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**POLYAMOROUS WOMEN,  
SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY  
AND POWER**

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*This article explores polyamorous women's potential to enlarge the concept of sexual subjectivity through their engagement in nontraditional relationships and their attempts to reject sexual objectification. Polyamorous people openly engage in romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships with multiple people simultaneously. Polyamory differs from swinging with its emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygamy. This ethnographic analysis expands sociological understanding of women's sexuality by investigating this previously unexamined area of sexual subjectivity. Specifically, the author analyzes some of the ways that polyamorous women expand so-called normal social roles, discusses their sexual lives and identities, and explores novel and traditional forms of power polyamorous practice engenders for these women's relationships.*

*Keywords:* polyamory; women; sexual subjectivity; gender; power; sexuality; relationships

**I**n the shifting gendered and sexual social landscape of the early twenty-first century, multiple-partner relationships remain eroticized and undertheorized. Pornographic films (Roof 1991; Swedberg 1989) and magazines (Jenefsky and Miller 1998) frequently present images of multiple-partner sex, most often of multiple women or a man with several women. Rather than challenging gendered and sexual roles or enlarging women's sexual sphere, these scenes rather serve to reinforce heteronormativity (Jenefsky and Miller 1998). These highly sexualized images fail to capture the lived experiences of the people, especially the women, who actually engage in multiple partner relationships. Feminist theorists have criticized such androcentric images of women's sexuality (Dworkin 1979; MacKinnon 1986) and have argued instead for an agentic female sexual subjectivity (Martin 1996; Tolman 2002).

Polyamory is a form of relationship in which people have multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners. It differs from swinging in

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its emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygamy. Very little sociological research has examined polyamory, and the scant extant scholarship (R. Rubin 2001) mentions it only in passing and provides no in-depth analysis of participants' experiences.

The study of polyamory is essential to forming a more complete understanding of women's sexual subjectivity and power. My analysis provides empirical evidence that suggests new complexities associated with multiple-partner relationships and expands sociological understanding of women's sexuality by investigating a previously unexamined area of sexual subjectivity. To explore polyamorous women's potential to enlarge the concept of sexual subjectivity through engagement in nontraditional relationships and their attempts to reject sexual objectification, I analyzed data based on seven years of participant observation and in-depth interviews.<sup>1</sup> I conclude this article by suggesting possible avenues for future research, particularly an examination of women involved in same-sex multiple-partner relationships, longitudinal research that investigates shifting power relationships as women age, and more thorough interaction with polyamorous men.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While social theorists have examined multiple-partner relationships in the context of bisexuality (Hutchins and Kaahumani 1991; Rust 1993, Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994), homosexuality (Connell 1995; Yip 1997), open marriage (Constantine and Constantine 1973; Smith and Smith 1974), adultery (Jones 1997; Michael et al. 1994), and swinging (Bartell 1971; Fang 1976; Jenks 1998), these discussions have focused on variations within a conventional sexual framework. Analysis indicates that swingers maintain conservative attitudes regarding gender roles (Henshel 1973), heterosexuality (Bartell 1971), and politics (Jenks 1998; Gould 1999). Although there are several self-help books written for people attempting polyamorous relationships (Anapol 1997; Easton and Liszt 1997; Nearing 1992; West 1996) and polyamory has received some (largely negative) attention in the

popular press (Cloud 1999; Kurtz 2003), there has been virtually no scholarly work of any depth on the topic. Addition of polyamory to the catalog of women's sexual identities augments contemporary sociological research by acknowledging an alternate form of sexuality that offers women expanded horizons of choice.

The polyamorous women in my sample engage in multifaceted and sometimes contradictory relationships with sexual subjectivity. Tolman (2002, 5–6) terms sexual subjectivity,

a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being. Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity.

Martin (1996, 10) asserts, "Sexual subjectivity is a necessary component of agency and thus of self-esteem. That is, one's sexuality affects her/his ability to act in the world, and to feel like she/he can will things and make them happen." Sexual subjectivity for girls and women contrasts heterocentric, patriarchal objectification in which female sexuality is commodified or colonized in the service and convenience of men (Dworkin 1979; MacKinnon 1986; Ramazanoglu and Holland 1993; L. Rubin 1990a; see also L. Rubin 1990b).

Sexual subjectivity is integrally linked with power—the power to appropriate sexuality, relational power, and social power connected to defining versions of sexuality outside rigidly controlled norms as deviant (Ramazanoglu and Holland 1993; Tannenbaum 1999). Women with no access to their own sexual subjectivity have bodies that Tolman (2002) terms "silent," disempowered by being spoken for and defined by masculine ideas and desires. In the sexualized social landscape of contemporary Western culture, even (or especially) lesbians and bisexual women are defined by masculine terms (Lorde 1984; Rust 1993).

Some women refuse the mandates of androcentric versions of sexuality and redefine themselves as sexual agents. Crawley and Broad (2004, 68) discuss the shift in the authority of storytelling from doctors and psychologists to "the everyday person" who becomes the agent in her own construction of a sexual and political self through "self-storying as activism." The bisexual women (and men) who participated in Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor's (2001) longitudinal study created lasting images of themselves as bisexual by concentrating on their

feelings of attraction to both sexes rather than sexual behaviors. “As the bisexuals aged, rather than focusing on the nature of their current sexual lives as the important dimension, more of them turned to their history of sexual feelings—their having sustained a dual attraction over such a long time,” which allowed participants to carve out a “more expansive identity” (Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 2001, 202). While some respondents in Shalet, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler’s (2003) examination of women in gangs occupied “respectable” roles in which male gang members defined and controlled their sexuality, others refused androcentric classifications and forged autonomous roles, outside of male supervision and sexual ownership. Their findings indicate that “female gang members confront a tension between establishing their independence from men and toughness on one hand and negotiating and accommodating constraining norms regarding femininity of the other” (Shalet, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler 2003, 139). In her examination of young women’s sexual decision making, Dunn (1998, 508) similarly concludes that

a woman is neither the product of her circumstances (a victim) nor the producer of her world (a powerful female), but rather she is both.

