sage both construct polyamorous constellations that increase people's individual choices and strive not to place restrictions on their partner's choices and practices in other relationships. This approach allows each person in the polyamorous constellation to form their relationships in the ways that they believe are the best for them at that time. Polyamory is about freedom and self-determination, rendering the details of other relationships irrelevant. So whether a person within a polyamorous constellation participates in casual sexual encounters, sexual recreation, or restricts their sexual activity to committed loving relationships, it is for them to decide.

Sage, Matt, Lisa and Emma's narratives emphasize freedom as a central part of their practice of polyamory. These participants explain that this freedom extends to all people in their polyamorous constellations and include the freedom to leave the constellation without reprisal. The emphasis on freedom, even freedom to leave the relationship directly challenges heteronormative and homonormative monogamous relationship formations. As I listened to these participants, I realized that this conception of polyamory was less familiar to me. Upon reflection, it reminded me of Munson and Stelboum's (1999) collection of articles in the *Lesbian Polyamory Reader*. Polyamory as a strategic intervention that promotes freedom and self-determination is comparable to the second-wave feminist deployment of polyamory as strategic resistance to patriarchy.

In addition to linking polyamory to anarchism, Sage's narrative also draws attention to the connection between feminism, anti-racist politics, and polyamory. For Sage, the body must be controlled by the individual. Sage presents polyamory as a way that people can retain power

over their bodies as they form loving, sexual and intimate relationships with people they desire without imposing control over other people's bodies through monogamy, heterosexuality and marriage. She explains, "I also think [polyamory] has its roots in feminist politics. That idea of the body not being something to be owned or controlled. Obviously, that has reverberations in anti-racist politics as well."

Corey also suggests that polyamory and feminism connect because people practicing polyamory are aware of power dynamics in their relationships:

There's something sort of inherently feminist about my definition of poly too, like how I see poly, it's like I imagine people who are conscious of issues of power and conscious of who [works] on being good communicators and good listeners and thinking about partnerships and respecting the other person.

Corey's narrative implies a link between feminist analyses of power and polyamory because polyamorous relationships require a particular recognition of power dynamics within a polyamorous constellation.

Corey also articulates that for her the practice of polyamory connects to her conceptions of queerness and to the Queer community in Guelph. Corey explains: "when I think about the Queer community in Guelph, I almost default to sort of assuming that people are poly or ... that people are comfortable with it." Corey articulates her understanding of polyamory to be queer because it challenges the normative approaches to relationships, similar to the ways that people who identify as queer explore their identities and practices outside of normative prescriptions for genders and sexualities:

Why I think that it's [polyamory] so popular among queer communities in Guelph is because I feel that it allows for the greatest depth and breadth of relationships, you know?

... tied to queer in the sense of a community of people who've had to redefine what relationships mean and what relationship rules are and have created different models and possibilities.

The connection that Corey makes between queerness and polyamory emphasizes the many possibilities that polyamory opens up for relationships. Polyamory is fluid and flexible and "allows for the greatest depth and breadth of relationships." Polyamory, like queerness, frees people to rethink heteronormative and homonormative relationship conceptions and move towards new and unique relationship formulations.

The narrators that connect polyamory to individual freedom, anarchist, feminist and queer politics, have extensive background knowledge (formal education) about identity politics and power dynamics. Their wording and language demonstrates an integration of polyamory and a range of political perspectives. Corey and Matt both connect polyamory to their local queer and anarchist communities in Guelph. Corey, Matt and Sage all explicitly connect their practice of polyamory to their politics. Matt and Sage posit polyamory as interconnected with their anarchist values of self-determination and independence and Corey with her feminist politics and active resistance to enacting genders and sexualities in normative ways in her relationships. These narratives demonstrate how people consciously and actively use "The transgressive potential of polyamory to shake up [their] taken-for-granted notions of sex/gender" (Klesse, 2016, p. 1365). Rebellious against mononormativity entails promoting individual freedom and reformulating relationships. These forms of radical politics are exactly what we preserve by dis-orienting polyamory; the transformative potential of polyamory is lost by defining polyamory as a sexual orientation (Klesse, 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge that the freedom to live polyamory as a form of radical politics does not extend to all people equally.

Polyamorous Identities: A Range of Conceptualizations

Listening to the participants describe their identities reminded me of the years of listening to clients when I worked as a counsellor. The many ways people think about and negotiate their identities with their self-concept continue to fascinate me. Participants provided a range of explanations of how they understand polyamory to relate to their sense self-concept. Some participants construct polyamory as part of their identity; others construct polyamory as both an identity and a relationship practice, while others were not certain how they understand polyamory as it relates to their sense of self.

Ambiguous and Shifting Polyamorous Identities

John was one of the participants who expressed some ambiguity about how he considers polyamory in relation to his sense of self. He notes that he has not really spent much time thinking about this question. He identifies polyamory as something more than a type of relationship; John states “in a way it’s more a state of mind.” John prefers the term “mindset” to “identity” when he describes polyamory. He defines polyamory more as a relationship conceptualization that he can invoke should he choose.

Corey also expresses some ambivalence when describing how polyamory relates to her identity. Corey identifies herself as a queer woman, and explains that she cannot really imagine being with a partner who could not accept polyamory and live comfortably with polyamory. While Corey understands polyamory as a requirement for her relationships, she does not identify it as a primary aspect of her identity:

I'm not sure what it would be for me. [long pause] I don't feel like it's really a *strong* identity thing for me. But, I can't really see myself not being in a relationship that wasn't okay with polyamory.

While Corey does not prioritize identifying herself as polyamorous, she recognizes that having partner(s) that affirm her practice of polyamory, is important to her.

Paul explains that he does not really think of polyamory as an identity or necessarily a practice. His answer demonstrates that he realizes that some people do understand polyamory as a conceptual approach or model of doing relationships, but that for him this does not really apply. Paul's description of polyamory emphasizes organic relationship formations that happen spontaneously. In his relationship constellation, Paul is free to pursue any form of relationship or even casual encounter. For Paul, his practice and understanding of polyamory does not restrict his experiences:

To me polyamory just happens. You find someone, you meet them, there's a spark, a chemistry, you get closer and then next you want to know this person more, you want to hang out, to explore who you are, who they are.