By simultaneously challenging and participating in aspects of sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification, polyamorous women inhabit the borderland between what Connell (1987, 183) identifies as *emphasized femininity*, or a version of womanhood that is “defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” and an alternative, noncompliant form of femininity. Polyamorous women, like the majority of women currently living in the United States, face a complex set of social and sexual norms with disparate requirements. L. Rubin (1990a; see also L. Rubin 1990b) explores heterosexuality in the aftermath of the sexual revolution and declares the social landscape a tangle of contradictory meanings, especially confusing regarding women’s sexual subjectivity. She concludes that while men enjoy increased sexual access to a larger variety of women, they simultaneously wish for women who are “real” in the sense of being sexually submissive and personally compliant. Women in her study recognize these divergent messages and chafe against the thinly veiled and more elaborate double standard their mothers endured a generation before:

Men, then, still take certain prerogatives unto themselves, as if they were given in natural law, and women are left to deal with messages that are wildly mixed. Be an equal, but not wholly so. Be independent, but tread with care. Be assertive, but ready to give way. Make money, but not too much. Commit to a career, but be ready to stay home with the children. Be sexually aggressive, but don't push too hard. (L. Rubin 1990a, 146; see also L. Rubin 1990b)

L. Rubin's respondents report negotiating androcentric standards, which define sexuality as a masculine territory in which women are judged by the degree to which they meet men's needs and fulfill masculine desires rather than their own.

Numerous theorists agree with L. Rubin's (1990a; see also L. Rubin 1990b) assessment that the gendered sexual double standard remains firmly entrenched (Crawford and Popp 2003; Dunn 1998; Jeffreys 1990; Martin 1996; Risman and Schwartz 2002).

If, as Lorde (1984, 55) suggests, conventional sexual arrangements are designed to silence women's authentic spirits, then an alternative erotic system could offer women a more authentic expression of sexual subjectivity from which to "rise up empowered." Through their involvement in polyamory, the women in my sample explored new roles and avenues of sexuality while shifting the balance of power in their relationships. Polyamory, however, is a complex relationship style, and its impact on their lives is concomitantly intricate. These shifts were unable to completely obscure the patriarchal culture, which remains active in the polyamorous subculture, nor did they negate the price some women paid for the stigma of nonmonogamy. In this article, I explore the impact the alternate sexual system of polyamory exerts on some women's lives. In so doing, I detail some of the ways in which polyamorous women expand "normal" social roles, discuss their sexual lives and identities, and explore the novel and traditional forms of power polyamorous practice engenders for these women's relationships.

## METHOD

This article is part of a larger project based on participant observation and in-depth interviews I conducted during a seven-year period

(1996 to 2003). Originally, I approached the group not as a researcher but rather to investigate the potential impact of polyamory on my own relationship. My partner introduced the idea of the two of us engaging in a relationship with another woman shortly after we met in 1993. He imagined it would fulfill his life-long dream of forging an alternative family, and it fit me well because I identify as bisexual. He expressed concern that I would become dissatisfied with a single partner and miss sexual contacts with women were he and I to be monogamous.

My initial reaction to his desire to open our relationship was almost complete rejection of the idea, borne of feelings of low self-esteem, personal inadequacy, and cultural conditioning. He was persistent, though, and we discussed opening the relationship to another woman for several years. As the conversation progressed, I began to place greater stock in my lover's assurances that he was completely committed to me. I also found his arguments for polyamory increasingly compelling, especially his assertion that monogamy held no guarantee that neither of us would fall in love with someone else.

I discovered a group of people in our local area practicing polyamory, exactly the kind of relationship my partner had been advocating. We attended multiple large group meetings and potluck picnics. I attended monthly meetings for polyamorous women, socialized regularly with polyamorists in the area, and frequented a monthly coed support group with my partner. My role in the setting became one of friend/seeker, someone who sought to explore polyamory to decide whether to engage in it. I forged friendships in the setting prior to considering it as a research area, and these relationships continued as I transitioned to a research role. Friendships with women were especially facile and rewarding, though I felt more guarded around some of the men in the setting and thus received less complete data from them than I did from the women with whom I felt more comfortable and interacted with more frequently. My continued reluctance to engage in a nonmonogamous sexual relationship may have truncated the data I gathered from those men I perceived as sexually aggressive, attracted to me, or desirous of sexual interaction with me.

My data for this article come from extensive participant observation, including attendance at support group meetings, workshops, and national polyamorists conferences, as well as informal conversations and forty in-depth interviews (twenty women and twenty men).

Reflecting mainstream Western polyamorous communities, my respondents were in their mid-30s to late 50s and tended toward middle- and upper-middle-class socioeconomic status, usually college educated, overwhelmingly white,<sup>2</sup> and frequently employed as professionals in computer or counseling/therapy fields. I used semistructured interviews that lasted from one and one half to two hours, a format that yields data suitable for answering questions about members' interpretations, actions, and interactions. Interviews followed a pattern in which respondents would first choose their own pseudonyms, and then I would ask an initial series of questions regarding demographic characteristics, entree into polyamory, and forms of relationship. After probing each of these areas, I encouraged respondents to choose a topic from an extensive list generated from previous interviews and participant observation covering a broad range of issues relevant to polyamorous relationships, such as safer sex agreements or parenting issues. I would probe each topic until respondents had exhausted their replies and then ask them to choose another subject from the list until they had nothing further to say. Initially respondents added new topics to the list, but eventually, no one had additional suggestions.

Employing inductive data gathering methods (Lofland and Lofland 1995) and constant comparative methods (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978), I analyzed the interview data and my field notes by adjusting analytical categories to fit the emerging theoretical concepts. Once the theoretical concepts emerged, I constructed clusters of participant's experiences to further develop my theories. I used subsequent interviews and field observation to verify the validity of these theories, as well as checking for the boundaries and variations of common themes (Glassner and Hertz 1999).

While I make no broad claims of generalizability with this study, I have confidence that my sample represents the populations in the areas I studied. Other scholars studying sexual minorities have come to similar conclusions (Connell 1995; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001; Weston 1991). The unknown boundaries of the universe of polyamorous, gay, or lesbian people make it impossible to collect a representative sample.

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While many polyamorous women reported a sense of exhilaration accompanying their liberation from traditional cultural roles they found overly constraining, some revealed a simultaneous experience of terror and anomic pain that accompanied the loss of traditionally recognized roles.

### **EXPANDED ROLES**

Some polyamorous women who felt constrained and disempowered by monogamy reported a sense of release upon embarking on polyamorous relationships. Departure from accepted forms of relationships required polyamorous women to form new roles or expand roles previously available to them as monogamists. The women in my sample expanded their familial, cultural, gendered, and sexual roles.

*Family and monogamous culture.* Peck, a 36-year-old white magazine editor and mother of three, rejected the traditional wifely role she observed in her family of origin and had originally replicated in her monogamous marriage:

Women got married, had children, raised the children and stayed in the home, that's what I was taught and brought up with. And that was the role I was following. . . . That period in my life, I was thinking and wanting things different and was starting to get my own empowerment as a woman, changing roles, and wanting more.

“Wanting more” involved not only pursuing higher levels of education but also rejecting a form of sexuality and family that was not working for her and forging a polyamorous alternative. Polyamory provided the impetus for Peck to shift long-standing roles she found ill fit.

Others found participation in polyamory spurred a willingness to challenge social conventions and attendant roles. Phoenix, a 53-year-old white computer programmer, saw polyamory as fundamental to her larger interrogation of social norms and values:

I have a tendency to think that somebody who is in their body, aware of what they want and don't want, making their own decisions, is much less likely to maybe go quietly off to war or send their kids off to war because

that's what's supposed to be done. They're much less controllable in some ways because you're used to making your own decisions... I think that my choice to be polyamorous has a lot to do with my willingness to look at how I really want to live my life... I think I have felt a lot freer to do things differently than the rest of society does, in other areas of my life as well. Once you've had to think about it rather than just follow society's scripts, you may be more open to making different choices in other parts of your life as well.

Rejecting such a fundamental social tenet as monogamy often granted polyamorous women self-permission to question other norms as well.

*Gender roles.* The majority of the polyamorous women in my sample reported shifting gender roles resulting from, or precipitating, participation in polyamory. Yansa, a 29-year-old African American health care provider and stepmother of one, related her reasons for agreeing to monogamous relationships even though she knew she desired multiple partners.

I didn't want to hurt my partner's feelings. I felt that I wanted to be the righteous one and do the right thing for them and for the relationship. . . . When we became committed and like kind of in a monogamous relationship I think the relationship immediately went down hill from there. And it was more of a situation where he had sown his wild oats. He was tired of playing around. I was the one, but I had just begun and it was like, quelled this desire and I was just like, this is not enough for me. And he was like, this is enough for me, and I said, we have a problem.

Yansa initially conformed to a traditionally feminine role of ignoring her own desire for multiple partners in favor of being "righteous" and engaging in the monogamy her partner desired. Eventually, she came to define their disparate needs as "a problem" and transitioned to a polyamorous relationship style and identity.

Similarly, Louise, a 37-year-old white astrologer and photographer with three children, found that her roles shifted once she engaged in polyamory:

I am more aware of what I need for myself. I'm more aware of taking care of myself and not always living for other people. Not that I don't

care about people, I'm a very caring person. The problem is that I had a bad habit of always putting everyone else first. I'm still working on that one. But it [polyamory] has made me realize how much I need to take care of me.... It's just being true to who I am.

Engagement in polyamory spurred Louise to reexamine her traditional female focus on "living for other people" and "putting everyone else first" and transition to a more agentic life pattern of self-focus with a concomitant experience of greater authenticity.

Some polyamorous women reported distaste for dualistic gender arrangements that they found overly constraining. Emmanuella, a 40-year-old Chicana Web designer and mother of three, was uncomfortable with a bipolar gender system and sought relational styles that allowed her greater latitude. "I'm not sure it matters, gender, as regards to . . . levels of communication and respect, tolerance. I'm not sure that it matters, male or female." Emmanuella asserted that personal qualities outweighed gender as priorities for establishing sexual or affective relationships.

*Sexual roles.* Sexuality was one of the primary areas in which polyamorous women reported expanding their roles. Julia, a 41-year-old Lebanese American software consultant, found polyamory to be instrumental in redefining the cultural ideal of sex and sexuality that failed her personally:

My motive of expressing my sexuality has really changed a lot since finding polyamory. . . . On the face of it, you could just say that it's been limited a lot and the things that other people usually call sex, things that involve genital contact and bringing one another to orgasm, mostly I don't do that anymore because it's too emotionally wrought for me. It's too, I just can't do it with integrity anymore. . . . So for me, when I talk about any sexual relationships or interactions I have had they've been relationships dominated overwhelmingly by what other people might just call smooching or a lot of breathing and gazing into each other's eyes and caressing and things where for me arousal is what's enjoyable and orgasm is not.

Some other polyamorous women eroticized gender fluidity. Nori, a 49-year-old white mother of one and small business owner, described it as "gender bending":

I've got strong-ass bending desire stuff going on. . . . The person I am most attracted to on the street is someone I don't know their gender. . . . I love those girls that look like boys and those boys that look like dykes, not girly girls, but dykes. . . . I am totally eroticized by the thought of drag, not necessarily what some of those drag queens do but boys or girls bending and a handful of transgendered women or men either way that just flipped over, that didn't like the outer edges of fem or masculine.

Several other respondents expressed a similarly strong desire to date transsexuals or cross-dressers. Dylan, a 33-year-old white costume designer and mother of one, embraced her own transgendered tendencies:

I love playing with the transgender thing because it totally tweaks how I know myself that way and I like it. I have been involved with several transgendered people, and I like that energy where it's like I'm more unexpected or more unknown to myself and I can grow in a place where I haven't before. So as I accepted myself as being more transgendered, I found my attractions to broaden. . . . Eventually, I just got really bored with trying to pick people apart by how they're male or female, and for me, it's really part of being transgendered where I don't like doing that to myself and I don't like doing it to other people. I find it a way to separate us instead of connect us, and I'm much, much, much more juiced by the connection!

Nori, Dylan, and other polyamorous women rejected a sexual and gender system that separated people with a false emphasis on small differences between men and women. Many of these polyamorous women embraced forms of sexual subjectivity that allowed them to redefine mores and social institutions such as sexuality and monogamy to better fit their own needs. Some consciously refused the subject/object dichotomy that cast women as passive objects of men's sexual satisfaction (Sedgwick 1990). Others simply forged novel roles without theorizing a social context. Still, the loss of traditional roles could hold hidden costs, and the aftermath of reorganizing sexual roles was extremely uncomfortable for some polyamorous women. While many respondents reported exhilaration at the liberation from confining traditional roles, they also reported terror that accompanied psychic freefall with no roles to emulate.

## SEXUALITY

Polyamorous women frequently discussed sexuality in support groups, social gatherings, and with their partners. These discussions emphasized sexuality in relation to polyamorous women's high sex drives, connections with other women, and bisexual identities.

*High sex drive.* In direct opposition to cultural mandates of female sexual submission and a double standard that requires women restrain their sexual desires (L. Rubin 1990a; Tolman 2002; see also L. Rubin 1990b), a number of polyamorous women reported viewing themselves as highly sexual people. Louise asserted that

I have such a high sex drive and literally feel I need sex on a regular basis to feel grounded, to feel clear, to feel good, and it's just, it's very, it's like exercise for me. It feels good. I enjoy it. . . . If I haven't had sex in a while, after about three to four weeks I start climbing the walls and I get very bitchy and I'm just not in a good mood and I don't feel good and I feel on edge. Whereas if I get sex on a regular basis, I'm calm, I'm fine, I'm happy.