Paul describes polyamory as serendipitous and experiential. He understands polyamory as having a relationship that does not interfere or restrict the relationships that a person can have. Paul feels he is free to explore and enjoy attractions and connected relationships as they develop throughout his life.

There were a couple of participants whose responses reveal how polyamorous identities may shift with time, experience and with each relationship. When Brittany first came for her interview, she identified as polyamorous, however, she and her current partner had not yet had the opportunity to participate in a polyamorous relationship because the opportunity to add additional partners had not yet presented itself to them. Several months later, Brittany contacted me and requested to return and continue her interview because she and her partner had expanded their constellation and now had experience with polyamory and she could contribute to the

interview. Interviewing Brittany twice gave her the opportunity to reflect on her changing conceptions of polyamory.

This portion of narrative comes from the second time that I met with Brittany. When asked about polyamory in relation to her self-concept, Brittany articulates that with her new polyamorous relationships she is experiencing a shift in her sense of self. Prior to having her polyamorous relationships, Brittany considered polyamory to be more of a practice, something that she did. She also recognizes that her earlier conception was different from her partner who understood himself to be polyamorous person. However, with her recent experiences of polyamory, Brittany recognizes that her sense of self as a polyamorous person is growing:

When I came in last time [first interview], it was very much something I did, not something that I was. For Timothy it definitely was something that he was. ... there's been a few times recently where I've said [that] poly is something that I do, not something that I am, but it's feeling like it's getting more and more fuzzy, so I could see that changing ... it was interesting the last time [first interview] I said that, but now I'm not so sure how true that is anymore.

Initially Brittany felt completely comfortable saying that polyamory is something that she does. With time and experience, Brittany describes her sense of polyamory as becoming more “fuzzy.” Brittany is no longer certain of how polyamory relates to her sense of self. She expresses that she has shifted from her original position and imagines her understandings will shift even more with time.

Eileen explains that polyamory is both a practice and an identity. Eileen explains that she is new to polyamorous relationships and that while currently she tends to think of herself as a polyamorous person, she could imagine this changing in the future:

It's part of my identity, it's hard because, for me right now, you're talking to me when I've been involved with this for just under a year now, and I only started seeing somebody, exercising, I guess, the right to be [in] another relationship ... So this [is] very, very new for me and sex itself is very new for me. I do define it as poly, like I do see myself as having that identity, but it's not something that I can share with everybody else, because like my Christian friends can't know, my family can't know right now because that will just add a complication that's not necessary, and the rest of the general world can't always know, but just because they can't know doesn't necessarily mean that it's not a part of myself. Part of it too is that, I'm not actually sure whether, I feel like it's insulting to quantify this as a phase, I don't think it is, but I don't know how long I will be polyamorous for. It's possible that I could decide that I want monogamy again and in five, ten years down the road just choose to be monogamous. So, I don't really [know], that's part of my hesitation I guess, with defining it as that [part of my identity], but I guess that my current state, right now, is that I see myself as polyamorous. I see it as partly a lifestyle and partly an identity.

Eileen discusses polyamory in relation to her practice of evangelical Christianity. She is not able to be open about her polyamorous relationships and identity with her Christian friends because heterosexual monogamy is the only acceptable relationship formation among them. Eileen also contends that having a polyamorous identity and practicing polyamory conflicts with her identity and practice of Christianity. Eileen expresses inner turmoil as she seeks to reconcile her polyamory with her Christianity.

This interview brought up thoughts and feelings related to my own upbringing because I was also raised in an evangelical Christian household. Eileen's descriptions of church

experiences and studies at a post-secondary religious institution resonated with me because I have childhood friends who have studied at the same institution. I recall immediately being filled with questions about how she could possibly integrate polyamory with Christianity. I was not expecting any of my participants to currently hold a belief system that requires all sexuality to be understood and practiced within the confines of monogamous heterosexual marriage. I know the difficulty I experienced coming out as queer within similar a similar community and cannot imagine adding polyamory to that experience. I asked Eileen about her journey of integrating her polyamorous and Christian identities. Eileen explains she is experiencing challenges integrating these identities and is experiencing inner conflict. Eileen stated that she did not truly imagine she will successfully negotiate such an integration and that she will most likely have to choose between polyamory and Christianity.

Polyamorous Identities: History, Permanence, and Capacity

Many participants describe polyamory as part of their identity. Sage's response is straightforward, "I'd say it's an identity. Yah!" Most other participants elaborate and explain how they came to conclude polyamory is part of who they are. Several participants construct polyamory as part of their identity, they express varying reasons why they came to this conclusion. In some cases, participants understand polyamory to be both an identity and also a relationship practice.

The narratives demonstrate that the participants spent time considering this question prior to the interview and had previously worked out their explanations and rationales. During the interviews it was evident that this question of identity and self-concept was an important question for many participants because they had already devoted time to thinking through this question. The narratives demonstrate that people construct polyamory in a range of ways as it

relates to their identities, self-concept and relationship practices and that they craft a range of justifications to explain their polyamorous identity.

Negotiating a polyamorous self-concept that directly challenges heteronormative and homonormative monogamy requires participants to create arguments and justifications for their polyamorous identities and practices. In this way, the arguments and justifications become strategic as they facilitate the construction of identities and practices that counter heteronormative and homonormative monogamy. Such justification is not required when negotiating identities and self-concepts that align with mononormativity in Western culture. For example, people typically are not asked to justify their identities and relationship practices that fall within heteronormative and homonormative identities and practices. It is not likely that a cis-gendered woman has to provide a rationale to herself or others if she claims a straight sexual identity and wants to marry a cis-gendered man. Many institutions in Western culture such as laws, religious practices, the media, and discourses in popular culture affirm her sexual identity, choice of partner and relationship practice and most likely construct them as natural and normal. However, when a person's identities and practices challenge the cultural norms, that person is faced with having to justify who they are and explain why they are not "normal."

Some of the participants conclude that polyamory is part of their identity, a part of who they are as people because of their experience of practicing polyamory and because of the length of time that they have practiced polyamory. Josephine describes it this way:

I think it's who I am, because over my life there's times where, I've had more than one [relationship] and then not more than one, but I still, all that time (if I would've known the term) would've probably called myself poly my entire life.