This description of sexual appetite would be unremarkable coming from a man, but from a woman, it contrasts dominant cultural scripts mandating women's disinterest in sex except to meet masculine needs. Although images of Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, and Halley Barry convey an unbridled female sexuality, ordinary women face a more mundane version of the entrenched sexual double standard. In their examination of research on the gendered implications of teenage (hetero)sexuality, Risman and Schwartz (2002, 20) found that

girls today may be able to have sex without stigma, but only with a steady boyfriend. For girls, love justifies desire. A young woman still cannot be respected if she admits an appetite driven sexuality. If a young woman has sexual liaisons outside of publicly acknowledged "coupledom," she is at risk of being defamed. . . . This puts her one down as a power player in her relationships, because her boyfriend does not have to worry about moving on too quickly and being stigmatized for his sexual choices.

Risking defamation by eschewing the constraints of coupledom, polyamorous women reject the power dynamic embedded in the

persistent sexual double standard that continues to limit women's sexual choices and stigmatize those who refrain from living by its mandates.

Some polyamorous women spoke of their high sexual appetites in even more consciously gendered transgressive terms. Peck defied cultural conditioning that defined highly sexual women in derogatory terms and instead recast her sexual appetite as empowering:

Women with multiple lovers are usually called sluts, bitches, very derogatory, very demeaning in sexual context. Whereas men who have multiple lovers—they're studs, they're playboys, they're glorified names where with a woman it's very demeaning. So to be a woman and have multiple partners, it's been very empowering and claiming some of that back, saying I have just as much right to be a sexual person with many lovers as men do. So that's where I see tying in without the shame and the guilt.

Similarly, Yansa redefined the meaning of multiple-partner sexuality:

At the time, I called myself sexually liberated and, um, it was kind of a nice thing to say because it didn't have, it's better than saying I'm a slut. I mean, it gave people an open door to ask you what you meant and it gave me the opportunity to define what I felt that meant at the time... It gives women power over our sexual beings, for so long women have had husbands who have cheated on them, and some haven't and hooray for them. So it gives women an opportunity to, um, expect their sexual side, which is again, I'm playing back to nature versus nurture, I think it's in every being to want to have their needs met and women as sexual beings have sexual needs that's like men.

While Yansa reported feeling empowered by her access to multiple partners and redefinition of sexuality, in another section of the interview, she lamented the impact of this redefinition on her marriage. She had discussed her discomfort with her husband regarding one of his girlfriends:

He was like, well, you're the physical and you're caring, but she's the one I can talk to and she's the one . . . (trails off). And that's like the worst thing you can tell a woman. That some other woman has your emotional connection and you're just the physical.

While Yansa desired sexual freedom “like a man,” she was offended when her husband defined her as “the physical” at the exclusion of the emotional. Sexual redefinition was enticing for many polyamorous women but could have unexpected negative consequences as well.

*Connections with other women.* The majority of the women in my sample viewed sexuality as a source of unity with other women, even some who had previously experienced sexuality as divisive. Louise discussed the new sense of connection she had developed with women since finding the polyamorous community:

One of the things that has probably been the best thing about finding the poly community is meeting women that I can relate to because I haven't had women friends before now. This is the first time in my life, with a few exceptions, that I have really had close women friends. It's been wonderful to meet women who are highly sexual who don't feel threatened that I'm highly sexual. . . . And it's brought me a closeness with women that I thought I'd never have.

Louise found not only social connection with other women, but sexual and affective as well. Louise discussed the additional advantages she found in her sexual relationship with her husband's girlfriend, Monique:

Monique is beautiful, I mean gorgeous. And she is big, like me, we are both big. And that was—being able to see how amazingly beautiful she is and feel my desire for her made me realize that I am that beautiful, too. I mean, now I can see how others see me as beautiful and see myself that way too since I have seen Monique that way. It opened my eyes. It really did (laughs).

Louise found herself gaining not only friendship and sexual interactions through her associations with other polyamorous women, but a new appreciation for her body in a culture that does not generally view large women as sexy. Some women forged unanticipated bonds with kindred sisters in the polyamorous community that they had been unable to establish in monogamous society.

Other polyamorous women reported a mutual sexuality or love for the same man as a source of connection and love. Morgan, a 29-year-old white accountant and mother of one, opined that monogamous

relationships fostered competition among women and that the polyamorous relationship she had with her husband Carl, her lover Josh, Carl's lover Vicky, and Josh's wife Jessica made competition a nonentity between herself, Vicky, and Jessica.

I fully and completely realize that Josh can love me and Jessica equally and it just doesn't take anything away from the other and same with Carl because I know I feel, I love Carl and Josh both very much in different ways. I don't love one lesser than the other, so I know that that's how they feel about me too. . . . Even if Jessica and I even weren't sexually attracted to each other, it would be good for us to have a deep bond because we're both in love with the same man. And I love my friendship with Vicky and she loves me, too! It just works out better when we love each other, it is much easier that way. . . . And I think polyamory can help raise the status of women because it gives, it also gives women the freedom to be with who they want, power over their own bodies.

Morgan viewed her greater freedom in relationships as integrally linked with her sexual and platonic love for other women. She connected what she viewed as stronger bonds between polyamorous women not only to the potential for them to develop a sexual relationship but the shift in the balance of power generated by bisexuality and attendant increase in choice and autonomy from men.

Facile connection with other women was not universal, however, and feelings of jealousy or strife often plagued relationships among polyamorous women. The most common source of discord was difficulty sharing a lover. Dylan reported hearing from a woman who was in love with one of Dylan's lovers that she wished to "kill me off. And she was serious, the look in her eye, I mean, scary shit! There was no way I was gonna turn my back on her, ever!"

Other polyamorous women reported strife that occurred frequently at the end of relationships. Alicia, an unemployed white woman in her late thirties, discussed her rage at being disenfranchised when the quad (four-person relationship) she and her soon to be ex-husband had been involved in for eight years dissolved. A back injury had prevented Alicia from performing paid labor, but she had been able to care for the home and the biological children of the other quad members. She was extremely angry with Monique, the other woman in the quad. "Now that bitch has my husband and the kids, too! I cooked for them for eight years, did their laundry, and cleaned the damn house and now I am out

cold and she—I could just kill her!” Polyamorous relationships that ended badly could lead to rancorous sentiment among ex-lovers.

*Bisexuality.* Bisexual women were quite numerous in polyamorous communities. In fact, bisexuality was so common among women in the polyamorous community that they had a standing joke that it allowed them to “have their Jake and Edith too!” Bisexual women were also among the highest status members of the subculture because they were most often sought as additions to existing female/male dyads to create the coveted and elusive F/M/F (female, male, female) triad. While the high status of the role might have encouraged some women to experiment with bisexuality, others had identified as bisexual long before their association with the polyamorous community. Some polyamorous women sought independent sexual relationships with other women, while others preferred group sexual encounters involving both women and men. Women in polyamorous communities interacted with varying degrees of sexuality that created social space for multiple definitions of bisexuality to coexist.