At the time of the interview, Josephine had engaged in polyamorous relationships for approximately 30 years, although this may not have been the language that she used to describe her relationships at the time. Danni also explains that she feels she is a polyamorous person because of her history and experience of being in polyamorous relationships:

I see myself as a polyamorous person, but I know that I have lovingly chosen to be [in] monogamous relationships, and gone through monogamous *phases* of relationships. But, I kind of feel that I am a polyamorous person because that's something that I have history and experience and capacity to do [polyamory].

Danni points out her history and experience of practicing polyamory for approximately a decade confirms that polyamory is a more stable and unchanging aspect of her self-concept. She emphasizes that while she considers herself a polyamorous person, she is capable of, and has chosen at times, to participate in monogamous relationships.⁵¹

Jamie concludes that polyamory is part of who she is as a person because she is able to navigate loving relationships with more than one person simultaneously and in a successful way:

I think I would identify myself [as a polyamorous person] because it's like I have the capacity within me and I don't think it really is for everyone. ... So if you're capable of it, then I think it's more [part of] a person, than the relationship. I don't think I've changed any when I start[ed] becoming poly, I think it was always there, just not being used.

Jamie expresses that her ability to be in polyamorous relationships is due to her intrinsic qualities that she believes have always been a part of her. She recognizes that not everyone has this

⁵¹ Danni expands on her participation in monogamous relationships in other sections of her narrative and explains that calling her relationship monogamous refers to the fact that there are only two people in the relationship who are not, in that moment, looking to add partners. It does not reflect that she thinks of herself as a monogamous person when she describes her relationship as monogamous.

capability and this might explain why other people choose monogamy. Jamie also distinguishes between the capability a person has to be in polyamorous relationships and choosing to be in polyamorous relationships. She explains that for some people it could be a choice, but for her, it is part of who she is because she has the skills to do polyamory.

Emma explains that she rarely experiences jealousy in relationships and that this intrinsic characteristic makes her suited for polyamorous relationships:

I understand that it's a lot easier for me to be non-monogamous, because I'm not very jealous. I have never been very jealous. And, I know it's [polyamory is] a lot harder for other individuals who experience jealousy. So, I know I that I can't really judge people based on that.

Emma's believes her lack of jealousy in relationships makes her suited for polyamorous relationships because she is able to support her partner(s) spending time with other people without being held back by limiting emotions. People can experience jealous emotions in any type of relationship, even those that are not intimate in nature, one can imagine that polyamorous relationships could increase a person's jealousy because they are not only sharing their partner(s) time with other people, but they are also sharing their partner(s) in intimate ways. Given the potentially unlimited number of loving, intimate relationships that one might have in a polyamorous constellation, the potential for jealousy is likely increased. A person who is prone to jealousy may likely experience significant internal struggle participating in polyamorous relationships. In this way, Emma considers her lack of jealousy to indicate her capacity of conducting positive polyamorous relationships. Emma suggests that people who are not prone to

jealousy are better suited for polyamory.⁵² Applying a capacity argument can work to explain or justify a person's polyamorous identity and practice; however, at the same time it suggests some people are “naturally primed” for polyamory while others are not.

Polyamorous Identities: Essentialist Claims and Whiteness

Given that normalized identities and practices are often constructed as “natural” in Western culture, it was not surprising to find participants using essentialist arguments to explain their non-normative identities and practices. A few participants root their polyamorous identities and behaviours in biology and nature. When identities and behaviours are constructed as natural, they are thought to be consistent, stable, and unchanging over time. In this way, some polyamorists adopt the assumptions of biological determinism that normalize identities and practices in Western culture to understand their practices of polyamory.

My goal in drawing attention to these narratives is not to reinforce essentialist claims and naturalizing arguments about polyamory. Attending to these claims about sexuality as “nature” and “evolution” is one way of bringing whiteness into focus so we may better understand the workings of power (Dyer, 1988) in relation to subjective meanings of polyamory.

Mark considers polyamory to be both an essentialized identity as well as a practice. He states, “I am poly by nature and polyamory is something I do.” After asking Mark if he has experience with monogamous relationships, he explains that he has but that they do not feel complete for him. His articulation presents sexuality as “hard-wired”:

⁵² This is not to suggest that other participants did not express experiences of jealousy. For example, when discussing relationship boundaries, Jeff explains that he does not want his partner to have relationships with other cis-gendered men because he is jealous. He acknowledges his feelings and that he should not feel this way, but he does. Deri (2015) completed a study in British Columbia and investigated experiences of jealousy in polyamorous relationships. Deri's study substantiates that some polyamorists experience complex emotions of jealousy. While some polyamorists understand their lack of jealousy to confirm their affinity for polyamory, other polyamorists who experience jealousy do not necessarily conclude they are not suited for polyamory.

It was good but it kind of felt incomplete ... my understanding from talking to some people who seem to be, I guess, wired for monogamy, is [that] when they are in a relationship with someone, something in their head just kind of goes click and they're not interested in other people anymore, as anything more than friends. They have someone and that's it. They just don't develop romantic or sexual interest in other people.

Mark explains that he experiences attractions differently than how his monogamous friends experience their desires and attractions – at least from what he can tell from their descriptions of their monogamous experiences. For Mark, when he is in a committed relationship, he continues to have sexual attraction to others and the desires to act upon these attractions. Mark locates his tendency towards non-monogamy in his experience of attractions (sexual desire), and concludes he is “naturally polyamorous”; he does state that this is not necessarily the case for all humans because some people are naturally monogamous. In addition to describing himself as polyamorous, Mark expands the definition of polyamory to include his behaviours. He brings the element of “doing polyamory” to the conversation. For Mark, polyamory encompasses both his identity and his relationship practices.

Lani describes polyamory as part of her identity and infers that polyamory is her natural way of being in relationships. She reaches the conclusion that polyamory is natural for her due to her compulsion to be in multiple relationships at one time. Lani describes her drive this way:

It was like a compulsion, it was like that relationship [her primary relationship] didn't exist when I met someone else that I was attracted to ... I don't know how to describe it. It would be the same thing that happened with Tim [her primary partner], happening again. And, even though everything that I had learned, culturally, morally, whatever, said “bad girl you are doing the wrong thing”, I still felt almost compelled to do it. So

certainly, it is an intrinsic part of me ... it's not just because I can, it's something I'm almost compelled to do.

Lani explains she experiences attractions and desires for people who are not her main partner in the same way that she did when first meeting her main partner. Similar to Mark's reasoning, Lani acknowledges that her attractions and desires do not align with the conventional approach of monogamy and concludes that her attractions and desires continue regardless of the cultural prescriptions of monogamy. Lani interprets her simultaneous attractions to people as a compulsion, a biological drive that fuels her polyamory. This framing situates Lani's tendencies for polyamory in the physiology of the body as she explains her inability to follow the cultural imperative of monogamy. She articulates that people who are not polyamorous often suspect that her desires and attractions exist because her main partner is not satisfying her relationship and sexual needs. Lani emphatically rejects this assumption, proposing that in addition to having the capacity to be polyamorous, she is driven to be polyamorous.

Emma reflects upon monogamy and polyamory from an evolutionary perspective. As an evolutionary biologist, Emma understands monogamy as a cultural requirement and humans, as a species, are mostly non-monogamous by nature:

I also don't think it [monogamy] makes evolutionary sense ... We evolved to live in tribes. Being monogamous, I feel like it is lot of feelings of possession and then jealousy and entitlement ... that kind of atmosphere within a tribal system would create a lot of [discord]. So there is evidence that in fact, we were pretty non-monogamous ... like males and females should stay together to raise offspring ... but they were fairly non-monogamous. I don't think it's in our nature to be monogamous. ... I don't think we are physiologically built [for monogamy or] we'd be perfectly happy ... So there's that

biological reason for it [polyamory] ... Everybody strives to be happy, but I feel like if we try to reflect on our evolutionary history and try to integrate that into our lives we'd be a lot happier because we'd be appropriating our lives to what we, our bodies want to do. Or what we're built to do, versus trying to deny ourselves that.

Emma makes the connection between polyamory and natural ways of relating to one another based on our evolutionary history as a species. Emma describes non-monogamy as a key characteristic that once fostered cooperation among members of pre-modern tribes. She presents non-monogamy as existing in its earlier "natural state," a state that she conceives as less tarnished by culture. Emma's narrative works to construct sexuality as a truth of the self, one that is now, in the present day, burdened by a culture of monogamy. Similar to Lani, she locates this truth of the self in the physiology of the body, and uses "happiness" as the gage for living this truth. Emma states: "I feel if we were a monogamous species, we would be 100% happy being with a partner for the rest of our lives and that's obviously not true, if you look at the statistics [on divorce and cheating]." This statement suggests that all members in pre-modern tribes not only were non-monogamous, but that they were completely unified in their "happiness" because they were non-monogamous.

Similar to Emma's ideas that humans did not evolve to be a monogamous species, Paul extends that he does not believe that it is human nature to be monogamous. Paul explains that he and his one long-term partner "just believed that ... it's human nature not to be monogamous." Paul and his long-term partner understand monogamy as a form of social control imposed on people to maintain social organization and cultural norms. "You know, to us it [monogamy] was a contrived political standby to run countries efficiently." Paul explains that people ought to have the freedom (cultural, legal and within their own relationships) to love and connect with people

as they choose especially because as humans, this is our natural tendency. Similar to Emma, Paul describes monogamy as a socially constructed imperative. He then invokes nature to make his claim about non-monogamy and polyamory. Willey (2016) argues that monogamy and non-monogamy are both part of the non/monogamous system because “the naturalization of nonmonogamy in poly discourse mirrors the scientific naturalization of monogamy in that it also relies on the kind of evolutionary logic I described” (p. 73).

I have reflected considerably on the essentialized claims made through these narratives. It was clear to me at the time that the participants were not aware of the racist and imperialist history of their claims. Nor, do I believe that they realized the story they were telling about the “nature of polyamory” is a White narrative. During the interviews, I recall thinking, “I am sure that they don’t realize that polyamory is considered a White privileged practice by many scholars. Maybe I should ask them what they think.” In the end, I did not ask any of the participants if they thought polyamory was a White practice. My fear was that I would make them feel judged. Looking back, I suspect I did not fully appreciate the importance of the question. After years of reflecting on these narratives, I believe my choice to avoid talking about polyamory and whiteness demonstrates the power of whiteness, in particular, how it works in connection to normativity (Dyer, 1988).

Summary

Polyamory is not prescriptive. It does not require people to follow a particular relationship structure or to even emphasize the same ideals across their polyamorous systems. Polyamory can be understood and practised in a variety of ways. Refusing to narrow the ways that polyamory is understood increases its transformative potential because it allows people to adapt their understandings of polyamory as their lives, relationships and politics shift and

change. The only characteristics of polyamory that participants consistently attributed to polyamory is that it is about forming loving relationships that are based on consent and honesty. When I think of these characteristics on their own, they are not unique in any way to polyamory. I would say that most people strive to have loving intimate relationships and friendships that are honest and based upon consent. The key is that polyamory is malleable, flexible and encourages reformulations of relationships; there is room for individual conceptions of polyamory to shift over time.

Several participants explain that they have imagined polyamory differently over the years. For some, their conceptions of polyamory overlaps other non-monogamous practices such as kink and BDSM. Others frame polyamory as inclusive of casual sexual encounters, and still others strictly limit polyamory to loving, committed and long-term relationships. Some participants frame their polyamory as political, relating polyamory to feminism, anarchism and queer politics.

The narratives confirm that participants envision polyamory as having the potential to transform their relationships and experiences within relationships. In some cases, participants actively use polyamory to shift relationship dynamics by de-centering sex and placing equal value on their friendships. Several participants include non-sexual intimate relationships in their polyamorous constellations. Others regard polyamory as a way to accommodate their low sex drive. Participants who identify as asexual are at odds with the sexual requirement of monogamous relationships and can chose polyamory as a way to transform their lives allowing them the opportunity to build their intimate relationships without the pressure of participating in unwanted sexual acts. One participant's narrative demonstrates how people with mental health challenges can be empowered as they use polyamory to reformulate their relationships in ways

that promote their well-being. Polyamory offers participants the possibility to remodel their lives in counter normative ways.