Some polyamorous women relished a specifically group-oriented bisexuality when they engaged in multiplistic relationships. Julia reported her experience of attending a polyamorous women’s retreat:

Twenty-four of us went to a log cabin on the coast and spent the weekend together. And on the second evening, half of them went to bed and half of us stayed up and had this big cuddle pile kind of thing. We were all on the couch and on the floor and leaning against each other’s legs or having our arms around each other. It kind of evolved in an erotic direction, some kind of smooching started to happen and then we moved to the big king sized bed and I really enjoyed that a lot. . . . It really kind of fed into a fantasy world of mine, like that network with all the interconnections. I love women. I feel safest with groups of women . . . , though in a really close intimate and possibly sexual relationship I am most comfortable with a man. . . . I tend to connect intimately with women if it’s not a one-on-one thing, but we have a lover in common or we’re in a group at a retreat or something like that.

Julia had not previously identified herself as bisexual prior to exploring same-sex sexuality with the large group of women.

On the other hand, some bisexual women in the polyamorous community had a multiplistic orientation toward seemingly everything *but* sexual encounters. While Nori identified as bisexual and polyamorous

for her entire adult life, she felt, “As group, community, or network oriented as I am, my handful of group sexual activities hasn’t been all that for me. So I really like, I am also oriented more one on one, sexually.” Bisexuality did not always mean multiple simultaneous partners.

Other polyamorous women reported shifting relationships with women that came to include sexuality, even when it had not initially been the focus. Peck discussed her joy at finding another polyamorous family in the area of Ohio where she had lived:

We had met another family in '94 that was polyamorous that lived about an hour away. They had three children and have been good friends for a long time. It was nice just to get some community and some support and another mom that was involved (in polyamory) and had kids involved. And so the mother of this family and I became really close friends and then ended up becoming lovers. And that was one of my first bisexual relationships. And that was another thing I learned from polyamory was that I was bisexual and had an opportunity to explore that within the polyamorous relationship.

Peck explicitly connected her bisexuality with her passion for polyamory and felt that the two were intertwined in a way that allowed her the greatest authenticity:

Because, being bisexual, if I was monogamous I’d have to choose to be either with a man or a woman. And this way, under a polyamorous lifestyle, I can do both, I can be with both.

Peck and numerous other polyamorous women reported that they valued the range of choices that accompanied a bisexual orientation. Many women identified the relief from the necessity to choose either a male or a female partner as a primary benefit that they experienced in polyamory.

Some women in the polyamorous community identified disparate reactions in relationship with men and women. Dylan explained that

I found myself more alive in my relationships with women than I was with men. I found them more of a celebration. I find my attractions to men and women to be different. I find fewer women really move me, but when one does, it usually cuts deeper, to the core. Where I have many more attractions to men, but I also have kind of this laissez-faire attitude

towards them. It's like, oh, its another man I'm attracted to. Its like, whatever. But when a woman really moves me, then its like, YEAH!

Dylan's relationships with men and women each had distinct qualities that she felt a monosexual relationship could not hope to satisfy.

This nearly ubiquitous bisexuality among polyamorous women was so pervasive as to create an assumption of universal female bisexuality in polyamorous communities. In fact, all but one of the women I interviewed for the study identified themselves as bisexual or "bi-questioning." Shelly, a white 39-year-old mother of three and legal secretary, was the sole respondent who identified herself as heterosexual, though she did so with qualification:

I would call myself heterosexual, although I have had a couple of experiences with women. . . . I don't feel bisexual, but I don't feel adverse to it. I don't feel a yearning of, "Oh, I would really love to be with a woman," but I wouldn't rule it out if the circumstances were right. I have felt attracted to other women several times, but not necessarily acted on it.

Even those women who questioned the legitimacy of their bisexual identity because of their greater attraction for men made it clear that they had felt attractions to and engaged in sexual relationships with women as well as men.

The assumption of female bisexuality was so enmeshed in the social context of the polyamorous community that Leigh, a white woman in her late thirties with whom I interacted at a social gathering in the San Francisco Bay Area, sheepishly confessed, "I am not bi." When I asked Leigh to clarify, she explained, "I am heterosexual. Bet you thought there weren't any straight women in the poly community!" Rather relying on the social default of heterosexuality extant in monogamous, heterocentric culture, Leigh felt compelled to account for her deviant heterosexual status. Leigh's confession of heterosexuality spurred the group with whom we were chatting to search their memories for another heterosexual polyamorous woman in their association. None could think of a single confirmed heterosexual woman in a polyamorous community of at least one thousand people. The assumption that all polyamorous women are bisexual was either grounded in fact or was a myth of such epic proportions that it obscured the presence of non-bisexual women. Either way, it reinforced bisexuality as the norm and heterosexuality as deviant.

While many polyamorous women spoke of the sexual freedom and power they felt in multiple-partner relationships, they concurrently spoke of feeling objectified by men who sought simultaneous sex with multiple women. Some of the women in my sample were chagrined by the intensity of male focus on simultaneous sex or relationships with multiple women. Louise hosted a coed support group for people seeking or involved in polyamorous relationships. She related an exchange with a male newcomer who arrived early for a support group meeting. He mentioned that he was seeking a triad with two women to which she replied, "Yeah, you and every other damn guy out there!" He remarked "You seem a little upset by that," to which she responded,

Well, it gets real old, forever dealing with the hot bi babe fantasy. I mean, I would love to be in a triad with two men devoted to me, who wouldn't? But my personal ad online as a single woman looking for two men gets only responses from f/m (female/male) couples who want a third. I am soooooo damn sick of that!

Other women shared Louise's disdain for heterosexual polyamorous men's seemingly ubiquitous obsession with "having" multiple women.

Women who joined existing female/male couples to form a triad often reported feeling that the couple retained more power than they did. Dylan related,

I like threes a lot. I've often become involved with couples and find that [I am] the third with them being in primary partnership and that configuration makes me feel often like the disposable partner in the relationship. And it's also, by now, after many, many years of this kind of lifestyle, I'm hypersensitive when I am not being treated more as an equal. And I don't always expect equality because I know they have their primary partnership, but especially if the two of them gang up on me or try to punish me together, I'm really, really sensitive to that. . . . I think that in this [polyamorous] culture being the bodacious bi babe and that being a lot of primary partners', like their dream, that I related as a fantasy and not as a person. And I felt exploited by that.