According to these narratives, polyamory is an alternative relationship practice that directly challenges heteronormative and homonormative monogamy in Western culture. These narratives demonstrate that people who practice polyamory construct meanings of polyamory in diverse ways. In some cases, the diverse meanings of polyamory facilitates conscious resistance to heteronormative and homonormative monogamy. The fluid and flexible quality of polyamory results in many variations of how polyamory can be understood and lived.

The narratives also demonstrate that even as polyamory resists mononormativity, it also reproduces mononormativity in the form of whiteness. Privileging love as an act to distinguish polyamory from other forms of non-monogamy, in particular polygamy, reinforces the racialized hierarchy of relationships (Willey, 2006, 2016). Essentialist identity claims that construct polyamory, and non-monogamies in general, as natural, also reinforce White, imperial discourses of sexuality.

Chapter Six: Reflections and Conclusions

Reflections on Identities and this Study

The reflexivity involved in grounded theory and autoethnography have enabled me to explore and expose my personal reflections about the dissertation topic and the process of conducting the study itself, and write them into the study. This study has taken place over the last decade; these years have been a gift to me because time has facilitated a reflexive process and has deepened my thinking and rethinking of polyamory and sexualities. My experiences of identities and sexualities are partly what brought me to study genders and sexualities at the doctoral level, and ultimately to conducting this study. My subjectivity further played an interactive role throughout the conversations I had with participants and the analysis of their narratives. As I write my reflections into this study, I share “the internal dialogue about the self” (Ronai, 1995, p. 399) with readers. I chose to include these because in many ways, my current reflections on my past selves are intertwined with this study and have a direct effect on my framing of the narratives. This study is bound up in my own identity struggles and personal framings of polyamory. While I have not struggled with formulating a polyamorous identity because I consider polyamory to be a flexible way of thinking about and practicing relationships, I have experienced identity crises that I believe inform my understanding of identities in general.

I was born the eldest daughter of young, working class parents. My mother’s culture was French-Canadian and my father had a French-Canadian mother and an English father. In my early years, French was the language of my home, of my elementary schooling, on the playground, and in my extended family. Having said this, being a francophone family in Ontario meant I was surrounded by English culture and spoke English regularly. I recall my grandfather

and elementary school teachers placing incredible expectations on me to preserve my culture and keep my language, reinforcing the importance of francophone identity.

I had a close friend in elementary school who I frequently visited, and I clearly remember being scolded for speaking English when I was at her home. I never spoke English in their home again, not because I feared the punishment, but because it set me apart. I wanted to be recognized and understood as francophone; I wanted to be part of that group. Due to my ethno-lingual situation, I was introduced to a form of identity politics early in my life. I understood the feeling of knowing who I was, but then having people tell me I did not belong. I also distinctly recall the protective feeling that comes with being part of a minority group.

I thought about my francophone identity a lot when I was young. I remember considering ideas like: “How can one be proud of an identity when you cannot even qualify as a member of the group?”, “How does having an anglophone father cancel out my francophone mother?”, “If speaking, thinking and dreaming in French does not make me a francophone, then how can I ever be completely French?” I would continue to think through some of these questions into adulthood.

Understanding, defining and negotiating my identity as a francophone in Ontario parallels many of my other identity struggles. As a tomboy, negotiating my gender as a child presented minor challenges. As an adult, understanding my sexuality would prove to be a major challenge. Over the years, I struggled to figure out which category I fit. As a teen, I questioned whether I was a straight girl who was sometimes attracted to other girls, or if my same-sex attractions were only sexual experimentation. As I became an adult, I wondered if I was bisexual, and then as my desires changed with time and experience, if I was actually a lesbian. Can my sexual desires change over time? Again, I found myself at odds with the categories because I did not clearly fit

into any of them. With more relationship experiences, came more confusion and my anxieties grew because the more I attempted to apply a narrow and rigid definition of sexual orientation, the less the labels seemed to fit. This identity crisis prepared me to question cultural assumptions about sexual normalcy and prepared me to re-imagine sexualities.

Looking back now, at 51 years of age, I now realize that my identity questions played a significant role in my choice to study feminist theories and theories of sexuality at the graduate level. I came to study feminism, sex, gender, and sexuality as a way of exploring myself and learning new ways of thinking about identities. I did not realize this at the time, but over the years, I have come to understand that my academic pursuits are interconnected with my own self-discovery.

The academic study of theories of sexuality challenged me. Initially, I anticipated learning about theories of sexual orientation so that I might better understand myself. I was hoping that the academic study of sexuality would provide me clarity and help me understand my own sexuality. Although, I did not frame it this way back then. However, after reading Foucault (1976/1978), Rubin (1984), Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990), I found myself having more questions about my sexuality and sexuality in general. Also, the focus of my questions began to change in the light of new knowledge. I shifted from questioning where I fit to questioning the system of sexual categorization. I started asking questions like “How have the categories of sexuality come to exist?” and “What purpose do these categories serve?” As I learned to deconstruct socially constructed labels and identities, I started unravelling my own identities.

I began to rethink the social constructs of genders and sexualities. I also began to rethink some of the information that I learned when I studying psychology and counselling theory.

Reflecting on the roles that psychology, law, and medicine played in the criminalization and pathologization of sexualities, helped me think more critically about the categorization of human experiences in general. I began to reconsider the power of culture and understand the power of normalization as a regulatory process. This allowed me to reframe and reread my own struggles with identity. I recognize that there are many ways of defining an identity and that the categories that a culture may use today, will shift and change over time or maybe even disappear altogether. Identity categories do not exist outside of culture; they only exist as they are created and sustained through culture and normalization plays a substantial role in stabilizing the categories. I recognize that I am in a position of privilege in Canada, and that not all individuals (in Canada and beyond) are free to live and question their genders and sexualities openly without fear of consequences. Nor are many people afforded the time to sift through and reflect upon their social identities to this degree. In this way, I am privileged and continue to be privileged to have the time to participate in such reflexivity.