Tina, a white 36-year-old urban planner, expressed similarly negative sentiments for a couple who appeared to desire her as a sexual accessory to their relationship: "literally, the only reason they wanted me around was to have threesome sexual activities." Other polyamorous

women who joined existing female/male couples objected to being related to as a “sex toy.” While the majority of the polyamorous women reported seeking and often successfully creating relationships based on equality and power sharing, the objectification of the “hot bi babe” remained a source of tension and inequality in numerous polyamorous relationships.

Nothing is simple in this intricate relational style, and it is not only bisexual women who may be viewed as sexual objects by polyamorists. Dylan emphatically stated,

I have really intensely been attracted to bi boys, extremely, intensely attracted to bi boys, like in a very bad bi boy stage for a long, long time now. . . . I just can't get enough of bi boys.

Even with this intense attraction for bisexual “boys,” Dylan reported,

And inside of that, I'm finding my attention is again drawn more towards women than before. And I feel like my connections there mean more to me and I'm finding that I want to play more with boys, just kind of play, casual thing.

Dylan reserved her intense emotional connections for relationships with women and saw bisexual men as fodder for solely “play, casual relationships.”

Clearly, the relationship between gender and bisexuality within the polyamorous community is complex. On one hand, women were sometimes sexualized as “hot bi babes” and sought to endow a new level of eroticism upon established male/female sexual relationships. On the other hand, men were sometimes objectified as sex toys but excluded from emotional relationships. In the relationally intricate world of polyamory, both scenarios operated simultaneously. Still, in patriarchal societies, men generally retain greater social and financial power on average, endowing their definitions of a given situation with greater weight (Becker 1963). Power remains a complex issue within polyamorous relationships.

## **POWER**

While both men and women involved in polyamorous subcultures tended to view women as retaining more power in polyamorous

relationships, women who had initiated the entree into polyamory themselves seemed more secure in their perceived enhanced power than did women who engaged in polyamory at the behest of their male partners. Yet both types of women endured stigma and the attendant loss of power that accompanies deviation from cherished social norms such as monogamy.

*Women in power.* Some polyamorists perceived women to have greater power in polyamorous subcultures. Emmanuella felt women's greater control of sexuality within polyamorous communities endowed them with increased social power in a potentially highly sexualized setting.

The women seem to have more of a sexual parlance because the women decide whether sex is available and there are still some incredibly conventional notions about who approaches whom. The men seem to swing between being very sort of kid in a candy store, elated, can't believe this whole practice is happening to them, but yeah, buddy, let's get it on of thing. And the other extreme is feeling very dour about the fact that their woman is participating in this and really uncertain whether they want to have that, but are going along with it because there might be sex involved. But they are not really emanating the yeah, buddy, yippee kind of energy. So what happens is that there are a bunch of poly women who are very much drawn to that, that very dour energy because they like the wounded spirit. So you know you see this group of women who will cluck around these men, and the men start thinking this isn't so bad after all. (laughing) But in either scenario the women retain the power.<sup>3</sup>

Yansa acknowledged what she perceived to be greater sexual and relational power than that of her new husband, but she kept it in check to educate him in a form of polyamory that she found acceptable.

My husband has actually gone out on more dates than I have. I have not gone out on one date yet since we have been married and it's not that I can't or that I won't, it's just that I wanted to give my husband the opportunity to date and have him get his feet wet and get a feel for what was ethically okay with it and what was unethical and this, this when we went out with this person and he did that that was not okay, but when you did this that was great. Keep doing that. Just to give him a new way of looking at poly. . . . I get invited, often times, to parties alone, by myself, without him, and I have had numerous men and women who want to date. But

I have turned them down for him because he wasn't comfortable with me going and so . . . (trails off).

Ostensibly, Yansa held less relational power since her husband was dating and she was not. It was clear, however, that he dated at her behest, following her guidelines, in a temporary arrangement she created and could end at her own discretion. When the two went to sex parties together, Yansa had many more sexual encounters than he, and both were aware that once she started dating again, she had far more options than he. Her husband acknowledged his position of lower power and bemoaned her greater relational cache in his own interview.

*Power shifts.* Other polyamorous women viewed power as more equally shared. Julia asserted,

Equal say is such a necessary thing for me that I don't even think about it. I mean, being raised in the '70s and encouraged, I was good in school, my parents encouraged me I could do whatever I wanted to do and I was a strong woman, I was a smart woman, I was a powerful woman. I've never, it's just kind of out of the question for me to be in a relationship where I don't have equal power, at least at the gross level. Of course, not everything is equal all the time on a finer level, but yeah, I would never even be in a romantic relationship where somebody had power over me.

Julia and other polyamorous women maintained the ostensibly equitable balance of power via rigorous communication, an esteemed ideal of polyamorous relationships. Some discussed a division of labor with their partner(s) that included some task division but ultimately established parity, while others explained how they shared all tasks with their partners and split everything equally.

Some women asserted that polyamorous men supported and indeed sought relationships based on equality in relationship. Louise said that she found that the polyamorous men "just think differently." She explained:

They are much more nontraditional. They aren't looking, most men that I've seen that are polyamorous aren't looking for a relationship with a woman they can control or be in charge of. They like independent women who are highly sexual, who are exciting. They like that. That's why they're attracted to this kind of lifestyle is because they like strong

women. And because of that, they're looking for an equal relationship in most cases.

This perception of equality stood in sharp contrast to some other polyamorous women's experiences with both polyamorous and monogamous men who became increasingly uncomfortable with multiple-partner sexuality as the relationship became more serious. Yansa discussed her experiences with men who were initially enthusiastic about polyamory and then became reluctant to participate:

Well, when we were dating, they thought it was great. They thought, what person would not want someone who is sex positive and comfortable with a stronger sense of sexuality because it gives them an opportunity to open up and try new things and see how far they can go. So while we were dating it was, they were attracted to it, they were curious. But when we initiated the relationship and it became more serious, they were very much not happy with it because they understood exactly through my actions what that meant, and they over time realized they weren't comfortable with it.

Yansa was disappointed by what she viewed as a failing on the part of the men who relished the idea of a "sexual free for all" but balked at the emotional consequences.

Others redefined the meaning of power in a relationship. Dylan, who identified as polyamorous since she was fourteen,<sup>4</sup> detailed her feeling of power in polyamorous relationships:

I'm very personable and I really like people a lot and I talk big in that way and being female in the poly world, I had more opportunities for relationships than sometimes my male partners or more shy female partners. And in that way, I felt the balance of power was off because I had more possibilities and opportunities than they did. At least relationally and sexually. I think that socially we consider that ability to acquire resources and have allies as a way of being powerful and I have that. I have very close friends and sometimes a bubbly character, so I think that can create power balances. I also travel a lot and the ability to walk away from a relationship without, like, knowing full well I can take care of myself and that they can take care of themselves has created, that I have more power at times.