After years of studying feminism, sex, gender and sexuality, I think that the categories of identity are very relevant, but not in the way I once thought. The categories are relevant because they are used to classify and organize people in society; the categories often create the distinctions between normal/abnormal and healthy/sick. Some categories, such as heterosexual and monogamous, continue to be privileged. People who fall in categories that align with heteronormative and homonormative monogamy are celebrated. Our cultural narratives, novels, media etc. work to reinforce and reproduce mononormativity. People who participate in acts and claim identities that fall outside of sexual normalcy continue to be marginalized, criminalized and pathologized. Yet, there remains a hierarchy of non-normative behaviours. Polyamory is a good example of a non-normative practice that maintains (White) privilege, compared to other

practices of non-monogamy, such as polygamy, which is a criminalized in Canada. Further, people's intersectional positions and the context within which they live their identities, contribute to how they are classified by society. People do not experience their intersectional positions in the same way. A person's geographical location, race, gender, ability, body, sexuality and so on, along with the cultural context, all contribute to very different experiences of power and privilege.

My experiences with psychological labels, my own ethno-lingual struggles, and identity crises with my sexuality, have shaped my subjective views of identities in general. They are directly related to my interest in researching polyamory and help explain my long-standing focus on the cognitive framings of institutionalized definitions and identity politics. I am fascinated and also troubled by the move to define polyamory as a sexual orientation. Given my experiences with psychological labelling, I cannot help but notice the similarities between the move to define polyamory as a sexual orientation and the diagnostic system of mental disorders (DSM) used in Western culture. In both cases the labels may offer access to privilege (legal protections) for some; however, they likely exclude others. Having access to legal protections does not preclude a person experiencing marginalization and stigma. These classification systems and approaches to identities in general, continuously produce divisions, outsiders, and reinforce binaries of normal/abnormal and healthy/sick.

The narratives from this study demonstrate that polyamory is many different things and that people form polyamorous relationships for many different reasons. What became clear, in all of my years of conversations about polyamory, years of counselling, and the 46 hours of interviews, is that polyamory has never been described to me as a sexual orientation. Even though I often used "sexual orientation" to clarify what I meant when asking participants to

describe their sexuality, not one participant labelled their sexuality or sexual orientation as polyamorous (Table 3). In the end, I positioned these narratives within the debate on polyamory as a sexual orientation because I believe they challenge this approach and work to dis-orient polyamory.

Conclusions

There is no single definition of polyamory or description of polyamory as it relates to self-concept. The narratives from this study construct polyamory as a consensual practice of non-monogamy that is diverse in its subjective meanings and conceptualizations. Some participants identify the flexibility and fluidity of polyamory to be an important aspect of polyamory because it can be lived in as many ways as there are polyamorists. The narratives demonstrate that people can shift and change how they think about and practice polyamory over their lives. Some polyamorists cling to essentialized descriptions of polyamory, while others understand polyamory to be a chosen practice and still others think that polyamory is something that “just happens,” a human experience of relationships. Others use polyamory in ways that work to challenge the binary of healthy / sick. The conceptions of polyamory that emerge from this study reproduce sexual normalcy in some ways and challenge it in others.

The participants define polyamory as a relationship practice and identity that challenges sexual normalcy by its rejection of monogamy and inclusion of non-sexual partners. By including non-sexual partners in their polyamorous constellations, some polyamorists reformulate their relationship dynamics in ways that de-center the couple and challenge the sexual imperative associated with intimacy. Placing non-sexual intimacies on equal footing with sexual intimacies begins to undo the relational hierarchy of sexual normalcy. In addition, people

use polyamory to enact their radical feminist, queer and anarchist politics to increase individual freedom.

Polyamory affords people who identify as asexual the opportunity to participate in polyamorous relationships without the pressure to have sexual interactions with their intimate partners. The narratives demonstrate that polyamory offers people who identify as asexual (or have low sexual desire) transformative potential by providing an opening for relationship formations and structures that might not be available to them (or might be very difficult to find) in monogamous relationships. Further, participants who identify as having mental illness find polyamory to be a good relationship structure for them because it allows them the opportunity to restructure their relationships in ways that reduce their anxieties and increase their autonomy and self-care. In this way, participants who experienced on-going challenges with mental health are able to transform their relationship experiences and access more support through polyamory. However, the narratives also confirm that polyamory is constructed in ways that reproduce sexual normalcy.

Even though most participants note their active resistance to mononormativity, some of their narratives work to reproduce sexual normalcy nonetheless. At times, the narratives privilege polyamory as a non-monogamous practice that is about love and is distinct from other forms of non-monogamy. In this sense, the narratives echo the White superiority and morality noted by Klesse (2006), Rambukkana (2015) and Willey (2006, 2016) in their analyses of polyamorous discourses. Participants' association of polyamory with forming loving, committed and consensual non-monogamous relationships also works to align polyamory with heteronormativity and homonormativity in Western culture. It is critical to attend to the ways that whiteness reveals itself through these polyamorous narratives so we may begin to better

understand the workings of power and address the persistent normalization of racialized and imperialist aspects of sexual normalcy.

A few participants conceive of polyamory as a “natural” part of who they are, or as a physiological drive, that fuels their non-monogamy. Some narratives apply an evolutionary logic to polyamory and propose that pre-modern societies were non-monogamous. Framing polyamory as a natural imperative that is rooted in our (the human species) primitive beginnings, works to construct polyamory as an essentialized identity. These narratives present polyamory as a truth of the self and use a form of primitivism to conclude that non-monogamy existed in its “purest” form “before” cultural influences. In these ways, the narratives expose whiteness as they reproduce naturalized and racialized discourses of non/monogamy.

The current study presents a range of definitions and concepts of polyamory that emerged from a group of people from Guelph, Ontario. While this group of people represent diverse experiences of genders, sexualities, religious perspectives and ideologies, the racial experience is overwhelmingly White, with many participants having a Eurocentric ethnicity. It is important to identify that these narratives present polyamory through the dominant social positions of whiteness. While it is noteworthy that this study does give voice to one Metis person who practices polyamory, the remaining participants presented White polyamorous experiences and perspectives.

While the range of genders, sexualities, religions and abilities represented in this study are a strength of this dissertation, the predominance of White participants replicates the lack of racial diversity found in the research on polyamory (Barker & Landridge, 2010b; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Willey, 2006). However, the range of intersectionalities, including positions that intersect with mental health and asexuality expand the literature on discourses on polyamory.

This study contributes to the literature on polyamory by placing the “focus as much on [the] diversity of practices and experiences as it does on consistency” (Barker & Landridge, 2010b, p. 763), because it attends to the many ways polyamory is defined and conceptualized.

In conclusion, the results from this study support Klesse’s (2014b, 2016) argument that applying a sexual orientation model to polyamory is a risky move, one that we should resist so that we may preserve the diverse forms of polyamory, and the transformative potentials that polyamory offers people. Defining polyamory as a sexual orientation would narrow the definition of polyamory and exclude those experiences of polyamory that include non-sexual relationships (including friendships and people who identify as asexual), radical politics that work to disrupt sexual normalcy (feminist, queer and anarchist politics), and remove the transformative potential polyamory offers people who have mental health struggles. Klesse further argues that defining polyamory as a sexual orientation would likely only offer legal protections to a small proportion of polyamorists. This study suggests that polyamorists who make essentialized (White) identity claims would likely be the ones who would fit into the sexual orientation model; however, it also demonstrates the forms of polyamory that are excluded by this approach. Adopting a sexual orientation model would reinforce whiteness by validating and privileging conceptualizations of polyamory that are defined as “natural,” and subsequently would work to stabilize sexual normalcy. None of the participants in this study constructs or even names polyamory as a sexual orientation. Based on the results of this study, it is clear that dis-orienting polyamory and allowing it to be an identity and relationship practice that is adaptable and flexible to those who claim it, will preserve polyamory’s radical and transformative potentials.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. General Background questions.
 - a. Where were you born?
 - b. Were you raised with a religion?
 - c. Where do you live now?
 - d. How old are you?
 - e. How do you describe your class?
 - f. How do you describe your gender? Sex?
 - g. How do you describe your race?
 - h. What is your citizenship?
 - i. Educational background?
 - j. Work? Career? Profession
 - k. Able-bodied / any disabilities
 - l. How do you describe your sexuality (sexual orientation)?

Questions Related to Polyamory (What is polyamory)

2. How do you define/describe polyamory?
 - Do you identify yourself as poly or your relationships as polyamorous?
3. How do you understand polyamory to be different than monogamy?
4. How do you define polyamory in relation to other forms of consensual non-monogamy. Do you think polyamory is different from polygamy? Swinging? BdsM?

5. Some people use the terminology of ‘primary or secondary’ partners....do you use these terms?

Monogamy

6. Have you been in a monogamous relationship? If so, how was this experience for you?

Poly Relationships

7. Are you currently in a polyamorous relationship? Can you describe your current polyamorous relationship(s)? (if not currently, can you think back to a poly situation?)
8. Can you tell me about your partners? Gender? Race? Class? Sexuality? Ability? Citizenship?
9. Have you had previous polyamorous relationships? If so, how do they compare to the relationships that you have now?
10. Do you live with all of your partners? Some partners? Children?
 - a. If so, how are the house/home chores organized?
 - b. Who cleans?
 - c. Who takes care of the money and the banking?
 - d. Who does the outdoor work?
 - e. Who cares for the children? (when they were younger – did someone stay home to take care of the children? Homeschooling?)
 - f. Who does the time scheduling and family organization (poly schedule? Who does this organizing)
 - g. Have the roles stayed the same over the years? Have they changed?
 - h. Were these roles negotiated or did you just fall into them?
 - i. Do these roles change depending on the partners that each of you have?
 - j. Is there more help with more partners?

Ground Rules

11. Do you have ground rules established in your poly relationships? If so, what are these ground rules?
12. How did you negotiate these ground rules? Did everyone participate in establishing these ground rules?
13. What are the consequences of breaking the ground rules?

Communication

14. How do you (would you) tell your partner/partners that you are interested in starting a new relationship with someone else?
15. Are there specific things that you would talk to the new partner about before you start the relationship? What are these things?
16. Do you have specific words that you use that are part of a poly language? Poly terminology?
17. Why do you think you use these words?

Transitions

18. When a new partner enters a poly relationship, or an old partner leaves it is a time of transition. Do you find that transitional moments in your poly relationships are challenging?
19. What is the most challenging about transitional moments?
20. What can partners do to make the transitions smooth?

Cheating

21. Typically in monogamous relationships, having sexual/intimate relationships with someone else usually threatens the relationship and often ends it. What things would threaten or end your relationships?
22. Can a poly person 'cheat'?

23. What is the biggest mistake you could make in your poly relationship?
24. What is the worst thing you have had to confess to your partners?
25. If you had to describe a 'bad poly person' or a 'bad thing for a poly person to do' what would that be?
26. What is a 'good' poly person?

Power

27. Are you equally committed to all of your partners? If circumstances forced you to have to pick one partner.....who would that be? Why? Why not?
28. Do you think that poly relationships in general are more egalitarian than monogamous relationships?
29. How do you explain 'relationship power'? If one person has more power in a relationship, what would this mean?
30. How does power work in poly relationships? If there is a hierarchy, how does it work?
31. Do you see any relationships between power and gender? Race? Class? Sexuality?
32. Do you see a relationship between power and a person's position in the poly relationship?
33. What happens to relationship power during a time of transition?
34. Do you think you have more or less power in a poly relationship compared to a monogamous relationship.

Guelph

35. How did you come to live in Guelph?
36. Do you think there is a strong poly presence in Guelph? More than other towns of this size that you have experienced?
37. Are there 'poly' exclusive places where you or your poly friends spend time?

38. Are you comfortable being 'out' publically? In all spaces?
39. What spaces are comfortable to be out? Why ?
40. What spaces are not comfortable to be out? Why?
41. Please name your favourite places to eat out in Guelph - or go out for coffee. Top 3
42. Please name your favourite places (and this can include private spaces also) to hang out with friends.
43. Please name the public spaces in Guelph that you feel the most comfortable, the most 'like yourself'? Where are these spaces and why do you think you feel comfortable there?
44. What street do you live on?
45. Can you name the spaces in Guelph where you feel the least comfortable? Why do you think you do not feel comfortable there?