Dylan recast the basis of power in a relationship and came to view her gregarious style of interaction and ability to leave as sources of power within polyamorous settings.

This shifting power base may initially appear androcentric and then become gynocentric through the machinations of polyamorous relating. Some women who were previously reluctant to engage in polyamory found themselves empowered by the gender dynamics of polyamorous relationships. Dylan noted,

It is a poly phenomenon that often the woman in the couple is kind of reluctant and is dragged kicking and screaming into poly. Then when the man is done with his experimentation, the woman often finds that it suits her character and stays with it. It is almost like acquiring a skill, once she's got it, it becomes part of how she wants to live her life. It can be real confronting when the man wants to become involved in the poly lifestyle and then finds out that it is really much easier for a woman to establish relationships, and not only do they establish them easier, they tend to get more intimate and deeper faster, cause that is what women are good at. Speaking generally, women like that kind of stuff. So the men can become very uncomfortable.

While women being “dragged kicking and screaming” evinces lower relational power, the tables can turn once the previously monogamous couple engages in polyamory. Carlie, a 34-year-old white educator and mother of two involved in one such relationship, related,

Ricco (her husband and father of her children) badgered me about it for forever, like eight years or something. And it made me feel terrible, like I was not enough for him or too fat or something. Finally, I tell him just go out and get laid if it will shut you the fuck up about it already! I did not expect to get together with anyone else, much less fall in love. Now we are screwed because I am in love with someone else and Ricco does not like him, does not want me to see him. Ricco will do anything for me now, he would be monogamous and never bring it up again. But I am REALLY REALLY pissed! I totally would have left him if we did not have kids.

Carlie felt that she gained power with additional suitors and that Ricco's insistence on polyamory backfired when it did not work out as he had imagined. Increased power did not translate to increased joy for Carlie, however, since she felt trapped in a no-win situation of staying

in a relationship she found distasteful or breaking up her family and subjecting her small children to the upheavals of divorce. Rather than reveling in her newfound power, she felt that “now *we* are screwed” (emphasis added) since she felt compelled to choose between her own happiness and that of her children. Even though the power base shifted in her relationship, Carlie reported few benefits from her new found relational cachet beyond the fact that a man she no longer loved would “do anything” for her.

### WOMEN DISEMPOWERED

Some polyamorous relationships retained elements of a traditional power structure in which men relied on their female partners to perform a greater share of the emotional maintenance. These relationships seemed to regularly self-destruct. Louise reported encouraging Max, her husband of thirteen years and the father of two of her children, to deepen emotional intimacy with her and facilitate her attempts at friendly contact with his other lovers. Max reported feeling that these demands were excessive and refused to meet them because they “invade my privacy.” Louise linked her emotional work to the balance of power in their relationship:

I didn't want to be in control, but I couldn't get him to take any of the control. And this was a catalyst for that happening, for changing the power structure of our relationship. . . . He's taking more power in our relationship and I totally gave up power, like you can have it! And what I mean by that is simply I was taking all the emotional responsibility and he didn't have to participate in our relationship because I was doing all the emotional work. With the kids, with our lives, with our families, with everything . . . he didn't even have to participate and rarely showed up in our relationship. He would just kind of wander around the edges, not really participating in what was going on. And this forced him to participate, because he had to either participate or I would be gone.

While Louise connected her completion of the emotional work with her control in the relationship, she simultaneously implied that Max retained control through his refusal to perform emotional work. After thirteen years of marriage, Louise initiated divorce proceedings, primarily because of what she perceived as Max's reluctance to participate in the emotional work in the relationship. Louise reported that it was

easier for her to leave Max since she had the emotional and sexual support of her other lovers and polyamorous friends who “understood what was going on.”

Some women reported an increased sense of insecurity in their relationships with the advent of polyamory. Shelly was eloquent regarding the numerous personal costs of polyamory. She had chosen to engage in polyamory at the behest of Sven, her 42-year-old white bisexual husband employed as a computer consultant. Sven hoped to find another bisexual man with whom he and Shelly could establish a long-term triad. This ideal relationship proved difficult to establish, and Shelly felt some emotional pain in connection with Sven’s desire for outside relationships:

It’s definitely better now than it was at first. I was much more threatened by him [Sven] being with someone else and I just didn’t understand it, like I went through why can’t he just be with me, why aren’t I enough? Sometimes it still makes me insecure. . . . I have lost part of what I receive from Sven, although one-on-one time and attention, we are both very busy. . . . Another disadvantage is just trying to keep two people happy. It’s hard to just make a marriage work, no matter who the two people are, and trying to be there emotionally and sexually and every other way with two people rather than one, trying to keep every one happy and balance I would think would be really difficult.

Shelly continued to pursue a polyamorous relationship but initially hypothesized that she would have been more comfortable in a monogamous relationship had she fallen in love with a monogamous man. Upon meeting another bisexual man with whom Shelly and Sven formed a triad, Shelly reported feeling far more optimistic about her engagement in polyamory. “This has turned out way, way better than I expected!”

Even those women who intentionally chose polyamory faced stigma and attendant loss of power in monogamous society. Peck found herself alienated from both her family of origin and a spiritual group after she initiated a triad with her husband and their good friend. During a difficult period of their triadic relationship, Peck sought emotional support from friends and instead found that

any of our close friends that we approached with it had a lot of judgments about it and actually we got ostracized from several communities

because of it. People [who] really cared about us said, “That’s the wrong thing to do, we can’t believe you are doing that.” . . . There was no positive information being said. It was tearing apart our family.

Regardless of potential power shifts in intimate relationships, polyamorous women retained their positions relative to the power base of monogamous society. This created some problems for them, primary among which was the anomic pain borne of failing to fit in to a monogamous society. Many discussed the social intolerance and fear of censure that sometimes accompanied their polyamorous lifestyle. Dylan described this as “being profoundly unacceptable on many levels.” Peck detailed the legal difficulties that plagued her when she was married to one man but had a child with another and wanted the “real” father’s name listed on the birth certificate. Ultimately she chose to divorce, partially to disentangle herself from legal issues surrounding multiple-partner relationships.<sup>5</sup>

While all of the polyamorous women in my sample faced the social risks of stigma, the women of color felt at greater risk of stigma and consequences for engaging in polyamory than did the white women I interviewed. Yansa detailed her reasons for remaining closeted at work:

At the time, I was a president’s assistant, and I was working for the Union Bank of Switzerland, and I was like an assistant and I was pretty high up there, and I supported eight executives who went to Wharton and Harvard and they were Republicans and assholes and their wives had nannies and they lived in like houses on hills and they were very just very closed minded. And that, but I got the impression that they were already not comfortable with me, being a person of color. To throw in the other stuff that I did may confirm their stereotypes about black people or it may have just gone, they may have just thought she’s the weirdest shit on the planet, I don’t trust her, I want her out of here. We don’t want her in this job any more, someone may find her out.

While other women detailed reasons for remaining closeted and felt that they risked losing their jobs if they were exposed as polyamorists at work, none of the white women linked their feelings of fear or vulnerability at work with race.

## CONCLUSIONS

The polyamorous women who participated in this ethnographic study related their experiences of attempting to expand their social roles, explore sexuality (especially bisexuality), and create and maintain the assorted power arrangements associated with polyamorous relationships, with varied results. Many of the women in my sample discussed feelings of power, with feelings of empowerment and disempowerment coexisting in the same relationships. While very few of the respondents explicitly linked access to shifting power dynamics and social arrangements with race, the impact of race and class privilege cannot be ignored. The fact that the majority of these polyamorous women have considerable financial and cultural capital to fall back on should their nontraditional relationships fail made this complex and somewhat risky relationship style more accessible to them than it might have been to women with fewer social or personal resources. It is no coincidence, then, that women with class and race privilege reported feeling greater freedom in relationship style. The ample resources they commanded conferred increased ability to transgress social boundaries since their cultural cachet created the safety net that allowed them to challenge monogamous social norms while simultaneously weathering the storms of the complex relationship style. My findings thus support Becker's (1963) conclusion that those with power are at greater liberty to alter the social fabric around them.

The women in my sample recognized and rejected the propensity to define female sexual desire in male terms. Many were aware of their transgressions and sought the company of others who supported their efforts to reshape dominant forms of female sexuality in a way that better met their needs. They experienced some success at a gynocentric redefinition of sexuality, gaining greater social power within polyamorous communities and relationships. By rejecting conventional social mores, polyamorous women were forced to create their own roles and examine their sexual relationships. Reflexive action necessitated greater sexual subjectivity and encouraged polyamorous women to shed a more limiting form of relationship for one that allowed greater freedom and self-expression.

Shifts in the base of relational power may have endowed polyamorous women with greater power because their ostensible greater ease in finding additional partners translated to greater capital within the relationship. Coltrane and Collins (2001, 265) discuss the

relationship “market” and conclude, “Whom a person will be able to ‘trade’ with depends on matching up with someone of the same market value. . . . [This market value depends on the] bundle of resources each person has to offer.” Increased access to other lovers amplifies the resources of the more sought-after lover. In this market-based relationship model, successful polyamorous women (and especially bisexual women) would indeed have greater power in their relationships because of their superior market worth. At least for some polyamorous women, the expanded horizons of choice conferred greater power than that which they experienced in monogamous relationships.

This dynamic could shift as the polyamorous population ages and elderly polyamorous women potentially outnumber their male counterparts. Such numerical imbalance might empower the relatively fewer men choosing from a comparatively larger pool of female partners (Guttentag and Secord 1983). In the tradition of Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor’s (2001) extended research into bisexuality, longitudinal research into polyamorous relationships could offer additional insight into the gendered power dynamics of these relationships. Useful avenues for future research could also include a more concentrated investigation of polyamorous men and an examination of people in same-sex polyamorous relationships.

Though numerous women in my sample reported feelings of empowerment, they simultaneously discussed experiences that left them feeling disempowered in their own relationships or larger, monogamous society through the impacts of stigma. Sexuality remains a contested region, and women who challenge it often do so at a cost. The promise of sexual freedom, which theoretically accompanied the sexual revolution beginning in the 1960s, translated into increased sexual freedom for men, but not for women. Feminist theorists hypothesize that it “released” women’s sexual appetites in the service of male sexual desire and retained an androcentric focal point (Jeffreys 1990). Many polyamorous women experienced the lingering affects of this stalled sexual liberation when they felt periodically objectified as sex toys. Others grated at the assumption that they would perform the majority of emotional management in an extremely high-maintenance relational style (Hochschild 1983). While polyamorous women offered new visions of expanded sexual subjectivity and alternative roles for women, many continued to struggle under the yoke of an androcentric society that demands that women’s sexuality function in the service of

men. Even though they reported varying degrees of success in their attempts to create new roles and power dynamics within their own relationships, they continued to live with the impacts of stigma attributed by a monogamous society that views their actions as deviant. In both cases, they were unable to completely reform power dynamics in either their own relationships or society at large.

Lorde (1984, 53) eloquently links oppression with sexual systems designed to suppress women's erotic selves and silence women's authentic sexual spirit:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

Erasure of women's erotic power has deleterious affects on other areas of their lives as well (Collins 1990; Tolman 2002; L. Rubin 1990a; see also L. Rubin 1990b). While polyamorous women created an incomplete and flawed liberation from androcentric definitions of sexuality, they nonetheless attempted to redefine sexuality on their own terms. Ultimately, polyamorous women's attempts at self-redefinition were active resistance to suppression. Even though their defiance was imperfect and left their emancipation unfinished, they still attempted to forge lives outside of the narrow confines allowed by heterocentric patriarchal culture. Any attempts at liberation serve to undermine the suppression of women and sexual minorities and are worthy of recognition in their myriad forms.

## NOTES

1. This research is part of a larger project in which I examine polyamorous subcultures in a midsized, Western college town I call Keegan and the San Francisco Bay Area. This portion addresses solely polyamorous women; other articles and my forthcoming book address community, men, family, and present a typology of those involved in polyamory.

2. Of the forty people I interviewed, two were Asian American (one woman, one man), one was a Latina, one was Latina and white, and three were African American (two men and one woman). The woman who identified as a Lebanese American did not define herself as a person of color, and I respected her self-definition. I intentionally

sought out people of color to interview whenever possible, and all accepted my invitation. There was a similar racial and ethnic mix of polyamorists I interacted with at social gatherings.

3. Ricco, a white social worker in his early forties and father of two, echoed Emmanuella's opinion with his characterization of his local polyamorous community: "seems like there are lots of lonely, desperate men looking for women and the women can pick and choose."

4. The term "polyamory" had not yet been coined when Dylan was fourteen, but what she practiced and publicly claimed as her identity mirrored what was later to become known as polyamory.

5. While Peck legally divorced her husband, she remained in sexual and emotional relationships with both men in her triad. For a more detailed discussion of polyamorous divorce, please see my forthcoming article on the polyamorous family.

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