Appendix B: Study Description

Guelph Poly Study – guelphpolystudy@gmail.com

Who Am I?

My name is Liane Cheshire and I am a PhD student in Women's Studies at York University. I am also a Professor at Georgian College teaching courses in Women's Studies, Gender and Sexuality in our university programs. I maintain a queer-positive and poly-positive politics and I am looking forward to learning from your experiences!

Research in Polyamory

Polyamory is typically defined as a relational style in which people participate openly in loving, intimate and sexual relationships with more than one person simultaneously. Polyamorous relationships can be completely open with shifting, flexible boundaries for forming new relationships. Alternatively, individuals may choose to have a closed relationship with two or more other people. This closed form of polyamory is also called 'polyfidelity'. Love, honesty, full disclosure and consent about sexual partnering and practices by each partner are common values in polyamorous communities.

My Study

I am currently conducting an ethnographic study of the Polyamorous community in Guelph, Ontario for my PhD dissertation. This means that I am interested in studying the culture and practices of polyamory in Guelph. My research includes personal interviews, participant observations of public spaces, and research into Guelph's sexual politics. My dissertation has full ethics approval from the Office of Ethics Approval at York University. The interview information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used in order to protect you and your partners' anonymity.

Participants

I am looking for individuals who

- are willing to do a personal interview with me (approximately 2-3 hours long)
- have been in at least one poly relationship and are open to potentially having more
- live in Guelph, or are in a poly relationship with someone who lives in Guelph
- are 18 years of age or older

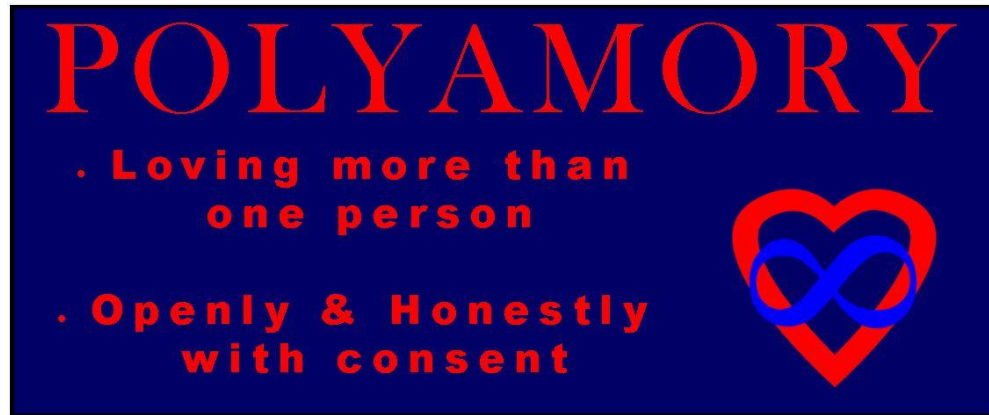
Individuals from all cultures, genders, sexualities and life experiences are welcome.

Unfortunately, I am only able to conduct interviews in English.

Contact Information

If you are interested in participating or would like to ask me any questions please email me at guelphpolystudy@gmail.com. I have created an email account for my research and I am the only one who has access to this information. All contact information will be kept confidential and will be deleted once the study is completed.

Appendix C: Information Poster



Guelph Polyamory Study

Who Am I?

- My name is Liane Cheshire and I am a PhD student in Women's Studies at York University.
- I maintain a queer-positive and poly-positive politics and I am looking forward to learning from your experiences!

My Study

- I am currently conducting an ethnographic study of the Polyamorous community in Guelph, Ontario for my PhD dissertation. This means that I am interested in studying the culture and practices of polyamory in Guelph.

Participant Criteria

- You identify as poly
- You are 18 years of age or older
- You live in Guelph or you have a partner(s) who lives in Guelph

guelphpolystudy@gmail.com
CHECK IT OUT

guelphpolystudy@gmail.com
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CHECK IT OUT

Appendix D: Consent Form

Date: Jan. 17, 2011

Study Name: Polyamory and Power: An Ethnographic Study.

Researcher:

Liane Cheshire PhD Candidate, Women's Studies, York University

One Georgian Drive, Barrie, Ontario.

lianecheshire@gmail.com

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of the current research is to conduct an ethnographic study that explores both the culture and the lived experiences of a group of individuals practicing polyamory in Guelph, Ontario. For the purpose of this study, polyamory is defined as having open/consensual intimate and sexual relationships with more than one person simultaneously. More specifically this research considers how power works through relations of gender, race, class and sexuality in polyamorous relationships. This study also examines communication, language and negotiating strategies used in polyamorous relationships.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:

You will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher that will last approximately 2-3 hours. The interview will be recorded, transcribed and then analyzed along with the transcripts from other interviews. The researcher is interested in the themes and concepts that emerge from these interviews. The questions for the interviews will focus on polyamory and personal relationships.

Risks and Discomforts:

I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. You have the choice to disclose / not disclose information about yourself throughout the interview.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:

Participating in this study allows you to play a significant role in contributing to the current research on polyamory. Your participation in this research defines/describes/exposes your culture of polyamory and allows you to have a voice in society without having to publically identify yourself and potentially risk discrimination. This research works against heteronormativity and mono-normativity.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of the relationship that you may have with the researcher or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study:

You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed.

Confidentiality:

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The interview will be recorded with a digital voice recorder. I will use the voice files to

transcribe the interview. All voice files and transcribed interviews will be stored on my computer and backed up on an external hard drive. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only research staff will have access to this information. Pseudonyms will be used so that the interview voice files and transcripts cannot be linked with the participant's real name.

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. If you provide written consent allowing me to keep your transcripts indefinitely then I will keep your data secure and locked. Otherwise, after 10 years your data will be destroyed. All files will be deleted and the computer will be re-formatted. All external hard drives will be physically broken prior to disposal.

Questions About the Research?

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Liane Cheshire by e-mail (lianecheshire@gmail.com). This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____, consent to participate in 'Polyamory and Power: An Ethnographic Study' conducted by Liane Cheshire. I have understood the nature of this project

and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator