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Exploring Polyamorous Relationship Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Pansexual Individuals

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by

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Acknowledgments

It all started with an innocent joke I learned through my mom's memory. She used to tell me that as a toddler, I would burst out "I wanna have a wife" whenever my neighboring adults teased me about my dream of the future. Every time, my grandma would correct me and let me repeat after her "I wanna go to college." Growing up in a working-class family in the 1990s in a rural town of China, my dream was actually more achievable than my grandma's. Yet, the irony is I ended up pursuing a Ph.D. degree at a U.S. university without a wife. I do, though, have a husband, whom I love deeply and dearly. Regardless of a million moments that have happened since my toddlerhood leading to my current academic trajectory, I do believe my longing and passion for love guided me to eventually choose polyamory as my dissertation study.

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Abstract

Polyamory is a type of relationship under the consensual non-monogamy relationship umbrella that assumes the possibility, validity, and worthwhileness of maintaining romantic, sexual, and intimate relationships with multiple people simultaneously. In Western society, the prevalence and domination of mononormativity have led to the marginalization of relationships alternative to monogamy (i.e., polyamory). As a result, individuals in polyamorous relationships continue to experience bias, stigma, and discrimination at varying levels. With a rise in public interest in CNM in the past two decades, scientists and researchers have slowly started to examine various topics related to CNM, including its prevalence, public attitudes toward CNM, and CNM relationship quality. However, empirical research designated to investigate polyamorous relationships is lacking, let alone polyamorous relationships of sexually minoritized populations. Therefore, the current qualitative study investigates the polyamorous relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals. Utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the current study explored the minority stress and resilience of polyamorous relationship experiences of 14 participants. Five group experiential themes were constructed based on the convergence of participants' experiences, including (1) polyamory is an evolving and purposeful journey, (2) poly satisfaction is a systemic experience, (3) dynamic interplay of sense of self and interpersonal experiences, (4) interwoven personal, relational, and systemic challenges, and (5) ecological systems for relationship maintenance. Overall, participants utilized personal, relational, and community resources to build strengths, skills, and resilience to address challenges that come within and outside of their polyamorous relationships. Implications for counseling practice, counselor education, and recommendations for future

research are discussed, with a focus on developing multicultural and social justice counseling competencies for counselors to work with clients in polyamorous relationships.

Keywords: Polyamory, LGBTQ+, relationship experiences, IPA, minority stress, minority resilience

Chapter One: Introduction

Monogamy naturalized in Western culture contributes to the devaluation and subordination of alternatives to monogamy (Anderson, 2010). Consequently, individuals who are in consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships face bias and discrimination in the United States due to their alternative relationship orientation (Conley et al., 2013a; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). In general, CNM relationship structures include but are not limited to, open relationships, swing, polyamory, and monogamish relationships (Hamilton, et al., 2021; LaSala, 2004; Parson et al., 2012). Each form of CNM is distinct in terms of the typical relational dynamics and boundaries inferred. For example, polyamory (the focus of the current study) refers to the multiple short- or long-term extra-dyadic relationships that can be intimate, sexual, and/or romantic (Hamilton et al., 2021; Taormino, 2008). Research suggests that intensified attention to CNM as internet searches of the terms "open relationship" and "polyamory" have been rising in public between 2006 and 2015 (Moors, 2017). In the U.S., approximately 4%-5% of adults report being in a subtype of CNM relationships (e.g., polyamory) and about 20% of single adults report previous experience in CNM relationships in their lifetime (Fairbrother et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Levine et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2014). In theory, the number of CNM relationships may be underestimated due to the concealment of relationship status in the face of anti-CNM stigmas (Conley et al., 2013a). It is plausible to assume that a fair number of U.S. adults experience or identify with CNM in spite of social bias toward non-monogamous relationship structures. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous relationships.

CNM and Polyamory

Unlike some other forms of CNM relationships (e.g., open relationships, swinging) that mainly emphasize sexual aspects of multi-partnered relationships, polyamory assumes the possibility, validity, and worthwhileness of maintaining "intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p518). Existing literature suggests that individuals who have sexual/affectional- and/or gender-expansive identities are more likely to engage in polyamory compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Balzarini et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Moor et al., 2014). It is possible that because of a long history of queer oppression for alternative identities, individuals in the queer community are inclined to explore alternative relationship configurations rather than conforming to mainstream heteronormativity in society.

To date, the estimate of the prevalence of polyamorous relationships in the U.S. remains unknown due to a lack of research, not to mention that of polyamorous relationships among individuals identifying as nonheterosexual. In addition, the scarcity of research on polyamory contributed to the knowledge gap in polyamorous relationships and the factors that influence relationship experiences in a multi-partnership (i.e., Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Moors et al., 2021). Few scholars have shed light on the negative influences of the minority stress non-heterosexual individuals(e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual) in polyamorous relationships live with on personal and relational well-being (e.g., Moors et al., 2021; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Yet, less is known about the polyamorous relationship experiences of non-heterosexual individuals to inform counselors to support the mental health and relational well-being of this population. Given that most models of relationship counseling were developed on heteronormative and mononormative ideas (e.g., marriage and couples

counseling), a need exists to incorporate the polyamorous relationship experiences of nonheterosexual individuals to enhance queer and poly affirmative counseling services.

Attitudes Toward CNM and Polyamory

CNM, including polyamory, is not well accepted in Western culture, probably due to its violation of the norms of monogamy and a perceived threat to monogamy (Moors. et al., 2013). Individuals who are in CNM relationships are often perceived as immoral, unfaithful, promiscuous, and sexually riskier (Balzarini et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2013). Moors et al. (2013) also found a "halo" effect around monogamy based on arbitrary qualities (e.g., a cognitive bias where respondents rated monogamous targets as being more likely to engage in unrelated behaviors such as flossing their teeth daily) and relationship-related behaviors such as perceived ratings as less likely to use condoms. Moors et al. (2013) hypothesized that less condom use may be perceived as a higher level of sexual intimacy and trust between couples among monogamous couples who do not engage in extra-dyadic sexual activities. Findings for a mononormative bias are consistent with the perception of individuals in CNM relationships being lonelier, less sexually satisfied, and having lower relationship quality (Moors et al., 2013). Furthermore, in one European study, respondents rated the extent CNM partners experience secondary emotions like happiness, love, guilt, or embarrassment significantly lower than in monogamous romantic relationships (Rodrigues et al., 2018). The authors theorized that the different perceptions in emotion-based attribution reflect the dehumanization process common within societies biased against CNM to favor monogamy.

In addition, the levels of negativity seem to differ based on the CNM subtypes (e.g., polyamorous relationships, swinging, open relationships). For example, polyamory is rated more favorable than both swinging and open relationships (Matsick et al., 2014). Survey respondents

perceived polyamorists as more moral, more motivated by duty than by pleasure, and less self-oriented than swingers and those in open relationships. One plausible explanation for the reported differences in public perceptions is that polyamory violates fewer monogamous norms because it involves social and emotional intimacy, which is typically absent in swing and open relationships. The involvement of social and emotional intimacy in polyamory may also explain the negative attitudes swingers toward polyamory because it still upholds aspects of mononormativity. Conversely, those in polyamorous relationships perceived swingers as dirtier, emotionally unavailable, and more sexually risky, which is similar to the perception of the general public (Balzarini et al., 2018). In general, monogamy, Christianity, and political conservatism predict negative attitudes toward CNM (Conley et al., 2013a; Balzarini et al., 2018; Hutzler et al., 2016; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). Therefore, biases and misperceptions towards CNM exist not only within the community but also in the larger society.

Furthermore, attitudes toward CNM also seem to differ based on one individual's personality trait, attachment style, and socio-sexual orientation (also called sociosexuality which refers to the openness to engage in casual sex; Kinsey et al., 1948). An avoidant attachment style is associated with a more positive attitude toward CNM and more willingness to engage in CNM, whereas an anxious attachment style predicts negative attitudes (Moors et al., 2015, 2017). Individuals who are highly organized, neat, careful, and success-driven tend to have negative attitudes toward CNM and less desire to engage in CNM (Moors et al., 2017). An extraverted personality predicts only negative attitudes toward CNM but not willingness for CNM engagement. Related, active imagination, openness to new experiences, and a preference for variety predict positive attitudes toward CNM and a greater willingness to engage in CNM relationships. Meanwhile, individuals with a more unrestricted socio-sexual orientation are more

likely to hold a positive attitude toward CNM and are more willing to accept and engage in CNM, whereas a restricted socio-sexual orientation predicts apprehension towards CNM (Cohen et al., 2017). While social and cultural factors can contribute to the development of restricted socio-sexual orientation, Moon (2021) discussed the connection between reproductive religiosity and sexual morality. In particular, certain reproductive-based religions imply a mating choice characterized by long-term, investment, and commitment, which facilitate trust in relationships. Therefore, religion can be used as a social cue to infer restricted socio-sexual orientation (Jackson et al., 2015; Moon et al., 2018; Moon et al., 2020). In fact, religious beliefs, morals, and values significantly predict non-engagement of CNM among African Americans, even though religious membership does not significantly predict attitudes toward and willingness to engage in CNM (St. Vil & Giles 2022). Taken together, these findings may suggest that religion-based morality can influence a restricted socio-sexual orientation, which leads to the preference for monogamy. In sum, certain characteristics of an individual, such as personality, attachment style, and sociosexuality, can predict their attitudes toward CNM.

The negative attitudes toward CNM, however, seem not to be static or unchangeable. For example, the level of negative attitudes that participants hold toward polyamory reduced when provided more descriptions of polyamory definitions and relationship characteristics to increase understanding of as well as familiarity with polyamory (Hutzler et al., 2016). The changes in participants' attitudes indicate that exposure to and relevant education on CNM may change people's biases against and misperceptions of CNM, which is consistent with the contact theory (i.e., enhancing knowledge of outgroups to reduce privilege; Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Meanwhile, people who are non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, have experienced CNM in the past, and/or have knowledge of CNM hold a less negative attitude toward CNM (Conley et

al., 2013a, Conley et al., 2013b; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). One possible explanation is the high prevalence of CNM within the LGBTQIA+ community may be attributed to more exposure to CNM and a long history of practicing alternative relationships, leading LGBTQIA+ individuals to have more CNM knowledge and hold a more positive attitude toward CNM. These findings suggest that education on and exposure to CNM, including polyamory, can contribute to addressing anti-CNM stigmas prevalent in Western society.

CNM and Polyamorous Relationship Quality

Although still in a nascent stage, research exists on the CNM relationship quality (such as Bricker & Horne, 2007; Hoff et al., 2010; LaSala, 2004; Moors et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2012; Séguin et al., 2017; Træen & Thuen, 2021). According to the research studies, CNM practitioners report the same level of, or even higher, relationship satisfaction compared to monogamous couples. In addition, few studies focused on exploring polyamorous relationship quality (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). Specifically, these studies examined the differences in relationship quality between hierarchical polyamory (e.g., a primary dyad with secondary partners, who may be casual or committed) and non-hierarchical polyamory (e.g., all partners share similar levels of bonding, intimacy, and commitment). Individuals in non-hierarchical polyamory reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction than those in hierarchical polyamory (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). Moreover, in primary-secondary hierarchical polyamorous relationships, individuals report a greater sense of closeness, emotional support and security, and higher levels of nurturance in primary relationships compared to secondary relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). However, It is worth noting the limitations to the findings due to the inconsistencies in the definitions of primary and secondary partners across these three studies. In

addition, all three studies utilized quantitative methods to investigate the level of relationship satisfaction in different domains, which leaves room for further explorations of factors influencing relationship satisfaction and nuances in relationship maintenance experiences.

Many scholars have conceptualized factors that may influence individuals' experiences in polyamory (such as Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Robinson, 1997; Ziegler et al, 2014). Characteristics of a polyamorous relationship may liberate women from the patriarchy that socializes them with values of caretaking, romance, family over personal pursuits, and financial independence (Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Robinson, 1997; Ziegler et al, 2014). Such arguments are consistent with narratives from one study, where polyamorous women reported a feeling of liberation from traditional gender, maternal, and relationship roles (Sheff, 2005). A more balanced distribution of financial and emotional resources in multi-partnered relationships may also benefit taking household responsibilities and child-rearing (Emens, 2004; Sheef, 2010). Although polyamory is no exception to feelings of jealousy, it is also possible that open communication on such feelings may lead to greater awareness of oneself as well as others and a rise of compersion (a feeling of joy when seeing a loved one have a positive romantic and/or sexual experience with another; Deri, 2015; Veaus & Rickert, 2014). However, Jordan et al. (2017) also cautioned against automatic assumptions about such polyamorous benefits due to the varied social status of individual partners and relationship dynamics. For example, egalitarianism could collapse due to gendered divisions of labor in a polyamorous relationship (Klesse, 2014). In addition, power differentials can also lead to inequitable shared decision-making (e.g., decisions related to sex, allocation of veto power, addressing difficulties among partners, integration of new partners) can contribute to discomfort and power struggle among partners (Wosick-Correa, 2010). Given the

diversity of polyamorous relationship structures and dynamics, partners can experience different levels of hierarchy, power, and intimacy.

Factors Influencing CNM and Polyamorous Relationship Quality

Currently, only limited empirical studies have examined the internal and external stressors that may influence polyamorous relationship quality. Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) also suggested that CNM-related minority stress can predict an increased level of psychological distress, such as depressive and anxiety symptoms. In addition, Moors et al. (2020) suggested that the length of polyamorous relationships may predict relationship satisfaction and attachment security. Low levels of satisfaction with romantic and sexual relationship agreements with both partners and lower commitment to their primary partner are also evident among CNM practitioners holding anti-CNM negativity. Additive stressors unique to polyamory, such as communication about relationship rules or contracts and the maintenance of attachment as well as commitment across multiple relationships, can also contribute to negative mental health and relationship well-being (Deri, 2015; Weitzman et al., 2009). Further, individuals in polyamorous relationships face systemic challenges outside their relationship: namely a lack of legal and social recognition, social stigma (e.g., promiscuity, infidelity), and discriminatory laws and policies (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2005; Morrison et al., 2013; Sheff, 2011; Weitzman et al., 2009; Wright, 2014). Internalized stressors by individuals in CNM relationships can lead to developing negative attitudes towards CNM and personal discomfort (e.g., feelings of guilt and shame for non-monogamous feelings and desires), which predict lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Moors et al., 2021; Weitzman et al., 2009). Due to the experiences of additive stressors at different levels, polyamorists face more challenges in maintaining their personal and relational well-being.

Relevance to Counseling

Many individuals in CNM relationships reported negative experiences of biases and microaggressions when interacting with their healthcare providers (Vaughan et al., 2019). Healthcare providers demonstrated a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding non-monogamous relationships and exhibited explicit and implicit judgment (e.g., language, facial expression) characterized as highly stressful (Vaughan et al., 2019). Sexual/affectional expansive individuals in polyamory may experience parallel stress in mental health services. In a recent study where 1, 220 participants currently engage in CNM, 20.3% reported at least one experience of explicit discrimination from a medical doctor, 19% reported discrimination from mental health providers, and 9% reported discrimination from other providers associated with their CNM status (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). In their study on exploring CNM clients' perceptions of helpful and harmful mental health practices, Schechinger et al. (2018) suggested that counselors' behaviors deemed to be harmful include being judgmental, pathological, dismissive, unknowledgeable, and overly focused on CNM. The stigmas, biases, and discriminations CNM practitioners face daily within their community as well as in the healthcare system based solely on relationship status contribute to frustration, stress, and concealment of relationship status that negatively influence their well-being and relationship quality (Moors et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019). Contrarily, counselors who exhibit affirming behaviors, are knowledgeable about CNM, remain nonjudgemental, and provide helpful techniques on relationship navigation and improvement were considered helpful (Schechinger et al., 2018). Similarly, participants in the Kisler and Lock (2019) study suggested family therapists seek education relevant to polyamory-related issues, challenge assumptions about relationships, and avoid pathologizing polyamorous relationships. While further research is needed to explore

CNM clients' experiences in counseling, it is obvious that participants in previous studies commonly reported healthcare providers, including counselors and therapists, demonstrated a lack of competence in non-monogamous relationships to exhibit explicit and implicit judgment (e.g., language, facial expression) that is unhelpful and even harmful.

The lack of empirical research and professional training may partially contribute to such a lack of competence among healthcare providers, including counselors, to provide services to clients in polyamorous relationships. For example, CNM practitioners are significantly underrepresented in couples counseling research (Gebel et al., 2023). In addition, all current Western models of marriage and couples counseling used in counselor education programs are established under the premise that two adults join a monogamous relationship with/without the purpose of creating a family, which leaves out the possibility of addressing alternative relationship types, such as CNM. In theory, structural therapy may be adjusted to benefit CNM clients since it has been updated to treat alternative family configurations and focuses on the structure, boundary, and dynamics among partners in CNM relationships (Gebel et al., 2023). Specifically, structural therapists may utilize joining and accommodating to build a strong therapeutic alliance with CNM clients and understand the marginalization of CNM in a mononormative society (Gebel et al., 2023). Other interventions (e.g., family mapping, enactment, unbalancing, mimesis) of structural therapy can be adapted to understand the boundaries and dynamics within as well as across different subsystems in a CNM relationship and assist CNM clients in building healthy boundaries that are appropriate and fluid (Gebel et al., 2023). However, no empirical evidence exists to support the effectiveness of adapting and applying Structural Therapy in the treatment of CNM clients. In addition, Fern (2020) developed a nested model based on her counseling practices to demonstrate how multi-dimensional trauma

and attachment injuries (i.e., self, relationship, home, local community, societal, collective) can influence individuals' relationship experiences in polyamory. Fern (2020) pointed out the importance of addressing attachment as the foundation for developing a sense of safety and security in polyamorous relationships. To date, there are no known evidence-based counseling interventions to support polyamorous clients in navigating their relationships.

It is crucial for counselor researchers to investigate the establishment and maintenance of polyamorous relationships to support clients in considering, exploring, and navigating polyamory. Currently, the American Psychological Association has created a permanent Committee of Consensual Non-Monogamy within Division 44 (the Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity) to focus on CNM-related research, psychological practice, and education and outreach (Hamilton, 2021; Moors & Schechinger, 2014; Schechinger 2017). Since non-heterosexual individuals are more likely to engage in non-monogamous relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Moor et al., 2014), the purpose of the current study is to contribute to the advancement of sexuality and poly-affirmative care through an empirical investigation of the barriers and resilience that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual (LGBP) individuals in polyamorous relationships experience. Acknowledging the need to update current marriage and couples counseling models or create a new model to meet the needs of polyamorous clients, the current study meets the urgency for counselors to enhance their competence in working with clients in polyamorous relationships through gaining more knowledge of their relationship experiences.

The Current Study

To date, there is a paucity of research focusing on the relationship quality of polyamorists, and no known study is designed to specifically explore that of polyamorists who

have sexual/affectional expansive identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual). So far, only three empirical studies focused on examining the quality of polyamorous relationships (i.e., Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). Specifically, it is consistent that individuals in a non-hierarchical relationship structure reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction (e.g., intimacy, commitment) than their counterparts in a hierarchical relationship structure (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). In addition, among individuals who are in hierarchical polyamorous relationships, the level of relationship satisfaction is higher between primary partnerships in areas of intimacy, emotional support, security, and nurturance than between primary partners and tertiary partners (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). More studies are warranted to explore factors contributing to the differences in relationship satisfaction between non-hierarchical polyamorist relationships and hierarchical ones and between primary partners and primary partners and tertiary partners. Moreover, the constructs of polyamorous relationship structures and partnerships lack a universal definition in the current literature (Flicker et al., 2021). For example, Balzarini et al. (2019) asked participants to self-identify as their primary partners, while Mitchell et al. (2014) labeled primary partners as significant others and non-primary partners as other significant others. It may be necessary to inquire from a qualitative approach that allows participants themselves to define their relationship structures and provide insights into their experiences navigating multi-partnered relationships under such structures.

According to research, individuals who have alternative sexual/affectional orientations are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to engage in polyamory and face parallel minority stress in mental health services as well as in society (Balzarini et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Moor et al., 2014; Vaughan et al., 2019; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). It is also

suggested that CNMs in general have the same or a higher level of relationship quality than monogamy, although CNM practitioners, including individuals in polyamorous relationships, experience challenges in some aspects of their relationship. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to explore the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous relationships and the meaning ascribed to their relationship maintenance experiences. Specifically, the qualitative investigation will be completed by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals establish their polyamorous relationships?

RQ2: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous relationships perceive their sexual/relationship orientations influencing their relationship experiences?

RQ3: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous perceive their sense of identity influencing their relationship experiences?

RQ4: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals respond to personal, relational, and societal challenges in order to maintain their relationship?

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) under the theoretical framework of minority stress theory (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003) will be utilized to answer the research questions. The minority stress theory pays close attention to the stress individuals face and the resilience built for relationship maintenance (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015). It is appropriate for the study as individuals who are sexual/affectional expansive and poly experience sociopolitical stigma and may build personal as well as relational resilience. I will discuss the minority stress theory in detail in Chapter Two.

The current study recruited 14 participants, which is slightly beyond the recommended number of interviews for IPA (n<10, Smith et al., 2022). However, the rationale for including over 10 participants is to provide different perspectives on polyamorous relationship experiences based on intersectional identities and experiences. In addition to following recommended recruitment strategy of IPA to use snowball sampling in order to achieve a certain level of homogeneity (Smith et al., 2022), LGBTQIA+ organizations (e.g. Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities) and polyamory organizations (e.g., Polyamory Virginia) will be identified and contacted in an effort to include different perspectives and voices from individuals with diverse backgrounds. Participants participating in the study will sit in a 60-75-minute individual Zoom interview. The rationale for interviewing individuals instead of some or all partners in the polyamorous relationship is to ensure a safe and non-judgmental environment to facilitate honest and genuine disclosure.

The methods used based on the IPA (Smith et al., 2022) will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three. Three theoretical components (i.e., phenomenology, hermeneutics, idiography; Smith et al., 2022) of IPA guided the data analysis process in Microsoft Word and Excel. Specifically, phenomenological and hermeneutic components focus on the lived experiences of LGBP individuals in polyamorous relationships in maintaining their relationships and the meaning they have made out of the relationship maintenance experiences. The ideographic component requires IPA researchers to attend to the particular, not only a particular phenomenon and a particular context but also a particular participant. Therefore, detailed and repetitive data analysis was carried out on each individual participant, including writing exploratory notes, constructing experiential statements, and identifying connections across experiential statements for personal experiential themes before comparing and contrasting across the group sample for

similarities and differences to develop group experiential themes across cases (Smith et al., 2022). As such, the inherent limitation of the current study lies in the limit to the generalization of findings since it focuses on the experiences (i.e., relationship maintenance) of a small group of a particular population (i.e., LGBP individuals) in a particular context (i.e., polyamorous relationships, residing state, U.S.). However, the goal of the IPA is not to achieve a certain generalization of rules for human behaviors but rather to explore the details of individual experiences that can add valuable insight into the generalization of theories (Smith et al., 2022).

The choice of using IPA as the analytic framework for the current study aligns with the theoretical emphasis of IPA on the exploration of subjective experiences of a phenomenon and the meaning-making attached to them (Smith et al., 2022). In addition, my personal and professional philosophy that no absolute neutrality exists is in line with IPA's acknowledgment of the influence of researchers' beliefs, attitudes, and contexts on the data analysis and interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, as suggested by IPA, it is crucial that I discuss my positionality in Chapter Three, including my experiences, beliefs, values, and potential beliefs, which I brought into the study process to ensure the rigor of the current study.

As I have provided my rationale for the study in this chapter, I aim to provide existing literature on the research topic, the methods for the study, an outline of results, and a discussion of the findings and their implications for counselors. Specifically, Chapter Two will include a comprehensive review of the literature on CNM and polyamory, including CNM prevalence, attitudes toward CNM, CNM and polyamorous relationship quality, CNM relationship experiences (e.g., polyamory), and minority stress process for being sexual/affectional expansive as well as being polyamorous. I will provide an in-depth description of the theoretical framework and methodology of the study in Chapter Three. Themed categorized grounded in participants'

narratives will be included in Chapter Four, In Chapter Five, I will discuss the findings, including the interpretation of participants' experiences and implications for counselors, followed by a brief conclusion.

Key Definitions

Consensual Non-Monogamy: Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) refers to intimate, sexual, and/or romantic relationships in which participants are aware of and consent to, the involvement with more than one partner at a time for some aspect of the relationships (e.g., sexual, romantic, a combination of both; Conley et al., 2013a; Conley et al., 2013b; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell 2016; Hamilton 2021; Muise et al., 2018).

Polyamory: Polyamory assumes the possibility, validity, and worthwhileness of maintaining "intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p518).

Relationship Satisfaction: Subjective evaluation of experiences, opinions, and feelings in one's relationship

Heteronormativity: The assumption of normalcy, naturalness, and superiority of heterosexuality

Mononormativity: The assumption of normalcy and naturalness of monogamy (Pieper & Bauer, 2005)

Minority Stress: The stressors (internal and/or external) an individual with a minoritized identity are subject to in addition to normal everyday ones (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003).

Resilience: The quality of surviving and thriving in adversity (Meyer, 2015)

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the theory and research related to consensual non-monogamy polyamory. The chapter begins with a discussion of consensual non-monogamy, CNM prevalence in the U.S., and social attitudes toward CNM, followed by a detailed review of polyamory, including polyamorous relationships, polyamorous experiences, and legal, social, as well as cultural barriers that individuals in polyamorous relationships face. Next, I present the primary theoretical framework, the minority stress model (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003), and its relevance to investigating issues related to sexual/affectional orientation and polyamory. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary of how current literature on CNM and polyamory provide context and support for the current research study.

Consensual Non-Monogamy

Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) refers to intimate, sexual, and/or romantic relationships in which participants are aware of and consent to, the involvement with more than one partner at a time for some aspect of the relationships (e.g., sexual, romantic, a combination of both; Conley et al., 2013a; Conley et al., 2013b; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell 2016; Hamilton 2021; Muise et al., 2018). Generally, CNM relationships include but are not limited to open relationships, swing, polyamory, and monogamish relationships. Each form of CNM is distinct in terms of the typical relational dynamics and boundaries inferred. Open relationships typically refer to those where partners consent to the sexual non-exclusiveness aspect of a relationship (Hamilton, et al., 2021; LaSala, 2004). Many CNM relationship configurations may also be described as open. Polyamory refers to individuals having multiple short- or long-term extra-dyadic relationships that can be intimate, sexual, and/or romantic (Hamilton et al., 2021; Taormino, 2008). Swinging involves a couple having sexual but not intimate and/or romantic

relations with other couples and/or evolving “swapping” partners (Hamilton et al., 2021). Monogamish relationships feature a couple being monogamous primarily but engaging in extra-dyadic sexual activities together (e.g., threesome) or engaging in such activities with the other partner being present (Hamilton et al., 2021; Parson et al., 2012). Therefore, CNM broadly encompasses several types of relationship dynamics that differ in terms of exclusivity with one or more partners for intimate, romantic, or sexual involvement.

To date, U.S. research on intimate relationships primarily focused on monogamous relationships (e.g., Conley et al., 2012b; Hazan et al., 2006; Schmookler & Bursik, 2007). Monogamy refers to an exclusive long-term and committed relationship between two partners (Haupert et al., 2017). Trends in monogamy-focused research in the Western culture contribute to monogamism or mononormativity and the devaluation and subordination of alternatives to monogamy (e.g., CNM; Anderson, 2010). Monogamism is defined as a preferable attitude toward monogamy and an assumption that all individuals desire and conform to monogamous relationships (Blumer et al., 2014). The notion of monogamism is rooted in mononormativity, which deems monogamy as normalized and natural (Pieper & Bauer, 2005). However, monogamy-based research fails to concede the variety of relationship practices that exist. For example, scientists suggest that only a few known human cultures practice monogamy, not to mention that it is even less common in other animal species (Barash & Lipton, 2002; Rubin, 2001; Ryan & Jetha, 2010). In addition, some revolutionary biologists argue a failure in research to distinguish the difference between sexual monogamy (i.e., the establishment and maintenance of sexual exclusivity between two partners) and social monogamy (i.e., the forming of an intense physical and social bond between two partners; (Carter & Cushing, 2003; Gray & Garcia, 2013). Due to a lack of recognition and acknowledgment by researchers in many academic fields,

including counseling, it is possible that academia and the general public are interpreting the terms (i.e., social monogamy, sexual monogamy) in different ways. Furthermore, individuals in relationships who claim themselves to be monogamous may not function as such, as Vangelisti and Gerstenberger (2004) documented approximately 60% of non-consensual non-monogamy (i.e., infidelity) in marriage. Nevertheless, monogamism or mononormativity still pervades and non-monogamy is rarely investigated in the academic literature until recently.

Research in the 1980s focused on the association between non-monogamy and gay men (Blasband & Peplau,1985; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Hickson et al., 1992), with a decrease in research on this topic during the AIDS pandemic. Interestingly, trends in internet searches show an intensified attention to CNM for searches of the terms "open relationship" and "polyamory" rising in public between 2006 and 2015 (Moors, 2017). Some major media (e.g., *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*) also published articles featuring positive accounts for CNM (e.g., polyamorous, open relationships, and swinging; Monroe, 2013; Oppenheimer, 2011; Reich, 2014). *Scientific American* and *Rolling Stone* even claimed consensual non-monogamy to be the next sexual revolution (Morris, 2014; Pappas, 2013). The rising interest in CNM among the general public has led to a return of research interest. Now, researchers are slowly catching up to examine the prevalence of CNM, individuals' interest in and practice of CNM, and levels of social, cultural, and legal acceptance of CNM (e.g., Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Haupert et al., 2017; Klesse 2005; Levine et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2013; Rubin et al., 2014). The findings of these studies provided valuable insights into the structures and dynamics of various types of CNM relationships.

Prevalence of CNM

The exact prevalence of non-monogamy is unknown due to a lack of census data and a consistent definition of non-monogamy. Existing literature suggests that approximately 4%-5% of adults in the U.S. are in a CNM relationship, and about 20% of adults report previous experience in CNM relationships in their lifetime (Fairbrother et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Levine et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2014). Contrary to public assumptions that those who engage in CNM are more likely to self-identify as White people with a higher socioeconomic status (SES, e.g., middle class, upper class), Haupert et al. (2017) argued there was no association between engagement in CNM and such demographic variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, education level). People of color are equally as likely to engage in CNM as White people, with the percentage of people of color in each study ranging from zero to a high of 48%. One study examining the demographic comparison of American individuals in polyamorous and monogamous relationships also suggests that multiethnicity is associated with a higher likelihood of endorsing CNM (Balzarini et al., 2019). However, CNM phenomena are more common among individuals with lower education level, lower income, and/or unemployment (Balzarini et al., 2019). These findings were inconsistent with existing literature that socioeconomic status was not associated with engagement in CNM (Haupert et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2014). Such inconsistent findings from current research warrant further investigation into the sociodemographic factors associated with endorsement and engagement in CNM relationships. Some studies contend that religious affiliation, political affiliation, and geographic regions do not predict the likelihood of engaging in CNM (Haupert et al., 2017, Rubin et al., 2014). However, Balzarini et al. (2019) suggested that individuals who were more likely to endorse CNM were characterized by gender as a woman or transgender person, non-heterosexual orientation (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual), no Christian affiliation, liberal or small political party

affiliations (e.g., Democratic, Green Party, Liberation), or experiences of divorce or separation. It is also noteworthy that individuals identifying as non-binary or transgender are more likely to positively endorse or engage in polyamorous relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019). The mixed findings for predictors of polyamory warrant further research investigations into the association between CNM and an individual's demographic variables.

With regard to the association between sexual orientation and CNM, it is suggested that non-heterosexual individuals are more likely to hold a favorable attitude toward and engage in CNM, although the number of heterosexual people engaging in CNM is higher than that of non-heterosexual people (Haupert et al., 2017; Moors; 2014). In fact, one study suggests that 78.6% of the people who had ever engaged in a CNM relationship identified as heterosexual (Haupert et al., 2017). The number of men reporting engaging in a CNM relationship is higher than women, a pattern that is consistent across sexual orientations. There is a greater portion of people who identify as non-heterosexual (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual) engage in a CNM relationship than do heterosexual people. Related, Moors (et al., 2014) documented no difference between lesbians and gay men in their endorsement of CNM and willingness to engage in CNM relationships. Moreover, bisexual individuals are more likely than gay men and lesbians to engage in CNM (Balzarini et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Taormino, 2008). Meanwhile, heterosexual men and individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are also more likely to be in a current CNM relationship (Haupert et al., 2017). Lesbians and gay men share a variety of similarities in their love styles, specifically passionate love, gameplaying love, friendship love, practical love, obsessive love, and altruistic love (Moors et al., 2014). In fact, higher levels of openness to new experiences and conscientiousness predict attraction to multiple-partner relationships among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals (Moors et al.,

2017). These findings suggest that CNM is a practice that is not uncommon among individuals in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual (LGBP) community instead of being exclusive to gay men. No known study has examined contributors to LGBP individuals' higher rate of engaging in a CNM relationship. However, scholars attempted to offer plausible explanations for such a phenomenon, which will be discussed further in the section on Non-Monogamy and Non-Heterosexuality.

Attitude Toward CNM

In the past two decades, in addition to exploring the prevalence of CNM in Western society and culture, researchers also have managed to investigate the public's perception of and attitude toward CNM (e.g., Cohen & Wilson, 2017; Moors et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2015; Moors et al., 2017). Nevertheless, CNM is still not well accepted by society, probably due to its violation of the norms of monogamy and a perceived threat to monogamy (Moors. et al., 2013). Several studies yield findings that monogamy, Christianity, and political conservatism are robust predictors of negative attitudes toward CNM (Conley et al., 2013a; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). For example, individuals in a CNM relationship were assumed to be promiscuous and sexually riskier (e.g., contracting sexually transmitted infections, STIs) than those in a monogamous relationship (Balzarini et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2013). CNM relationships and the parties involved are also viewed as lower in relationship quality, less sexually satisfied, and lonelier (Moore et al., 2013). In sum, anti-CNM stigma is prevalent in Western culture where monogamy is the optimal relationship structure.

Researchers also found a "halo" effect around monogamy as some positive ratings of monogamous relationships are based on arbitrary qualities (e.g., more likely to floss teeth daily) and less likely to use condoms, which suggests a higher level of sexual intimacy and trust

between partners (Moors et al., 2013). However, when considering that 60% of individuals in monogamous marriages engaged in non-consensual extra-dyadic sexual activities, the risk of contracting STIs can be high among those individuals (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). In fact, several studies suggested that CNM practitioners emphasize the importance of safe sex (e.g., condom use) for STI prevention (Conley et al., 2012a; Conley et al., 2013b; Lehmiller, 2015). In addition, individuals in CNM relationships are more likely to discuss relationship rules, including safe sex (Hosking, 2013; Stewart et al., 2021), and men in CNM relationships are more likely than their counterparts in nonconsensual non-monogamous relationships to engage in safe sex (e.g., wearing a condom; Træen & Thuen, 2021). In sum, however, the public generally holds negative attitudes toward CNM, and some of them are rooted in mononormativity and misperceptions of CNM.

While CNM relationships are often perceived as negative, the levels of negativity seem to differ based on the CNM subtypes (e.g., polyamorous relationships, swinging, open relationships). For example, Matsick et al. (2014) explored the public's prescription, including individuals in monogamous and CNM relationships, on various types of CNM relationships. Participants rated polyamorous relationships as more favorable than both swinging and open relationships and consider polyamorous relationships as more moral, more motivated by duty rather than by pleasure, and less self-oriented than swingers and those in open relationships (Matsick et al., 2014). Individuals in open relationships are also perceived more negatively (e.g., less moral) than those in polyamorous relationships. Swingers were perceived as the least favorable among the three subtypes of CNM relationships and viewed as kinkier, dirtier, less responsible, more adventurous, more radical, and more open to new experiences (Matsick et al., 2014). One possible explanation is that polyamorous relationships violate fewer norms of

monogamy since it involves social and emotional intimacy, which typically is absent in swinging and open relationships. Interestingly, the involvement of social and emotional intimacy also contributed to the negative attitudes toward polyamorous relationships held by swingers (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Frank & DeLamater, 2010). Research documents narratives from swingers that individuals in polyamory still uphold heteronormative and mononormative practices (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Frank & DeLamater, 2010). Conversely, those in polyamorous relationships perceived swingers as dirtier, emotionally unavailable, and more sexually risky, which is similar to what the general public believes (Balzarini et al., 2018; Ritchie, 2010). The biases and misperceptions exist not only within the CNM community but also in the larger society.

Attitudes toward CNM also seem to differ based on one individual's personality trait, attachment style, and socio-sexual orientation. For example, Moors et al. (2015; 2017) found that individuals with an avoidant attachment style are more likely to express a positive attitude toward CNM and more willing to engage in CNM, while an anxious attachment style predicts a negative attitude. A possible explanation is that individuals who have an avoidant attachment style may consider having multiple romantic and/or sexual partners to avoid a deep bond with one (Moors et al., 2015). In addition, active imagination, openness to engage in new experiences, and a preference for variety predict positive attitudes toward CNM and a greater willingness to engage in CNM relationships (Moors et al., 2017). Individuals who seem to be highly organized, neat, careful, and high in conscientiousness (which indicates success-driven) tend to perceive CNM negatively and are less desired for CNM engagement. Negative attitudes toward CNM are also evident among individuals who are extraverted (e.g., outgoing, assertive, and gregarious); however, extraversion is not associated with willingness to engage in CNM (Moors et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Cohen et al. (2017) examined perceptions of CNM based on one's socio-sexual

orientation and found that both men and women with a more unrestricted socio-sexual orientation (also called sociosexuality which refers to a measure to assess the openness to engage in casual sex; Kinsey et al., 1948) held a more positive attitude toward CNM and are more willing to accept and engage in CNM. In addition to social and cultural factors that contribute to the development of restricted socio-sexual orientation, reproductive religiosity is associated with certain sexual morality (Moon, 2021). In particular, certain reproductive-based religions imply a mating choice characterized by long-term, investment, and commitment, which facilitate trust in relationships. Therefore, religion can be used as a social cue to infer restricted socio-sexual orientation (Jackson et al., 2015; Moon et al., 2018; Moon et al., 2020). In fact, religious beliefs, morals, and values significantly predict non-engagement of CNM among African Americans, even though religious membership does not significantly predict attitudes toward and willingness to engage in CNM (St. Vil & Giles 2022). Taken together, these findings may suggest that religion-based morality can influence a restricted socio-sexual orientation, which leads to the preference for monogamy. However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution as attitude and willingness do not necessarily translate to behavior. Overall, a number of personal factors influence how individuals consider CNM a viable relationship option or not.

Individuals who actually practice CNM reported facing stigmas and/or biases in the healthcare system (e.g., hospital, mental health service). For example, Vaughan et al. (2019) documented the negative experiences reported by CNM people when interacting with their healthcare providers. Participants shared that healthcare providers demonstrated a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding non-monogamous relationships and exhibited explicit and implicit judgment (e.g., language, facial expression) characterized as highly stressful. Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) also found among 1,220 participants currently engaged in

CNM, 20.3% reported at least one experience of explicit discrimination from a medical doctor, 19% reported discrimination from mental health providers, and 9% reported discrimination from other providers associated with their CNM status. The stigmas, biases, and discriminations CNM individuals face daily within their community, in society, as well as in the healthcare system based solely on relationship status, contribute to frustration, stress, and concealment of relationship status that negatively influence their well-being and relationship quality (Moors et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019). For example, internalized personal discomfort (e.g., perceiving CNM as unnatural) is linked to lower satisfaction with romantic and sexual relationship agreement, overall relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment. Such a finding indicates the negative impact of monogamism on one's self and their CNM relationship quality.

The negative attitudes toward CNM, however, seem not to be static or unchangeable. A study compared the levels of negative attitudes of participants by only providing a brief definition of polyamory and a detailed description of CNM (e.g., definition, experience; Hutzler et al., 2016). The level of negative attitudes of participants reduced when provided more descriptions of CNM definitions and relationship characteristics to increase understanding of and familiarity with CNM. The findings indicate that exposure to and relevant education on CNM may change people's biases against and misperceptions of CNM, which is consistent with the contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Meanwhile, people who are non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, have experienced CNM in the past, and/or have knowledge of CNM hold a less negative attitude toward CNM (Conley et al., 2013a, Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). Contact theory may also explain the higher levels of positive attitudes toward CNM among non-heterosexual persons (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual) and non-cisgender persons (e.g., transgender, non-binary, agender, other). It is

assumed that the higher prevalence of CNM within the LGBTQIA+ community contributes to more frequent exposure to CNM, which may have led non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals to acquire relevant CNM knowledge and hold more positive attitudes toward CNM. Although CNM and sexual orientation are two distinct constructs, individuals who are in a CNM relationship or who are non-heterosexual often share parallel lived experiences of facing stigma and discrimination in society.

Consensual Non-Monogamy and Sexual Orientation

Persons in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual (LGBP) community are more likely to endorse and engage in a CNM relationship than heterosexual individuals, although the number of heterosexual people engaging in CNM is higher (Haupert et al., 2017; Moors; 2014). This higher prevalence of CNM among non-heterosexual individuals may be related to the fact that queer people are less constrained by heteronormative expectations, such as monogamy, in spite of facing historical experiences of oppression and pathologization (Hamilton et al., 2021). Therefore, LGBP individuals may embrace more opportunities to explore and define their sexuality and relationship outside the socially and culturally prescribed hetero- and mononormativity.

More research expanded their target populations across sexual orientations, including heterosexuality (Levine et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2015, Moors et al., 2017, Séguin et al., 2016; Træen & Thuen, 2021). Yet, it is important that we remember the history of CNM and its connections to marginalized sexualities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual; Hamilton et al., 2021). Most early CNM studies (i.e., open relationships) in a Western society focused on gay men's lived experiences due to the high prevalence of CNM in this population (Blasband & Peplau,1985; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Hickson et al., 1992). Recent literature also suggests an equal

prevalence of CNM among lesbians and an increased likelihood of CNM engagement among bisexual and pansexual individuals when compared with lesbian women and gay men (Haupert et al., 2017). As aforementioned, non-heterosexual individuals and people in a CNM relationship share parallel marginalization and oppression in society due to violation of social and cultural norms (e.g., heteronormativity, mononormativity). Religious and political conservatism (e.g., Christianity, republic party) contribute to the challenges of social, cultural, and legal acceptance of both non-heterosexuality and CNM (Balzarini et al., 2018; Hutzler et al., 2016). In fact, many conservative politicians and pundits connected CNM (i.e., polyamory) to their position to oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage (Kurtz, 2003; Lithwick, 2004). For example, Kurtz (2003) argued that the legitimacy of same-sex marriage would also lead to legitimizing all forms of passion deemed immoral or illegal while leaving society defenseless against an onslaught of unbounded desire. Furthermore, Kurtz (2003) argued that polyamory would be a pivotal step down the slippery slope from same-sex marriage to social debauchery and chaos. Many LGBTQIA+ activists in the past distanced themselves from polyamory advocacy (Klesse, 2018), perhaps fearing advocating for social and legal acceptance of CNM in their agenda may jeopardize the community's effort to fight for marriage equality (i.e., the legalization of same-sex marriage).

While non-heterosexual individuals and individuals in CNM relationships share parallel and even some overlapping social biases and prejudices, it is also crucial to identify the unique challenges they face. In a study investigating the stigma against CNM relationships, participants rated gay and lesbian couples in monogamous relationships as sexually riskier and less socially acceptable to society than heterosexual couples (Moors et al., 2015). On the other hand, CNM relationships were perceived as a threat to monogamy; CNM practitioners were viewed more

negatively than those engaging in monogamy regardless of their sexual orientation (Moors et al., 2013). Loneliness, high level of sexual risk, low relationship quality, low level of sexual satisfaction, less likelihood of condom use, and low social acceptability were often associated with couples in CNM relationships (Moors et al., 2013). In sum, individuals who practice/identify as CNM experience negative attitudes, biases, and even discrimination based on their sexual identity and/or practice.

In theory, non-heterosexual individuals who engage in CNM may face double oppression due to their sexual orientation and relationship structure. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to investigate factors influencing the establishment of CNM relationships and the maintenance of relationship quality among this population. Within the field of psychology, the Division 44 of the American Psychological Association (APA) is the Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, within which a permanent Committee of Consensual Non-Monogamy focuses on research, psychological practice, and education and outreach (Hamilton, 2021; Moors & Schechinger, 2014; Schechinger 2017). Such scientific exploration of CNM, sexual orientation, and gender identity may reduce the negative biases against individuals with gender identities, LGBP sexual/affectional orientations, and consensual non-monogamy.

Polyamory

The word polyamory was a combination of the Greek word “many” and the Latin word “amores”, which can be translated as many loves (Klesse, 2011). The term polyamory was claimed to be invented by the founders of a neo-pagan church in the U.S. in the early 1990s, while its variations in terminology have existed since the 1950s (Alan, 2010; Anapol, 2010). The challenge in a universal definition of polyamory persists given that its meaning varies among individuals in polyamorous relationships (Barker, 2005; Bettinger, 2005; Keener, 2004; Klesse,

2006; Klesse, 2011; Sheff, 2011). In general, polyamory assumes the possibility, validity, and worthwhileness of maintaining "intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p518). Since the 1990s, research on polyamory has grown in the fields of social sciences (e.g., Barker & Langdridge 2010). For example, Lano and Parry (1995) suggested polyamory as an umbrella term for multiple approaches to responsible non-monogamy. The endorsement of consensus and a series of values (e.g., honesty, self-knowledge, self-possession, integrity, value of sex and love over jealousy) imply various theories on polyamory, which contend a philosophical discourse (Emens, 2004; Klesse, 2014). Polyamory is also defined as a relationship orientation, describing a love style of entering and/or maintaining multiple intimate and/or sexual relationships simultaneously (Anapol, 2010).

In recent years, scholars also attempt to categorize polyamory as an identity, which is evident in participants' narratives from previous research (e.g., Barker, 2005, Klesse, 2007). In one study, Barker (2005) focused on the construction of a polyamorous identity, narratives about polyamorous as a natural state of being are not uncommon among participants, although some describe polyamory as a choice of practice – a behavior that people can choose and/or work at. The identity reference to polyamory is tied closely to the LGBT coming-out process research literature and political writing (Weitzman, 2006; Rambukkana, 2004). For example, the words "natural" and "hard-wired" expressed by participants in Barker's study (2005) resonate with the sexual orientation accounts for the insistence on stability and durability (Klesse, 2014). Among researchers who claimed polyamory as a sexual orientation, Tweedy (2011) argued such a classification of polyamory could benefit polyamorous individuals with regard to state-based workplace anti-discrimination legislation. In her argument, Tweedy (2011) stated that polyamory people experienced discrimination in marriage law (e.g., couples only), criminal law (e.g.,

anti-bigamy and adultery laws), and family law (e.g., discriminatory custody decisions). She suggested that the sexual orientation category defined in the current anti-discrimination laws could be accommodated for polyamory. However, Klesse (2014) criticized such categorization of polyamory as one sexual orientation, arguing that equating polyamory with sexual orientation may only achieve selective legal protection for polyamory while failing to seek poly alliance and allyship to foster "a politics of recognition" (p.92). Klesse pointed out a limited readiness for the polyamory movement to build an advocacy coalition with other consensually non-monogamous relationships, as polyamorous people often held negative biases and even distanced them from other sex-orientated styles of non-monogamy (e.g., swing, casual sex; Klesse, 2007). To date, the attempt to define polyamorous varies from a philosophical lens to the perspectives of relationship orientation and sexual orientation. Yet. the discourse on the definition of polyamory continues, accompanied by scholarly efforts to understand polyamory based on its different relationship structures.

Polyamorous Relationship Structures

There is no one way to polyamory given the diversity of polyamorous relationship structures. An attempt to categorize polyamorous relationship structures may fall into ignorance of such diversity, which limits polyamory within a monogamous culture (Emens, 2004; Heckert, 2010). Nevertheless, existing literature described some prominent polyamorous relationships (such as Bettinger, 2005; Strassberg, 2003). Hierarchy exists in some polyamorous relationships, which refers to the existence of a primary dyad with secondary partners, who may be casual or committed (Fin et al., 2012; Wosik-Correa, 2010). Some polyamorous relationships can be more complicated depending on the level of commitment, involvement, and agreement among members (Klesse, 2014). For example, triad or quad relationships can involve three or four

partners sharing relationships with each other, characterized by deep bonding, intimacy, and commitment (Aoki, 2005; Bettinger, 2005). However, it is also not uncommon that one person may have two relationships with equal priority where two partners share no relationship with one another (Witherspoon & Wilson, 2013). In addition, a polyamorous relationship can be closed, meaning partners remain committed and intimate exclusively with one another, or open, which allows new members emotionally or sexually to enter the relationship system (Taormino, 2008; Witherspoon & Wilson, 2013). Due to the diversity of polyamorous relationship structures, a rigid conceptualization of polyamory should be cautioned (Barker, 2005; Jordan et al., 2017).

Many feminists argued that polyamory could lead women to liberation from relationships characterized by patriarchal and gendered influences (e.g., Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Robinson, 1997). Such arguments are consistent with narratives from one study, where polyamorous women reported a feeling of liberation from traditional gender, maternal, and relationship roles (Sheff, 2005). So, some individuals who engage in polyamory report positive experiences of liberation; however, power differentials often still exist among partners, which can complicate the creation and maintenance of polyamorous relationships (Goldner, 1985; Klesse, 2004; Klesse, 2006; Rampage, 2002). In addition, Sheff (2013) suggested that a power differential can exist in the structure of a polyamorous relationship. In a primary-secondary polyamorous relationship, for example, the primary partners may mainly prescribe rules for their extradyadic relationships, which can create a hierarchy between partners (Bettinger, 2005; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Even in a polyamorous relationship (e.g., polyfidelity) where partners are committed to each other, power differentials can still emerge during the decision-making process of partners (e.g., majority rule, consensus; Aoki, 2005; Gilmore & de Arcana, 2015; Strassberg, 2003).

Wosick-Correa (2010) also documented some other commonly known decisions in polyamorous relationships, including decisions related to sex, allocation of veto power, addressing difficulties among partners, and integration of new partners. Inequitable shared decision-making can contribute to power imbalance which leads to discomfort and power struggle among partners. Some polyamorous relationships establish ground rules, boundaries, and relationship contracts and are open for negotiation as well as communication (Anapol, 2010; Deri, 2015; Easton & Hardy, 2011; Gilmore & de Arcana, 2015; Heaney, 2011; Taormino, 2008; Veaus & Ricket, 2014). So far, existing research offered insights into the hierarchy (e.g., hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical polyamory) and power dynamics (e.g., equal sharing of decision-making vs. unbalanced decision-making) among partners in various polyamorous relationship structures. In the next section, I discuss existing literature related to individuals' lived experiences within the relationship structure and in the larger context of society.

Polyamorous Experiences

Individual experiences in a polyamorous relationship can vary due to the relationship structure and external influences (e.g., legal recognition, social and cultural acceptance). Within a polyamorous relationship system, some research characterized polyamorous relationships as egalitarianism, deep commitment, loving, and open communication among partners (Aguilar, 2013; Séguin, 2019). Contrary to a common belief that multi-partnered relationships benefit men over women, it is argued that polyamorous women report feeling liberated from traditional gender, maternal, and relationship roles (Sheff, 2005). It is possible that the characteristics of a polyamorous relationship can create opportunities for polyamorous women to free themselves from the patriarchy that socializes women with values of caretaking, romance, and family over personal pursuits and financial independence (Ziegler et al, 2014). In addition, the distribution of

financial and emotional resources among partners in a polyamorous relationship can also benefit taking household responsibilities and child-rearing (Emens, 2004; Sheff, 2010). However, Jordan et al. (2017) cautioned against automatic assumptions about such polyamorous benefits due to the varied social status of individual partners and relationship dynamics. For example, egalitarianism could collapse due to gendered divisions of labor in a polyamorous relationship (Klesse, 2014).

Open communication and negotiation start at the beginning of a polyamorous relationship and continue to happen during the maintenance of the relationship. Common issues and concerns that partners negotiate in a polyamorous relationship include relationship parameters, agreements, boundaries, coming out as polyamorous (e.g., to family members, friends, workplace, children), identifying social support and resources, and challenges due to separation (Weitzman et al., 2009). The ground rules, boundaries, and relationship contracts established can benefit the resolution of those issues and concerns (Easton & Hardy, 2011; Taormina, 2008). However, as aforementioned, a polyamorous relationship can include a hierarchy between members (e.g., primary-secondary partner formation) and can also be closed or open. Such a relationship structure implicates who can attend to the negotiations on those issues and who has the power to make decisions, which may contribute to an inequitable share of the decision-making process. For example, power imbalance can arise when partners discuss opening their previously monogamous relationship, as one partner may experience pressure to conform to their partner's desire to introduce new partners to their relationship (Klesse, 2014). Power dynamics can also be changed or shifted when new partners enter an already-established relationship system (Wosick-Correa, 2010). Existing literature suggests that polyamorous relationships are no exception to jealousy (Deri, 2015; Heaney, 2011), although polyamory is

established on the premise of consensual non-monogamy. Some partners, especially the ones who perceive themselves with less power, may experience jealousy characterized by a sense of betrayal and a need to control the relationship (Deri, 2015; Keener, 2004; Mint, 2010; Pines, 2013). However, it is also possible in a polyamorous relationship that feelings of jealousy can be attended to with open communication, which can create opportunities for greater awareness of oneself and others and a rise of compersion (a feeling of joy when seeing a loved one engage in a positive romantic and/or sexual experience with another; Deri, 2015; Veaus & Rickert, 2014).

The lived experiences in a polyamorous relationship can further be complicated due to structural power influenced by intersecting political, social, and cultural identities (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2006). Race, gender, class, dis(ability), and sexual orientation can influence a partner's experiences in society (e.g., workplace discrimination, fewer earnings), which in return, creates a power imbalance that can lead to a sense of insecurity and dependence (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse. 2006; Wilson, 2002). External forces (e.g., legal acceptance, discrimination, social support) can also influence polyamorous experiences.

Experiences Outside Polyamory

Individuals in polyamorous relationships may experience negativity in society (e.g., school, workplace, community) due to their relationship orientation (i.e., polyamory), which in turn influences their experiences within their relationships. Monogamous privileges have been taken for granted through the process of social, cultural, and legal recognition in many countries, although it faces criticism for promoting a heteronormative and patriarchal culture that benefits men over women (Robinson, 1997; Rosa, 1994; Ziegler et al, 2014). For example, monogamy is institutionalized in the U.S. as the optimal relationship through policy, religion, and social norms (Coontz, 2004; D'emilio & Freedman, 1997; Smith, 1993). Polyamory is not legally

acknowledged and protected in the U.S. (Aviram & Leachman, 2014; Davis 2010; Tweedy, 2011). Such a lack of legal recognition can contribute to challenges for partners in polyamorous relationships (e.g., unable to obtain government tax deductions or medical insurance, challenges in seeking child support and alimony after separation, discriminatory custody cases; Aviram & Leachman, 2014; Barnett 2014; Black, 2006, Davis, 2010; Dryden, 2015, Sheff, 2013; Strassberg, 2003). In fact, custody issues have been recorded as the frequently mentioned concerns and fear expressed by divorcing patterns in polyamorous relationships (Barnett, 2014; Black, 2006).

A monogamist and mononormative culture also contribute to discrimination and stigmatization experienced by individuals in polyamorous relationships. CNM practitioners face being stigmatized as immoral, corrupt, promiscuous, and deviant (Moors et al., 2013). It is not uncommon for a person in a polyamorous relationship to live double lives, avoiding disclosing their relationships in public, in an effort to protect themes from potential stigmatization and discrimination (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010). For example, a feeling of exclusion is often reported by those who disclose their polyamorous relationship status to friends, family, and colleagues (Sheff, 2011). Partners can also feel rejected if family members and friends refuse to accept the partnerships. A physical and emotional cutoff can also occur between polyamorous practitioners and their rejecting families and friendships, which then can lead to feelings of isolation (Sheff, 2013). Both parents and children from polyamorous families also experienced stigmatization in school from students, teachers, and other parents (Otter, 2014; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). The lack of recognition of CNM relationships in the workplace can also potentially contribute to feelings of exclusion and potential discrimination (Klesse, 2014). Experiences of stigmatization and

discrimination in a monogamist society can create a deleterious impact on polyamorous relationships and cause tensions in partnerships (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006; Sheff, 2011).

The over-sexualization of racially minoritized groups, LGBTQ, and working-class people and the asexualization of persons with disabilities can be exacerbated when individuals engage in polyamorous relationships that are considered promiscuous and immoral (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Hutchinson, 1999; Klesse, 2012, Klesse, 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Some argue such discrimination can contribute to a sense of invisibility of intersecting identities in polyamory, which can be detrimental to the relationship quality (Klesse, 2018; Rambukkanna, 2015). Therefore, different aspects of one's identity also contribute to the varied experiences in polyamorous relationships and therefore influence the levels of relationship quality.

Relationship Quality

Relationship satisfaction is a common indicator of relationship quality that researchers used across different types of CNM relationships (Bricker & Horne, 2007; Hoff et al., 2010; LaSala, 2004; Flicker et al., 2021; Moors et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2012; Séguine et al., 2017; Stults, 2019; Whitton et al., 2015). Some researchers suggest no difference between gay and bisexual men in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships with regard to relationship satisfaction, communication quality, and sexual satisfaction (Bricker & Horne, 2007; Hoff et al., 2010; LaSala, 2004; Parsons et al., 2012; Séguine et al., 2017; Stults, 2019; Whitton et al., 2015). In addition, individuals with a consensual extradyadic experience report high levels of both relationship intimacy, and positive attitudes toward sex and sexuality, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender (Træen & Thuen, 2021). Contradicting the popular Western belief that monogamy is the optimal relationship for intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction, less sexual jealousy was documented among men in monogamish and open

relationships and greater levels of intimacy among heterosexual polyamorous men and women, compared to their monogamous counterparts (Parsons et al., 2012). Yet, inconsistencies also exist, in spite of these positive findings for CNM relationship quality.

With a closer examination of CNM relationship quality, it is suggested that individuals may report less favorably on certain aspects of their relationships. For example, in a study conducted in 1983, CNM lesbian couples reported less sexual satisfaction and less commitment to the main relationship, whereas no relationship between those variables was identified among gay men (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). However, the study may be outdated as gender differences in sexual satisfaction and commitment may have changed in the past four decades. Hosking (2013) also suggested lower levels of passion among Australian gay men in open relationships compared to those in monogamous and threesome-only relationships. This finding indicates that CNM types may predict relationship quality.

So far, only fewer studies focused on exploring polyamorous relationship quality (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Flicker et al., 2021). In primary-secondary hierarchical polyamorous relationships, individuals may have a greater sense of closeness, emotional support and security, and higher levels of nurturance in primary relationships compared to secondary relationships (Balzarini et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014). However, the definition of primary partner was inconsistent across the two studies. Specifically, Balzarini et al. (2019) asked participants to self-identify as their primary partners, while Mitchell et al. (2014) labeled primary partners as significant others and non-primary partners as other significant others. Such inconsistencies can complicate the interpretation of findings as the ill-established definition of ‘primary partners’ may not match the participant's perception of their partners. Moors et al. (2020) provided more insight into the differences in relationship quality between

hierarchical and non-hierarchical polyamorous relationships. Specifically, no statistically significant differences were documented in variability in relationship satisfaction between hierarchical and non-hierarchical relationships. However, individuals in hierarchical relationships reported lower levels of overall relationship satisfaction compared to those in non-hierarchical relationships. Furthermore, individuals reported lower relationship satisfaction with secondary partners, although no such significant differences were suggested between non-hierarchical and primary partners (Flicker et al., 2021). In sum, the three studies all shed light on the influence of hierarchy on polyamorous relationships, namely partners in non-hierarchical polyamorous relationships reporting a higher level of relationship satisfaction than those in hierarchical polyamorous relationships. However, research attention to polyamorous relationship quality is limited, and none of the existing studies examined the specifics within different polyamorous relationship structures that contributed to the differences in relationship quality. Therefore, more research is warranted to examine the factors that impact individual experiences in polyamory that influence relationship quality.

Limited studies also explore factors that may influence polyamorous relationship quality. For example, the length of a polyamorous relationship may predict relationship satisfaction and attachment security (Flicker et al., 2021). Specifically, for individuals in polyamorous relationships of five years or less, greater attachment avoidance and lower relationship satisfaction were detected among hierarchical relationships than those in non-hierarchical relationships. Such a finding seems inconsistent with current research on relationship quality of monogamous relationships, within which relationship satisfaction decreases over time while stability increases (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Therefore, a longitudinal study investigating polyamorous relationship satisfaction and stability is warranted. In addition, Moors et al. (2021)

seemed to provide some insight into the influence of internalized CNM negativity on relationship quality. Specifically, people in CNM (i.e., polyamory, swinging, open relationships) who express negative attitudes toward CNM and personal discomfort with CNM report lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Low levels of satisfaction with romantic and sexual relationship agreements with both of their partners and lower commitment to their primary partner are also evident among CNM practitioners holding anti-CNM negativity (Moors et al., 2021). Such findings shed light on the negative influence of internalized CNM negativity on relationship quality, although how individuals internalize CNM negativity and how such internalization influences relationship quality needs further research. It also suggested that individual experiences outside their relationship may influence their engagement with partners and affect their relationship quality.

Minority Stress Model

Minority stress theory was first developed to conceptualize a multilevel model of cultural and social stressors (e.g., interpersonal stressors, economic factors) faced by lesbian women (Brooks, 1981). These external stressors can be transmitted into biophysical and psychological stressors that influence the cognitive structure of the individuals and consequent readjustment or adaptational failure. Meyer (2003) adapted the minority stress theory and created a minority stress model for understanding mental health discrepancies among minoritized populations due to one's identities (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race). The model posits that individuals with a minoritized identity are subject to internal and external stressors in addition to normal everyday stressors. Specifically, a minority status can lead one to be more susceptible to prejudiced events (e.g. discrimination, violence), which Meyer (2003) defined as "distal minority stressors" (p.5). Such stressors are more objective and are not based on one's perceptions or appraisals. For

example, besides general stressors, an Asian gay man may experience racism and homophobia due to his racial identity and sexual orientation in a racist and heteronormative society.

In addition, an individual with a minoritized identity may also experience a "proximal stressors" process (p.5), such as expecting rejection and discrimination, concealing identity in an attempt to avoid discrimination, and internalizing oppressive ideologies. For instance, the same Asian gay man may be hypervigilant when interacting with others, conceal their sexual orientation to avoid homophobia, and internalize the idea that 'gay men will go to hell.' During the minority stress process, the additive effects of minority stressors can create discrepancies in mental health outcomes that lead to disproportionate levels of mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) among minoritized individuals (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003).

In the process of minority stress, other factors, including salience, valence, and integration with one's other identities can modify the effects of minority stressors on one's life. (Meyer, 2003). The level of identification, commitment, and development of identity can contribute to the extent to which the emotional impact of stressors on one's life (Meyer, 2003; Thoits, 2013). It should be noted that identity is fluid rather than static, with the prominence of identity shifting with social contexts (Brooks, 1981; Crocker & Quinn; 2000). Meyer (2003) referred to valence as the evaluative features of identity and is connected to self-validation. While positive valence may contribute to higher levels of self-acceptance and lower levels of internalized stigma, negative valence may predict mental health problems (e.g., depression; Allen et al., 1996; Woolfolk et al., 1995). Furthermore, integrating one's minoritized identity with other identities can also predict the level of self-acceptance, which may ameliorate minority stressors.

Such factors can be a source of strength and resilience for individuals with a minoritized status, especially when one develops high levels of self-acceptance, commitment to community engagement to build social support, and coping skills (Branscombe et al., 1999; Meyer. 2003; Meyer, 2015; Miller & Major, 2000). Meyer (2015) cautioned that resilience building should depend on both individuals and communities, although individual resilience can be beneficial to ameliorate the impact of minority stress. In sum, a person's minority status can be both a source of stress and a crucial modifier of stress effect during the stress process (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model provides considerable theoretical value when examining the external stressors that influence mental health outcomes among marginalized groups (Borgogna et al., 2019; Brooks, 1981; Meyer 2003).

Process of Minority Stress for Nonheterosexuality

The minority stress model provides a theoretical framework useful for investigating the association between minoritized identities (e.g., LGBTQIA+) and the high prevalence of mental health symptoms (Meyer, 2015; Meyer & Frost, 2013; Testa et al., 2015). Anti-gay discrimination experienced by LGB individuals predicted a higher likelihood of mental health symptoms (Herek, et al., 1999). Social and cultural stigma against non-heterosexual individuals can lead to experiences of alienation, lack of integration with the community, and challenges with self-acceptance (Grossman & Kener, 1998; Meyer, 2003; Stokes & Peterson, 1998). Such stress processes are linked to mental health symptoms, such as depressive symptoms, substance use, and suicide ideations (Meyer, 1995; Waldo, 1999). In a meta-analysis of 179 effect sizes from 32 research reports on the association between minority stress and relationship well-being, Cao et al., (2017) found that minority stress was significantly and negatively associated with relationship well-being, although the effect size was small - the more stress from experiences of

being minoritized, the lower a person's report of relationship quality. In addition, internalized homophobia moderately predicted low levels of relationship well-being. However, sexual orientation visibility and heterosexist discrimination did not predict relationship quality in the same way. Such findings suggest that the proximal factors in the minority stress process have a stronger influence on same-sex relationship well-being (Meyer, 2003).

Historically, nonheterosexual individuals were subject to human rights abuses and mistreatment, including denial of human dignity, anti-gay violence, and even murder, many of which were sanctioned by governments through discriminatory laws and religious organizations through religious traditions (Meyer, 2003). In the U.S., for example, sexual orientation was not a protected class in the original Title VII of Civil Rights until President Obama signed an executive order in 2014 adding sexual orientation and gender identity protections for all federal employees (McAnallen, 2015). The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Bostock v. Clayton County* protected nonheterosexual and transgender individuals against employment discrimination (e.g., hiring, promotion, training), as cited that prohibition against sex discrimination in Title VII included employment discrimination against one's sexual orientation or transgender status (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2021). However, Title VII may not apply to employers with fewer than 15 employees, Tribal nations, independent contractors, religious organizations, and religious educational institutions (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2021). The legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S. in 2015 provided non-heterosexual individuals with equal marriage rights and contributed to a steeper decline of both implicit and explicitly anti-gay biases across the country (Ofosu et al., 2019). While the findings suggest that legislation can shape public attitudes, the authors also cautioned that attitudes and legislation could be mutually reinforcing, meaning that attitudes

towards gay men and lesbians can be momentum for state and federal legalization (Ofosu et al., 2019). Given the rise of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation passing in some states in the U.S. (e.g., Florida, Texas, Virginia), continuous effort to advocate for LGBTQIA+ equality is still warranted.

Process of Minority Stress for Polyamory

Similar to the minority stress process experienced by non-heterosexual individuals due to their minoritized sexual orientation, CNM individuals can also face bias, stigma, and discrimination based on their identity and behavior. Researchers argued the theoretical value of the minority stress model in conceptualizing the lived experiences of CNM practitioners, as they hold a marginalized status within mainstream Western society (Hutzler et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2015; Moors et al., 2013; Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Weitzman et al., 2009). As aforementioned, CNM individuals may face a lack of legal and social recognition, social stigma (e.g., promiscuity, infidelity), and discriminatory laws and policies (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2005; Morrison et al., 2013; Sheff, 2011; Weitzman et al., 2009; Wright, 2014). Such external stressors can be internalized by CNM individuals, which leads to feelings of guilt and shame for non-monogamous feelings and desires (Weitzman et al., 2009). In addition, additive stressors unique to CNM, such as communication about relationship rules or contracts and the maintenance of attachment as well as commitment across multiple relationships, can also contribute to negative mental health and relationship well-being for CNM individuals (Deri, 2015; Weitzman et al., 2009).

The minority stress theory provides valuable conceptual insights into the minority stress process of polyamory. However, only limited empirical research focuses on examining the impact of external and internal stressors on the personal and relational well-being of CNM

individuals. Borgogna et al. (2021) suggested higher levels of depression and anxiety among CNM individuals regardless of their relationship status compared to non-CNM individuals. Their finding suggests notable mental health discrepancies among CNM individuals compared to those who did not engage in CNM relationships. In addition, CNM individuals were more likely to self-identify as gender/sexual minorities, and experience higher rates of emotional/physical abuse and sexual assault in the past 12 months compared to non-CNM individuals (Borgogna et al., 2021). It should be noted that the mechanisms behind the high reports of intimate partner abuse (IPV) and sexual assault remain unknown and need further research. One possible explanation is that CNM individuals may have more knowledge related to IPV and consent, given their open and continuous communication on relationship rules and contracts (Borgogna et al., 2021). Such knowledge may benefit them with regard to reporting experiences of IPV and sexual assault. However, the study provided valuable insight into CNM being an additive stressor to mental health concerns (i.e., depression), as CNM individuals report higher rates of depression compared to those who were dating or married/partners, regardless of the participant's racial identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Borgogna et al., 2021). Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) also suggested that CNM-related minority stress can predict an increased level of psychological distress, such as depressive and anxiety symptoms. Such findings are consistent with the minority stress process in which minoritized identities add unique stress and contribute to additive effects on mental health concerns.

One study examined the relationship between internalized negativity toward CNM and relationship quality. Moor et al. (2021) found that individuals engaging in CNM who express negative attitudes toward CNM and personal discomfort with CNM (e.g., wanting to change relationship styles, perceiving CNM as unnatural) also report lower levels of relationship

satisfaction and satisfaction with romantic and sexual relationship agreements with their partners. In addition, CNM negativity significantly predicted lower commitment to the primary partner (Moors et al., 2021). The findings highlight how proximal factors (i.e., internalized oppressive ideologies) can contribute to minority stress, which negatively affects CNM relationships.

Minority Stress for Nonheterosexuality and Polyamory

Although sexual orientation and relationship orientation are two distinct concepts, many argue that nonheterosexual individuals (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual) and people who engage in CNM (e.g., polyamory, open relationships) share some parallel minority stress process (Borgogna et al. 2021; Moors et al., 2021; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Under the minority stress framework, both groups can face stress due to stigma, discrimination, and internalized negativity, although the sources of such are distinct since they challenge different underlying socio-cultural norms, namely heteronormativity and mononormativity, respectively (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). For example, concealment of identity/relationship, expectations of family and social rejection, and experiences of political and social discrimination are common among both non-heterosexual individuals and CNM practitioners, which may lead to internalization of homophobia and mononormativity and negative consequences (e.g., lower well-being, lower relationship satisfaction, and mental health symptoms; Borgogna et al., 2021; Deri, 2015; Meyer, 2003; Moors et al., 2021; Weitzman et al., 2009; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). In addition, non-heterosexual individuals who endorse and engage in monogamous relationships and CNM practitioners may hold stigmas against each other. For example, CNM practitioners may see LGB individuals entering marriages are upholding and assimilating to hetero-monogamist norms, which hinders the progress of sexual liberation (Aviram & Leachman, 2015; Marsh, 2021), whereas LGB individuals may believe that CNM can threaten the efforts LGBTQIA+

have made to gain legal, social, and cultural legitimacy and that CNM can increase social, sexual, and ethical risk-taking (Cardoso, 2014; Mogilski et al., 2020).

Furthermore, other aspects of identity can also affect the minority stress processes nonheterosexual and CNM individuals experience. For example, it is theorized that sexual double standards may contribute to higher levels of perceived anti-CNM stigma among women (Rubin et al., 2014). In addition, the narrow sample size of White and middle-class participants in CNM research may also contribute to the absence of individuals with other identities in the CNM community (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). The lack of representation of diverse racial, gender, religious, and social class identities can lead to the perpetuation of the popular belief that only White and middle-class individuals practice CNM and to the further marginalization of those who may not fit the stereotype (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). In fact. White polyamorous communities frequently fetishize, exoticize, and exclude CNM individuals of color (Patterson, 2018; Shef & Hammers, 2011). Racism and sexism also exist in the queer community, which contribute to the exclusion, microaggression, and stigmatization experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals who do not fit the Eurocentric ideologies of queer identity (Le & Kler, 2022; Patel, 2019). For example, the internalization of negative views about Asian men's attractiveness affects the perceived desirability of queer Asian men (Le & Kler, 2022). Therefore, nonheterosexual individuals and CNM practitioners may face stigma and discrimination from different but paralleling directions based on their other aspects of identity within their own community.

The intersecting aspects of identity further complicate the minority stress process for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual CNM practitioners. For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage can promote social acceptance and cultural legitimation of nonheterosexuality.

However, distancing from CNM including polyamory and demanding poly-marriage equality can lead to the assumption that all non-heterosexual individuals are monogamous and the marginalization of alternative relationship formations within the LGBTQIA+ community (Klesse, 2018; Zimmerman, 2012). Therefore, a new hierarchy was established within the community, where the "good gays" are looking for monogamy and marriage whereas the "bad queers" reject assimilating to monogamism (Eades & Vivienne, 2018). In addition, the stigmatization of bisexuality and pansexuality can be exacerbated when one bisexual or pansexual individual engages in CNM (Witherspoon et al., 2019). This is consistent with the prejudice against bisexual and pansexual people by heterosexual and lesbian/gay people due to promiscuity stereotypes and illegitimacy of sexual identity (Barker et al., 2012; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Klesse, 2005).

Furthermore, race, gender, and socioeconomic status can add intersectional bias and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Mereish et al., 2022; Shangani et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2020). Specifically, individuals with both sexual and gender minority identities are susceptible to greater exposure to minority stress, which resulted in higher risks of worsening mental health (Williams et al. 2020). Sexually minoritized adults with an African American or Latinx identity reported greater anticipated stigma compared to their White counterparts, and African American sexual minority with a lower socioeconomic status experienced a higher degree of enacted stigma (Shangani et al., 2019). Until recently, one study has examined the impact of intersectional minority stressors on depressive symptoms among sexual and gender minority adolescents of color (i.e., Mereish et al., 2022). The findings suggest that intersectional minority stressors indirectly influence depressive symptoms through lower self-esteem and a sense of mastery of identities among sexual and gender minority adolescents of color (Mereish et

al., 2022). Therefore, it is possible that individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience complicated intersectional minority stressors as they maintain their CNM relationships.

Resilience and Minority Stress

Resilience is defined as the quality of surviving and thriving in adversity (Meyer, 2015). Therefore, some suggest the use of the term resilience should only be used "when referring to the process or phenomenon of competence despite adversity" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 554). Resilience is an essential part of the minority stress process given that it only has meaning when one encounters stress (Meyer, 2015). On the one hand, distal stressors refer to external forces, such as day-to-day discrimination, microaggressions, and chronic strains, which may create a diversity of anti-CNM stigma leading to intensifying the negative effects on the lives of many CNM practitioners (Meyer et al., 2015; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Shef, 2014). On the other hand, the proximal stressors, which focus on stressors a person experiences through internal cognitive processing of lived experiences, implicate that the level of proximal stress may be linked to one's coping and resilience (Meyer, 2015). Hypothetically, in the face of marginalization based on sexual orientation (homo/bi phobia) and relationship structure (anti-poly/CNM), one may develop a greater capacity to cope with experienced minority stress (Cyrus, 2017). For example, individuals in polyamorous relationships may utilize and develop resiliencies o mitigate the impact of the negative effects of stigma and discrimination (Sheff, 2016). Some scholars also argued that layers of cultural identity might be sources of resilience against the negative effects of stigma-related stressors (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Figueroa & Zoccola, 2015; Hill & Gunderson, 2015). In addition, commitment and engagement to one's community can also be a

source of social support that buffers the effects of stressful life experiences (Hobfoll et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003).

It is important to note the distinction between individual- and community-based resilience (Meyer, 2015). Individual-based resilience can be constructed from the concept of mastery (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), personal qualities (e.g., powerlessness, helplessness, locus of control; Rotter, 1966; Seeman, 1959; Seligman, 1975), personality traits, and worldview (Antonovsky, 1979). Existing literature suggests no differences in relationship quality between nonheterosexual individuals and their heterosexual counterparts and between CNM practitioners and monogamist couples (Bricker & Horne, 2007; Hoff et al., 2010; LaSala, 2004; Parsons et al., 2012; Séguin et al., 2017; Stults, 2019; Whitton et al., 2015). It is hypothesized that nonheterosexual or CNM individuals may have developed resilience to withstand and even thrive in the face of social stigma and discrimination (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). For example, CNM participants may focus on developing personal and relationship skills (e.g., self-reflection, emotion regulation, and open communication) to cope with the challenges of creating and sustaining multiple romantic/social/sexual relationships (Labriola, 2010; Sheff, 2014). However, with numerous hypotheses so far on the buffering effect of resilience on the harmful anti-CNM effects, only one study investigated resilience factors that are against the negative effects of anti-CNM stigma and discrimination (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Specifically, mindfulness can reduce psychological distress and minority stress through both direct and moderating effects. In addition, cognitive flexibility positively predicts psychological stress and strengthens the influence of minority stress on psychological stress, suggesting that greater cognitive flexibility may lead to increased anticipation of stigma and discrimination which in turn exacerbates stress (Brewster et al., 2013; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). However, the level of psychological

stress is not associated with either a positive CNM identity or a connection to the CNM community (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). These findings seem inconsistent with the minority stress theory that identity can be a source of strength to attenuate stress and that community can be a source of social support to overcome life challenges and obstacles (Hobfoll et al, 2002; Meyer, 2015). Therefore, further research needs to be conducted to explore the effect of these resilience factors against anti-CNM stigma and discrimination.

Individual-based resilience bears an important value in lessening psychological stress and strengthening relationship well-being for minoritized individuals (e.g., nonheterosexual, polyamory). However, Meyer (2015) cautioned limitations to overly focusing on individual-based resilience, suggesting that it can potentially perpetuate meritocracy and individualism, and thus lead to an attitude of blaming the victim (Meyer, 2015). As minority stress theorizes the negative influence of social stigma, prejudice, and discrimination on the health of minoritized populations, attention should be given to correcting the "pathogenic social environment" (Meyer, 2015, p.51). Community-based resilience can be understood as the capacity that communities have to further help individuals to develop and maintain well-being (Hall & Zautra, 2010). For example, tangible and intangible resources within a community (e.g., role models, community centers, support groups, affirmative care clinics) can provide opportunities for social and legal support and for the reframing of social values and norms (Crocker & Major, 1989; Meyer, 2015). Community-based support can also mobilize resources and advocate for equality (e.g., same-sex marriage) to achieve changes on the national level (Meyer, 2015). Therefore, in theory, community-based resilience can help minoritized individuals to mitigate minority stress in different contexts and at different levels.

It is important to note, however, that community resilience is not equitably accessible to all members of the community. For example, Meyer (2015) suggested that social identity (e.g, non-heterosexuality, polyamory) and affiliation with the related community can influence the extent of community resources to which one member can access. Identification with and engagement in a community can be crucial steps to benefiting from community resilience. At the same time, structural inequalities within one community (e.g., racism, bi/pan phobia, sexism) can limit certain members in identifying and affiliating with the community and deny their access to community resilience. To better understand the resilience of nonheterosexual individuals in polyamorous relationships, Pallotta-Chiarolli and Pease (2014) proposed the term "situated agency" (p.35) to scrutinize the intersection of political, economic, social, cultural religious, and health systems and their restraints on individuals' effort to maintain wellbeing. Therefore, it is important to consider sociodemographic factors, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class, when conceptualizing community resilience.

Summary

With a growing research interest in CNM, limited studies focused on the relationship quality of CNM practitioners and the factors that influence relationship quality. It is suggested that CNM practitioners have the same level of, or even higher, relationship satisfaction, compared to monogamous couples (Balzarini et al., 2019; Séguin et al., 2017). As CNM individuals face unique stressors within their relationship (e.g., negotiation on relationship contract/rules, maintaining multiple romantic relationships) and from society (e.g., anti-CNM stigma, discrimination), exploring how CNM practitioners maintain their relationship quality under a minority stress framework can provide valuable insights into the improvement of the functioning and wellbeing of CNM relationships and those within. Although prior research

quantitatively examined relationship quality across different types of CNM (e.g., Moor et al., 2021; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021), the current study aims to deepen our understanding of the factors that influence CNM relationship quality through qualitative inquiry. In the following chapter, I will discuss in detail the methods used for the current study, including research design, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter Three: Methods

The purpose of the current study is to explore the polyamorous relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals (LGBP). Under the framework of minority stress theory, I will use interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of LGBP individuals with regard to the meaning ascribed to the establishment and maintenance of their multi-partnered relationships. For this chapter, I will discuss my positionality, including how my intersecting identities and related experiences influence the design of the current study and how I plan to minimize such influence during the research process. Then I will discuss the research methods, including a brief review of minority stress theory as the theoretical framework, proceeded by the history and relevance of IPA, research procedure, data collection as well as analysis, efforts to ensure the validity and quality of research, and ethical considerations.

Positionality

As a form of establishing trust and researcher reflexivity in qualitative inquiry, it is critical for researchers to situate their experience and identity with the constructs and population to be researched (Holmes, 2020). Therefore, I provide a statement of positionality that includes my personal and professional connections to the study of LGBP polyamory. My positionality includes professional experiences in the classroom and in the conduct of relationship research, as well as, personal experiences in my family of origin, current relationship, and sense of self.

To begin, I co-instructed a sexuality counseling class with primarily couple and family counseling masters students, which kindled my research interest in the relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamory. With existing stigmas and biases against consensual non-monogamy in society, pop culture, and the field of relationship

counseling (as outlined in Chapter Two), limited empirical evidence indicating high levels of relationship quality among CNM practitioners led me to question the socially and culturally accepted perceptions of CNM. I grew an intellectual curiosity to investigate the lived experiences of individuals in CNM relationships, which may add more knowledge of CNM relationships to counselors and the public. After reviewing the current literature on CNM, I identified the research gap through in-depth explorations of lived experiences in polyamorous relationships. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I designed my dissertation to focus on exploring the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals and the meaning-making attached to relationship maintenance experiences. Throughout the study, my own intersectional identities may play a complex role that creates both barriers and connections to understanding the participants' lived experiences, which can also potentially influence how I analyze and interpret the data.

I was born in China and was raised in a traditional Chinese family that values monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. However, witnessing several family members in my extended family engage in non-consensual monogamy even when they were in an assumably monogamous relationship has influenced my values on intimate relationships. For example, I may still have implicit biases against extradyadic romantic and sexual relationships, even though they may be consensual. Currently, I am in a committed monogamous relationship, which can also affect how I perceive relationship rules, communication between partners, and emotional as well as sexual intimacy. Therefore, as an outsider to the poly community, I must be aware of my biases and approach participants with respect and affirmation. While not actively disclosing my relationship configuration and status to participants during the research process, I approached such questions with honesty and transparency when asked, followed by restating the

purpose and potential impact of the study. In addition, I face some barriers to understanding the complexity of American culture (e,g., metaphors, slang,) as an international student, although I have lived in the U.S. for four years. However, my identity as a foreign-born citizen also puts me in a privileged position where I can approach participants with cultural curiosity and humility instead of with established perceptions.

Growing up in a working-class family, I have also been conditioned to certain work and life philosophies that may not resonate with my participants born in a family with a higher socio-economic status. For example, the value of personal pursuits over family may contradict my values of prioritizing family needs over my own. Meanwhile, my education in a master's and doctoral program in the U.S. also privileged me with more power as a researcher than the participants, as I will interpret their subjective experiences in polyamory. While my identity as a counselor can help me build a rapport with my participants quickly, I need to be aware of my position as a researcher in the study and avoid providing counseling services.

While I identify as an atheist, my beliefs and values are partially affiliated with Buddhism and Daoism. Therefore, I may not resonate with the oppression and marginalization that LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced based on Western religions, such as Christianity. Although being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, I have the privilege of not being subject to religion-based anti-queer oppression because religious institutions do not hold sociopolitical power in China. Moreover, I hold male privilege and have internalized patriarchy as a cis-gender man, although I firmly stand with feminism and advocate for gender equity. My identity and socialized beliefs and values can influence not only the interview process with participants of other gender identities but also my analysis as interpreting the data. Lastly, as a person with no

known disability, I can be unaware of my ability-based privilege, which influences my perceptions of participants' experiences based on their ability status.

In summary, I am biased because of my experiences, beliefs, and values based on my intersecting identities. During the research process, I used voice memos to constantly check and bracket my assumptions and biases about consensual non-monogamy, including polyamory. I was attuned to the details that my participants shared during the interview to inquire further with humility and curiosity, rather than my assumptions based on my own experiences. My sexual identity as a gay man plays an important role in my decision to design the study under the minority stress framework because it interrogates the systemic oppression that impacts the healthy development of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Meyer, 2003). Utilization of an IPA methodology allows me to explore the in-depth subjective experiences in polyamorous relationships (Smith et al., 2022). In the next sections, I address the theoretical framework briefly and discuss my analytical approach in detail.

Theoretical Framework

The minority stress model examines how social and cultural stressors impact the high prevalence of mental health issues among minoritized communities (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race; Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003). The model posits that an individual with a minoritized identity can be subject to internal and external stressors in addition to normal everyday stressors. According to Meyer (2003), distal minority stressors refer to the susceptibility to prejudiced events, including discrimination and violence, whereas proximal stressors refer to the expectation of rejection and discrimination, concealment of identity in an effort to avoid discrimination, and internalization of oppressive ideologies. The additive effect of minority stressors can contribute to the discrepancies in mental health outcomes that lead to

disproportionate levels of mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) among minoritized individuals (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003). The combination of external and internal stress experienced by individuals with a minoritized status can be detrimental to personal well-being.

In addition, other factors (e.g., salience, valence, and integration with one's other identities) can moderate the effects of minority stressors and the emotional impact of stressors on one's life (Meyer, 2003; Thoits, 2013). For example, these factors can be a source of strength and resilience for individuals of a minoritized status, especially when one develops high levels of self-acceptance, commitment to community engagement to build social support, and coping skills (Branscombe et al., 1999; Meyer. 2003; Meyer, 2015; Miller & Major, 2000). However, resilience building should not depend solely on individuals as it may perpetuate the meritocracy and ignore the systemic oppression that minoritized communities face (Meyer, 2015). Therefore, building community-based resilience, centering resources and support, should also be emphasized to help minoritized individuals to mitigate minority stress in different contexts and at different levels (Crocker & Major, 1989; Meyer, 2015). In the past few decades, the minority stress theory has provided considerable theoretical value when examining the external stressors that influence mental health outcomes among marginalized groups (Borgogna et al., 2019; Brook, 1981; Meyer 2003). It posits that a person's minority status can be both a source of stress and a crucial modifier of stress effect during the stress process.

Rationale for Utilizing Minority Stress Model

Individuals who identify with nonheterosexuality and polyamory face stigmatization and discrimination in Western society due to the violation of heteronormativity and mononormativity, respectively (Meyer, 2003; Moors et al., 2013). Therefore, individuals who are nonheterosexual and/or polyamorous experience minority stress that can influence the healthy development of self

and relationships (Moors et al., 2021; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). For example, individuals experiencing high levels of minority stress are more likely to report mental health symptoms, such as depressive symptoms, substance use, and suicide ideations, and poor relationship quality as well as well-being (Cao et al., 2017; Meyer, 1995; Waldo, 1999). While the legalization of same-sex marriage on the federal level contributed to a steeper decline of both implicit and explicitly anti-gay biases across the country (Ofosu et al., 2019), nonheterosexual individuals still face stigmas and discrimination at institutional (e.g., independent contractors, religious organizations, and religious educational institutions) and state levels (e.g., Florida, Tennessee). Meanwhile, CNM practitioners, including individuals in polyamorous relationships face a lack of legal and social recognition, social stigma (e.g., promiscuity, infidelity), and discriminatory laws and policies (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2005; Morrison et al., 2013; Sheff, 2011; Weitzman et al., 2009; Wright, 2014). It is theorized that such external stressors may lead to feelings of guilt and shame for non-monogamous feelings and desires (Weitzman et al., 2009). In addition, communication and navigation related to relationship rules or contracts as well as maintenance of attachment and commitment to multiple partners, a unique additive stressor to individuals in polyamorous relationships, may also contribute to negative mental health and relationship quality (Deri, 2015; Weitzman et al., 2009). In fact, CNM-related minority stress predicts higher levels of depression and anxiety among CNM practitioners compared to their non-CMN counterparts (Borgogna et al., 2021; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Moors et al. (2021) also suggested that internalized anti-CNM stigma can contribute to minority stress, which negatively influences relationship satisfaction and satisfaction with romantic and sexual relationship agreements with their partners. Based on the conceptual understanding and empirical evidence, the minority stress model aligns with the research goals to answer the research questions.

Specifically, the current study aims to answer the following four research questions:

RQ1: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals establish their polyamorous relationships?

RQ2: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous relationships perceive their sexual/relationship orientations influencing their relationship experiences?

RQ3: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous perceive their sense of identity influencing their relationship experiences?

RQ4: How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals respond to personal, relational, and societal challenges in order to maintain their relationship?

It is established that heteronormativity and mononormativity influence individuals' personal and relationship well-being (Cao et al., 2017; Meyer, 1995; Moors et al., 2021; Waldo, 1999; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Therefore, utilizing the minority stress model as the theoretical framework supports the focus of the study on investigating how external and internal stressors influence polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals and how they respond to those stressors while maintaining their relationships. The minority stress model grounds the interview protocol and analytical approach to pay close attention to the stress created due to participants' minoritized statuses and to the resilience building to cope with the stress. Moreover, the minority stress model examines human experiences from a social constructivist perspective, which is in line with the IPA used for research design and data analysis.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Researchers utilize IPA to investigate personal lived experiences and the sense-making attached to such experiences (Smith et al., 2022). In the past 27 years since Jonathan Smith

argued its scholarly importance in capturing the experiential and qualitative in 1996, IPA has been used in research in health psychology, counseling, and social as well as educational psychology (Smith et al., 2022). According to Smith et al. (2022), IPA is a qualitative approach rooted in three theoretical axes, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that aims to investigate the experiences of particular importance that an individual has lived. Hermeneutics refers to the endeavor of researchers to interpret the senses individuals make out of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Furthermore, the idiographic aspect of IPA lies in its commitment to the examination of detailed experiences of each case before moving to more general claims (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, IPA requires researchers to be attuned to the personal account of each participant, interpret the meaning-making based on the participant's reflections of their experiences, be aware of the influence of personal biases on the research process and data analysis, and gain a deeper understanding of each participant's experiences that contribute to the group themes. In the next few sections, I will discuss in detail each theoretical tenet of IPA.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, originally developed by Husserl, concerns the meaning humans make out of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The philosophical component of phenomenology provides researchers with a source of perspectives on how to investigate and understand lived experiences. Although not directly related to IPA, many leading phenomenological philosophers, including Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, developed aspects of phenomenology that are relevant to IPA research (Smith et al., 2022). For example, Husserl suggested that phenomenology aims to carefully examine human experiences and identify the essential qualities of those experiences (Smith et al., 2022). In order to reach the

aims, one needs to adopt a “phenomenological attitude” that moves oneself away from the objects in the world to one’s perception of the objects (Smith et al., 2022, p.8). Husserl also argued that the focus of a phenomenological inquiry is on what is experienced in the consciousness of an individual, which indicates that phenomenology concerns more about the sense-making of an experience, rather than the experience itself (Smith et al., 2022). Bracketing, a term coined by Husserl, refers to the effort to put one’s pre-knowledge aside in order to identify the essence of the experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Such a phenomenological method helps IPA researchers silence their biases, values, and perceptions in order to enter the world of participants and try to understand their experiences on their own terms (Smith et al., 2022). According to Husserl (1927), bracketing can be achieved through a process of reductions, which involves constantly checking one’s perceptions and consciousness and reducing the noise in the phenomenological examination. While Husserl’s work was primarily conceptual and lacked empirical evidence, it has helped IPA focus on the process of reflection on human experiences.

Heidegger’s work diverged from Husserl’s with regard to his focus on the interpretative stance, as meaning is fundamental to understanding the conscious processing of the significance of one’s world (Smith et al., 2022). The interpretative stance is closely tied to hermeneutics since according to Heidegger, a phenomenon can not be understood without interpretation. Interpretation is central to IPA as researchers attempt to interpret participants’ meaning-making activities as the center of inquiry. In addition, Heidegger’s central interest was the conceptual basis of existence, such can be objects, language, and relationships (Smith et al., 2022). Heidegger was also concerned with intersubjectivity, which refers to the relational and intersecting nature of our involvement in the world (Smith et al., 2022). Such a phenomenological concept influences IPA with regard to the view of human existence as

constantly in-relation-to somatic and semantic objects in the world (Smith et al., 2022). Carrying on the intellectual legacy of Husserl and Heidegger, Merlau-Ponty (1962) developed phenomenology in a different direction by emphasizing the embodied nature of human relationships to the world (a situated perspective) that leads to individuals' unique perspectives on the world. The implication of contextualization is crucial for IPA since the lived experiences of researchers are a significant part of understanding the perspectives of participants. In addition, IPA researchers need to analyze the meaning of participants' experiences, even though they cannot be completely captured or reflected (Smith et al., 2022). Both Heidegger and Merlau-Ponty emphasized the importance of interpretation in phenomenological inquiry, which is another theoretical underpinning of IPA: Hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics theorizes methods for interpretations, which is the sense-making process (Smith et al., 2022). Hermeneutics was initially developed to provide foundations for interpreting biblical texts but later was used for a wider range of texts, including historical and literary texts (Smith et al., 2022). Notably, Heidegger (see the previous section), Schleiermacher, and Gadamer contributed to the hermeneutic component of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Schleiermacher invoked the terms grammatical interpretation (the objective meaning of texts) and psychological interpretation (the author's individuality; Smith et al., 2022). Both terms are linked to IPA since the researchers attempt to not only report the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences but also offer meaningful insights that are beyond the participants' claims (Smith et al., 2022). One caveat is that IPA researchers should refrain from viewing their analyses of participants' experiences as being more true than those of the participants (Smith et al., 2022). Gadamer's hermeneutics primarily focused on historical documents and literary works (Smith et

al., 2022). The hermeneutic phenomenologist argued that one could only know their preconceptions until they start the interpretation, which points out the dynamic process of IPA analysis of data (Smith et al., 2009). While IPA researchers may acknowledge some preconceptions and their influence before entering and interpreting participants' experiences, many may emerge during the process (Smith et al., 2022). As researchers' preconceptions will be inevitably present, engaging the dialogue about the position between researchers themselves and the texts is crucial to avoid those preconceptions hindering the interpretation process (Smith et al., 2022). Gadamer's point echoes the importance of bracketing as IPA researchers need to constantly check their beliefs, values, and perceptions of the phenomenon of inquiry in order to do justice to the accurate interpretation of participants' experiences.

The hermeneutic circle, which describes the dynamic and non-linear thinking process of interpretation, provides a useful method for IPA research (Smith et al., 2022). Essentially, it focuses on the "dynamic relationship between the part and the whole" such as between a word and a sentence within which the word is used, a single extract and a complete test, and the interview and the research project (Smith et al., 2022). IPA researchers engage in the hermeneutic circle by analyzing the data through different perspectives and understanding the meaning at different levels (Smith et al., 2022). Hermeneutics is central to IPA since it is an interpretative phenomenological approach to interpreting the interpretations of participants' lived experiences.

Idiography

The final theoretical component of IPA is idiography, which focuses on the particular (Smith et al., 2022). Specifically, IPA is committed to two levels of particular, namely in-depth analysis of the particular and a deep understanding of how a particular phenomenon is

interpreted by particular individuals in a particular context (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, rather than concerning generalizing rules of human behaviors, IPA locates such generalizations in the particular and develops them with more caution (Smith et al., 2022). The idiographic tenet of IPA requires researchers to recruit a small sample of participants with a purposive and situated method (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) caution that a large sample can lead IPA researchers to focus on the whole and generalization of findings while neglecting the details of individual experiences. As such, IPA prioritizes the detailed analysis of particular cases of lived experiences of individuals, which adds valuable insights into the phenomenon being studied.

Rationale for Utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The three theoretical components of IPA, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, aligns with the research purpose and research questions. While a quantitative method may help examine different aspects of polyamorous relationship experiences among LGBP individuals, phenomenology supports exploring the experiences that are significant to LGBP individuals maintaining their polyamorous relationships. Such nuances in relationship maintenance experiences have important implications for counselors to approach LGBP clients in polyamorous relationships with cultural humility after understanding the diversity in polyamorous relationship experiences. In addition, hermeneutics allows answering the questions related to the meaning that LGBP individuals make out of their polyamorous relationship maintenance experiences. Hermeneutical phenomenology helps me pay close attention to how participants understand the events, incidents, resources, and people that happened in their lives and allows me to add my interpretations that may exceed their claims during the interview. Finally, since polyamory is not a normative relationship experience in Western society, attending to the details of individual particular experiences is rational. Taking an idiographic stance, I step

away from pre-established knowledge of polyamorous relationship quality to focus on the individual's subjective account of their unique experiences.

Research Procedure

Upon the passing of the dissertation prospectus hearing and obtaining approval from the VCU Institutional Review Board (HM20025919), the research recruitment information was sent to LGBTQIA+ and polyamory organizations (e.g., SAIGE, Polyamory Virginia) to inquire about interest in sharing research information (i.e., research flyer) among their members. Individuals who had met inclusion criteria and expressed interest in participating in the study based on the recruitment email and flyer were sent the participant information sheet (see Appendix D) to review the process of research participation and ask questions or concerns. After participants confirmed that they had fully understood the research study and their involvement via email, semi-structured interviews were scheduled and conducted remotely via Zoom. Each participant was offered a $15 Amazon gift card after the interview as compensation for their time. The interview was audio recorded for verbatim transcription, which was then sent back to participants for reviewing and editing. Upon receiving the verified transcript, I conducted the coding and theme categorization for each individual case and then collaborated with the research team consisting of two then-doctoral students and the dissertation committee chair in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Virginia Commonwealth University on identifying group experiential themes. In addition, the themes and commonalities were sent back to participants for member checking before the completion of data analysis.

Recruitment

Convenience sampling was utilized for participant recruitment, including contacting LGBTQIA+ and polyamory organizations, social media, and word of mouth. Specifically, the

research participation request email (see Appendix A) and research flyer (see Appendix B) were sent to LGBTQIA+ and polyamory organizations (e.g., SAIGE, Virginia Polyamory) to inquire about their interest in sharing the research information among members. One request email was sent to each organization, which had full autonomy to decide whether they would assist in research recruitment. The organizations that supported research recruitment shared research information on their official website, social media platforms, and/or group chats. In addition, snowball sampling was used as the other primary recruitment method. Specifically, participants who completed the interview had the autonomy to share research information with individuals who might be interested in or benefit from participating in the study. In order to avoid potential coercion to individuals with whom I socialize to participate, sharing of study information on my personal social media was not used as a recruitment method. All recruitment methods are designed to recruit diverse populations within the LGBP polyamory community with careful ethical consideration.

Research Participants

The current study attempted to recruit 10-15 participants. The number of participants was slightly beyond the recommended number of participants (n<10) by Smith et al. (2022). The authors suggested approximately six to 10 interviews for professional doctorates as such a number of interviews can yield rich data for analysis. For example, Farmer and Byrd (2015) interviewed 10 participants to explore genderism and gender binarism within the LGBTQIA+ community. Nevertheless, the rationale for recruiting 10-15 participants in the current study was to include diverse perspectives on polyamorous relationship experiences based on intersectionality. Such rationale was also supported by existing literature (e.g., MacLeod et al., 2017; Petalas et al., 2015).

Regardless, IPA aims to explore the subjective experiences of a phenomenon and the meaning attached to it (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, the goal of the current study is to investigate the meaning of LGBP individuals with regard to their polyamorous relationship maintenance experiences for theoretical transferability rather than to generalize knowledge inferred from findings based on a large sample. Moreover, IPA values quality over quantity and requires time, reflection, and dialogue throughout the research process (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, with the timeframe of the study in mind, a number of 10-15 participants was rational for a high degree of commitment to the recruitment, interview, transcription, and data analysis. Lastly, the research population is LGBP individuals in polyamorous relationships, who are a small population (the estimated percentage of current CNM practitioners in the U.S. is about 4%; Haupert et al., 2017) and often conceal their sexual, affectional, and/or relationship orientations due to fear of stigmatization and discrimination (Conley et al., 2013a). It will be challenging and time-consuming to recruit a large number of participants for qualitative interviews. In sum, the number of 10-15 participants was determined based on the nature of IPA, the degree of commitment to analysis, and the complex phenomenon of the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals.

In order to participate, Individuals needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) be at or above the age of 18 at the time of participating in the study, (2) self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or pansexual, (3) be in a polyamorous relationship, (4) be able to complete the interview in the English language, and (5) live in the U.S. at the time of participating in the study. Individuals who failed to meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. The inclusion criteria were crucial to answer the research questions that aim to explore the experiences of and meaning ascribed to the maintenance of multi-partnered relationships. The

decision to limit the research focus on the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals living in the U.S. aligned with the suggestion from Smith et al. (2022) that IPA needs a certain degree of homogeneity in the population of research (e.g., sexual/affectional orientation, relationship status, country of residence). However, Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010; 2020) also hypothesized that the narrow sample size of White and middle-class participants in CNM research might contribute to the absence of individuals with other identities in the CNM community (e.g., race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status), which further marginalization of those who may not fit the stereotype. Therefore, I acknowledged that individual experiences could vary depending on not only their intersecting identities but also the social, political, and cultural climate of the geographic location in which a participant resided in the U.S. As IPA also aims to analyze the convergence and divergence within the data to examine variability within the population of research (Smith et al., 2022), I made efforts to achieve diversity in the population of research so that participants can share their diverse experiences in maintaining their polyamorous relationships.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

To collect data, a total number of 17 semi-structured virtual interviews for 15 participants were conducted via Zoom with all participants. Specifically, 13 participants completed the interview in a single setting, and two participants completed the interview in two settings. One participant was excluded from the study after the interview due to questions about the validity and reliability of what had been shared during the interview. Therefore, the final number of participants included in the study and data analysis was 14. The time of the interviews for each participant ranged from 62 to 133 minutes. One participant also provided additional information

via email after completing the interview, which was included in the data for later analysis. Virtual interviews were selected in order to reach participants residing in other states in the U.S. and for safety and privacy considerations. A VCU-affiliated Zoom account is considered ethically acceptable to complete interviews and collect data by the VCU Institutional Review Board. All interviews were both audio and video recorded, which is a default recording method by Zoom. Video recordings were deleted immediately after the interview, and only audio files were stored securely for transcription.

The interview process followed the protocol consisting of a preparation script, interview questions, demographic questions, and an ending script (see Appendix C for interview protocol). The preparation script is to ensure that participants fully understand the interview process as well as the participant information sheet and confirm their willingness to proceed with the interview. The interview started once the participant consented to be recorded, during which a total of 10 interview questions were asked to explore the meaning of lived experiences in establishing and maintaining multi-partnered relationships.

Specifically, To answer research question one “How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals establish their polyamorous relationships,” the following three questions were asked, “Could you describe your journey to enter polyamory?” “What communications did you have with your partner(s) when entering polyamory?” “What suggestions do you have for folks who are considering polyamory?” In addition, questions two “How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous relationships perceive their sexual/relationship orientations influencing their relationship experiences?” and question three “How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in polyamorous perceive their sense of identity influencing their relationship experiences?” are interconnected as both questions aim

to explore how participants' sense of intersecting identities influence their perceptions of self and relationship experiences. Therefore, the following four interview questions were asked during the interview to answer both questions: "Could you describe your current relationship structures?" "In what areas are you satisfied in your relationships?" "What other experiences related to your sexual orientation and polyamory have influenced the way you see yourself?" "How do you see those experiences influence your relationships with multiple partners?" Lastly, to explore the question of "How lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals respond to personal, relational, and societal challenges in order to maintain their relationship," the following three interview questions were asked, "What challenges do you face maintaining your relationships with multiple partners?" "How do you address the challenges as you maintain your relationships with multiple partners?" "Could you share your coming-out journey?"

In addition, prompts and questions on the spot were utilized following IPA interview guidelines by Smith et al. (2022) based on the lived experiences shared by each participant. This approach was in line with the goal of my study using IPA to inquire about the subjective experience of participants in their polyamorous relationships at an individual level. Utilizing prompts and questions on the spot also created spaces and opportunities for each participant to share the deeper and unique meaning of their polyamorous experiences given the diversity in polyamorous relationships.

To ensure privacy, participants were advised against mentioning real names during the interview and were able to choose a pseudonym at the end of the interview. Out of 14 participants, 12 chose their own pseudonyms that were used to place their real names if mentioned in interviews, and two participants requested me to assign pseudonyms for them. While the interview was less likely to cause greater than minimal risks to participants, mental

health resources were sent to participants via email upon the completion of the interview to access national mental health hotlines. Each participant was offered a $15 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time upon the completion of the interview, and two participants chose to participate without compensation.

All video recordings were deleted immediately after the interview, and audio recordings were stored on the VCU-affiliated Google Drive account of the dissertation committee chair for verbatim transcription. Out of 16 interview recordings, 12 were transcribed by me, one by the dissertation committee chair, and three were sent to Panda Transcription, a third-party transcriber, for transcription. Transcripts were sent back to all participants for reviewing and editing, and eight participants completed the process and returned the verified and edited transcripts. Data analysis proceeded after the member-checking procedure.

Data Analysis

Microsoft Word and Excel were utilized for data analysis. Specifically, Microsoft Word, a word processor that fits the goal of IPA in the organization of data analysis, was used during the single case coding process of data analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Microsoft Excel, a spreadsheet program, was used to organize Personal Experiential Themes and cross-case data analysis. In the following section, I detail the specific data analysis process that follows the seven steps suggested by Smith et al. (2022).

Step 1: Reading and Reading the Transcripts

Reading and rereading the data is crucial for an immersive experience and active engagement with the original data, which is also the foundation for gaining an understanding of the life stories of the participants (Smith et al., 2022). I listened to the audio recordings regularly while reading the transcript to reflect on the voices of the participants during the interview,

which assisted me with a more comprehensive analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Meanwhile, I recorded voice memos about my recollections of the interviews and my observations of the transcript while reading the transcript to capture the data and track their potential influence on subsequent analyses (Smith et al., 2022). Thoughts and feelings associated with the recollections and observations were also recorded in order to bracket them from biasing my analysis and interpretation of the data. In addition, I regularly discussed with my dissertation committee chair my reflections on the lived experiences of participants to identify my biased and bracket them from the following data analysis procedure. In sum, repeated reading aimed to facilitate the development of the overall interview structure and a deep understanding of how narratives connect sections of an interview together (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 2: Exploratory Noting

The exploratory noting step is similar to a free textual analysis, which allows me to annotate the transcript with an open mind and note anything of interest within it (Smith et al., 2022). This step was completed on Microsoft Word, as Smith et al. (2022) suggested generic world processing applications over specialized coding software. Specifically, I noted the comments of participants that are closely tied to the phenomenon and identified explicit meaning. For example, specific events, persons, and places related to polyamorous experiences (e.g., entering polyamory, relationship with a particular partner, coming-out settings) as well as ascribed meanings were at the center of the account during the exploratory noting process. In addition, I added descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes when necessary (Smith et al., 2022). Descriptive notes were used to focus on the content of what the participants had shared during the interview, which included keywords, phrases, or explanations that the participants used to highlight their thoughts and experiences relevant to their polyamorous relationships (e.g.,

relationship satisfaction, relationship challenges). I also used linguistic notes to explore the specific language participants use, identify the constituents of the participants' world, and induce the meaning of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022). This process involved noting the pauses, silence, tone, repetition, and other functional aspects of language. For example, Cat repeated the word "permissive" during the interview to imply the sense of powerlessness and helplessness due be the public silence over anti-trans legislation across the U.S. Sylvia paused several times when sharing her coming out experiences as polyamorous, which indicated her negative attitudes (e.g., less brave) towards self because of lower levels of poly outness than partners. Furthermore, conceptual noting requires a more interrogative and conceptual level of the data (Smith et al., 2022). Since this is an early stage of data analysis, I approached the data with questions and attempt to reach some tentative answers. To achieve this goal, I shifted my focus to a more abstract level to analyze the participant's understanding of their experiences. For example, I annotated parts of each transcript with questions about what certain languages (e.g., analogy, metaphors) of importance mean to me as well as to the participants. According to Smith et al. (2008), IPA researchers are using themselves as a tool to help make sense of the participants. Therefore, I used my own perception and understanding to identify the meaning of key events and processes for the participants. Lastly, I engaged in an analytical dialogue between my pre-established perceptions of the participants' experiences and my newly emerging understanding of their experiences.

Step 3: Constructing Experiential Statements

Constructing experiential statements is crucial to consolidating and crystalizing the thoughts of the researcher, and the analytical focus is shifted away from the transcripts themselves to the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, I constructed experiential

statements in Microsoft Word for each transcript that were directly related to experiential notes attached to the participant's experiences and the associated meaning-making. In addition, I reorganized the data by breaking up the narrative flow of the interview and fragmenting the participant's experiences in order to interpret the analysis. According to Smith et al. (2022), the experiential statements reflect both the participants' original words as well as their thoughts and interpretations of the researcher. Moreover, experiential statements should be constructed from analytical work rather than reconfiguring the original data (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, I ensured to construct experiential statements that were concise and abstract yet captured and reflected the understanding of participants' experiences.

Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements

Searching for connections across experiential statements involves chattering and clustering statements based on the researcher's analysis of the connections among statements (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, for each participant, I fragmented their experiential statements in Microsoft Word in order to examine possible connections across them in a single case. I also remained open-minded and flexible with clustering the experiential statements, given that they could be connected in different ways. Meanwhile, I referred back to the research questions regularly to ensure the clustering could answer the questions. Multiple attempts were made as I moved around experiential statements to consider the optimal way to demonstrate the mapping of their interconnections. In sum, personal experiential statements were clustered based on their commonalities. It is worth noting that few personal experiential statements were not grouped due to irrelevance to the rest of the themes, which was acceptable according to Smith et al. (2022).

Step 5: Naming Personal Experiential Themes for Consolidation and Organization

According to Smith et al. (2022), this step involves giving a name to each culture of experiential statements, which then becomes the participants' Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). In this step, I created a spreadsheet for each participant in Microsoft Excel that includes the PETs, subthemes, and original experiential statements with corresponding page numbers in the transcript. This supporting information helped me locate the exact place in the transcript that generated the statements and offered keywords from the participant that stimulated the generating process (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 6: Constituting the Individual Analysis of Other Cases

This step involves repeating the aforementioned five steps to conduct the analytical work on the rest of the transcripts (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) suggested treating each transcript on its own terms and as a "complete universe of inquiry" (p.99). Therefore, I cautioned against reproducing ideas from previous analyses, although it was inevitable to identify similar patterns in the latter transcripts and to be influenced by prior analyses. To prevent the reproduction of ideas from happening, I again engaged in the analytical dialogue between my pre-established perceptions of the participants' experiences and my newly emerging understanding of their experiences. The process was repeated until the completion of the last individual transcript. Upon the completion of the first six steps, 14 Excel spreadsheets were created that included the PETs, sub-themes, and original experiential statements of each participant.

Step 7: Develop Group Experiential Themes Across Cases

The construction of group Experiential Themes (GETs) involves a process of identifying the convergencies and divergencies across the PETs generated in Step 5 (Smith et al., 2022). Specifically, after completing the previous six steps individually, I collaborated with the research

team to discuss the connections across all PETs to process the convergences and divergences, provide a name for the group themes, and annotate the PETs to demonstrate the connections. Before developing the GETs, the research team met to process potential biases and prejudices due to positionality and bracket them. In addition, the research team discussed important concepts and terminologies related to IPA (i.e., data analysis process and goals) and polyamory (e.g., relationship hierarchy, metamour, unicorn, open/closed relationship systems). This process aimed to ensure every member of the research team understood the protocol of data analysis and approached data with an unbiased stance.

PETs and sub-themes were printed and cut into pieces so that the team could move them around on the floor for constant comparison and contrasts to determine at which level they fit the emerging GETs (e.g., theme, sub-theme). In addition, we identified the PETs that did not fit the emerging GET to determine if they might fit together for a different GET. After the completion of constructing GETs, I examined how they reflected the participants' experiences and answered the research questions, and sent them to participants for member checking. Following the seven IPA analytical steps suggested by Smith et al. (2022), the research goal is to provide a venue where participants can share stories about the understanding of their polyamorous experiences at a group level while also demonstrating the individual uniqueness reflected in the shared experiences.

Validity and Quality of the Study

Various strategies have been taken to ensure the validity and quality of the current study. Following the interview protocol to approaching the semi-structured interviews with participants, I acknowledged the possibility of reactivity during the data collection process. For example, my presence, including my race, gender, and body language, might have influenced participants'

responses to the interview questions. In addition, reminding participants to only discuss what they feel comfortable with at the beginning of the interview may have influenced participants' ways of answering the interview questions. Furthermore, encouragers such as "um-hmm," "yeah," and "uh-ha" could lead participants to react by either continuing on the topic or changing the topic of the conversation. To address these concerns, I remained transparent with all participants during the data collection process about the purpose of the study, benefits and risks of participation, and my professional background. Using counseling attending skills (i.e., eye contact, encouragers), I managed to create a warm and safe environment in which participants could share their experiences without fear of being judged. During the interviews, I also utilized some counseling micro-skills (i.e. reflection, paraphrasing) to ensure an accurate understanding of participants' experiences and the meaning ascribed to such experiences. As a result, a majority of interviews exceeded the scheduled time, which indicated participants' comfort in discussing their experiences in the interviews.

I recorded voice memos after each interview to reflect on my experiences with the participants, particularly my thoughts and feelings on their lived experiences. In addition, I discussed my reflections during the weekly meeting with my dissertation committee chair throughout the process of data collection and analysis. These strategies served two main purposes. The reflection process helped me recollect specific moments during which I experienced positive and negative thoughts and feelings toward participants' experiences and identify biases and prejudices contributing to them. During the weekly discussion, my dissertation committee chair and I also generated strategies to minimize the influence of my biases and prejudices during the data collection and analysis.

While following the aforementioned seven steps to conduct my data analysis, it is also crucial to ensure the validity and quality of my study throughout the research process. Specifically, as suggested by Smith et al. (2022), I followed the guidelines of Levitt et al. (2018) to maintain the rigor and validity of my research design and practice, including maintaining transparency, contextualizing the participants' world, and maintaining methodological integrity. Specifically, I utilized several methods to maintain transparency throughout the research. I shared the research purpose, research questions, and interview questions with potential participants if requested to ensure each participant entered the interview with a clear understanding of the research purpose and process. Transcripts were sent to participants for reviewing and editing before data analysis. In addition, as suggested by Levitt et al. (2018), I have shared in detail the data collection and data analysis strategies that strictly follow the guideline of the VCU Institutional Review Board. Furthermore, I also discussed in this chapter my positionality, the influence of my intersecting identities on research design and data analysis, and the strategies (i.e., voice memos, regular discussion with my dissertation committee chair) that I used to minimize the influence of my standpoints and positionality on analyzing and interpreting the data.

Since IPA (Smith et al., 2022) focuses on exploring the subjective experiences of a phenomenon and the meaning ascribed to the experiences, it is important that I develop the findings that are bound to the contexts of my research participants (i.e., LGBP polyamorous relationships in the U.S.; Levitt et al., 2018). To achieve this, in addition to giving the context of myself as a researcher and my relationship to polyamory, I discussed the context within which the study topic was construed in my positionality statement. Since it is important to consider the contexts of data sources (Levitt et al., 2018), I limited the population of research participants to

LGBP individuals in polyamorous relationships in the U.S. with the awareness that the influence of sexual orientation and geographic location could influence the individual and shared experiences of participants.

As for maintaining methodological integrity, I have taken the following steps to achieve this goal. I conducted a thorough review of existing literature related to CNM, polyamory, and sexual/affectional orientation in Chapter Two to situate my study and its purpose. In addition, I discussed the inquiry approach and specific procedures that I used to address the purpose of the study. The purpose of the study, research questions, and interview questions were sent to the chair and methodologist of my dissertation committee to ensure trustworthiness. To ensure fidelity to the research participants (Levitt et al., 2018), I discussed how my own perspectives could influence the research process and the steps taken to minimize such influences. Participants with diverse identities and experiences were recruited to increase the variations in the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals. In addition, I improved my groundedness in data by engaging in analytical dialogues and recording voice memos, to ensure my findings are rooted in data (Levitt et al., 2018). To ensure utility in achieving the research goals, I intentionally selected procedures helpful to answer the research questions and address the study's purposes. For example, based on the review of the literature, the minority stress theory (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003) was chosen as the theoretical framework because it addresses the stress and resilience that are relevant to the polyamorous relationships experiences of LGBP individuals in the U.S. where monogamy is naturalized and institutionalized. The choice of IPA (Smith et al., 2022) as the analytical framework was in line with the purpose of the study to explore the subjective experiences of maintaining polyamorous relationships and the meaning made through such lived experiences.

Lastly, I followed the suggestions of Smith et al. (2022) to form a research team consisting of myself, two doctoral students, and my dissertation committee chair in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at VCU as a method of triangulating the analysis of data. While Smith et al. (2022) did not mention finding checking, I used member-checking by sending the GETs to participants to ensure they had captured and reflected the understanding of their lived experiences. With all the procedures I have taken in the research process, I am confident that the research design and methods I utilized were appropriate to answer the research questions and achieve the study's goals.

Ethical Considerations

Maintaining ethical standards is a priority for me personally and professionally. Therefore, I utilized several strategies to ensure the research procedure was conducted ethically. Throughout the research process, I deferred to the expertise of my dissertation committee as they provided feedback on my research design and methodology to the rigor of my research and its positive impact on affirmative counseling approaches to LGBP individuals in polyamorous relationships. I obtained approval from VCU Institutional Review Board for my research and strictly followed its guidelines to safeguard the participants' privacy and minimize potential risks. Specifically, I ensured that the research recruitment methods did not coerce individuals to participate. Interested individuals received the participant information sheet that provided important information related to the study (e.g., the purpose of the study, participant's involvement, participant's rights, potential benefits and risks). Interview scheduling and conducting only happened after receiving confirmation from participants that they had fully understood the participant information sheet and agreed to proceed with participation. During the interview, I respected the rights, beliefs, and values of the participants, asking questions only in a

respectful and culturally sensitive manner. In addition, I also provided mental health resources to participants after the completion of the interview. To ensure the safety of data, interview audio files and anonymized transcripts were stored in the cloud (i.e., the VCU-affiliated Google Drive account of my dissertation committee chair). Lastly, I shared the research findings (i.e., GETs) with my participants. Cognizant of the vulnerability of the research participants in the study, I adhered to these ethical standards throughout the research.

In summary, I utilized IPA through a minority stress lens to explore the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals and the meaning ascribed to these relationship maintenance experiences. The theoretical axes of IPA (i.e., phenomenology, hermeneutics, idiography) grounded the research focus on the particular (a small number of LGBP individuals in polyamorous relationships in the U.S.), phenomenon (relationship quality), and meaning of the phenomenon. As outlined in this chapter, I followed the seven steps of the IPA data analysis guideline to analyze each particular case and compare and contrast to identify convergences and divergences across cases to reflect unique and shared experiences in maintaining polyamorous relationships. I am mindful of these theories and practices as writing the results of the current study in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Results

The current study aimed to explore the polyamorous relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals. I utilized minority stress theory as the guiding framework and analyzed transcripts of semi-structured interviews with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Data analysis included interviews with 14 participants, which resulted in Five Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and 16 subordinate themes. In this Chapter, I include a summary of participants' demographics (see Table 1), an abbreviated table of GETs and sub-themes (see Table 2), and in-depth descriptions of GETs and sub-themes.

Participants

A total of 15 participants completed the interview process. One participant was removed due to the questions about the validity and reliability of responses during the interview. As a result, the data for the current study was based on the interviews of 14 participants. The mean age of the participants was 36, with a range between 25 and 46 years. While participants were not interviewed about the length of their polyamorous relationships, 12 participants indicated that they had a long-term relationship with at least one of their partners, and three participants had less than three years on their polyamorous journey. Six participants identified as cis women, five as cis men, one as a trans woman, one as a trans man, and one as a woman and gender fluid. The majority of participants identified their affectional/sexual orientation as bi/pansexual (n = 10). It is worth noting that no participant identified as lesbian, although it was not an exclusion criterion. Although not directly asked, several participants also disclosed neurodivergence as a part of their intersectional understanding of self. The majority of participants identified their race as White (n = 10), with two as Asian, one as Latina, and one as Biracial. Almost all participants obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, with a middle-class or higher background (n = 13). In

addition, the majority of participants identified as not currently religious. When asked about the social climate in their state of residence, only one participant perceived the level of inclusiveness of polyamory as friendly. Table 1 below displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Name	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender	Race	Edu Level	Perceived Inclusivity	SES	Religion/ Spirituality
Rachel	39	Bi/pansexual	Cis women	White	Bachelor's	Neutral	Working-middle	Pagon
Elijah	36	Gay, queer, demisexual	Cis man	Biracial	Doctorate	Unfriendly	Upper-middle	Pantheist
Gabe	33	Gay	Cis man	Asian	Master's	Neutral	Middle	Atheist
Amy	25	Bisexual	Cis woman	White	Bachelor's	Indifferent	Lower-middle	Atheist
Dominic	37	Gay, queer	Cis man	White	Master's	Indifferent	Upper	Atheist/Spiritual
Peter	29	Gay	Cis man	White	Master's	Indifferent	Upper-middle	Atheist/Spiritual
Glenn	43	Pansexual	Cis woman	White	Master's	Indifferent	middle	Spiritual
Cat	32	Pansexual, queer, demisexual	Trans women	White	Some College	Hostile	Lower	Atheist
Luna	46	Pansexual	Cis woman	White	Bachelor's	Neutral	Upper-middle	Pagan
Sylvia	46	Bi/Pansexual	Cis woman	White	Bachelor's	Unfriendly	Middle	Atheist/Spiritual
Jack	27	Pansexual, queer, ACE	Trans man	White	Bachelor's	Unfriendly	Upper-middle	Atheist
Rosa	42	Bisexual	Cis women	Latina	Master's	Taboo	Middle	Hindu, Spiritual
Lynna	28	Bisexual, queer	Women, fluid	Asian	Master's	Friendly	Middle	Atheist
Puffin	41	Pansexual	Cis man	White	Master's	Hostile	Upper-middle	Atheist

Note. Pseudonyms used as names to protect participant identity.

Group Experiential Themes and Sub-Themes

Analysis of 14 participant interviews resulted in the construction of five GETs with 16 sub-themes. The GETs described the meaning participants have made in their polyamorous relationship experiences, which include (1) polyamory is an evolving and purposeful journey, (2) poly satisfaction is a systemic experience, (3) dynamic interplay of sense of self and interpersonal experiences, (4) interwoven personal, relational, and systemic challenges, and (5) ecological systems for relationship maintenance. Table 2 below displays the GETs and sub-themes.

Table 2: GETs and Subthemes

Group Experiential Themes	Subordinate Themes
Polyamory Is an Evolving and Purposeful Journey	Continuous Exploration in Polyamory Continuous Improvement in Polyamorous Relationship Current Polyamorous Structure Reflects Relational Philosophy
Poly Satisfaction Is a Systemic Experience	Multi-Partnership Satisfies Needs and Wants in Different Ways Polycule Satisfaction Enhances Connectedness
Dynamic Interplay of Sense of Self and Interpersonal Experiences	Compatibility Between Self and Polyamory Continuous Development of Intersectionality Managing Outness under Hetero/Mononormativity
Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges	Hegemony across Cultures within a Normative Society Internalization of Adversity Strains Individual and Relational Well-Being Multi-Partnership Amplifies Relational Complexity
Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance	On-Going Personal Work for Growth Togetherness in Addressing Challenges Personal and Relational Efforts in Managing Jealousy The Cruciality of Communication Accessing Resources in a Support System

GET One: Polyamory Is an Evolving and Purposeful Journey

Participants shared how they entered polyamory and described their journey to establish the current relationship structure that reflects their beliefs, values, and expectations of relationships. All participants described their continuous exploration in and reflection on relationship experiences that facilitated their evolving relationship structure to fulfill personal and relational needs. Therefore, this GET consists of three sub-themes, including (1) continuous exploration in polyamory, (2) continuous improvement in polyamorous relationships, and (3) current structure serves particular purposes.

Continuous Exploration in Polyamory

In many of the experiences shared, participants relayed an ongoing exploration process inherent in navigating polyamory. Exploration in polyamory included the efforts and experiences reported by participants to initiate polyamorous relationship structures, evaluate the process, and negotiate intra- and interpersonal needs. Early exploratory stages of participants' polyamorous journey included participant experiences of changes in their relationship structures. Participants discussed various reasons for departing from monogamous relationships. Some participants experienced a sense of constraint in conforming to monogamy, which contributed to explorations of different relationship configurations (e.g., nonmonogamy, polyamory) for personal liberation. Specifically, some described feeling "distressed," "faking," or "trapped" in an attempt to fit into monogamy. For example:

> Right around my sophomore year of college, I'd say, like my freshman year college, the first time I completely fell in love with two people at the same time, and I'd never heard of the concept of polyamory. And I just remember sitting with friends on the floor of the kitchen being like, "I don't understand why I have to pick. I'm equally distressed about

> both of these…" It's like it, I wish I could just have an apartment and a cat with both of them, and that just them just being like, "Sure, okay." I have supportive friends who didn't understand what I was talking about. And then once stuff like those sorts of rolling crushes constantly happening, continued to happen by the end of my sophomore year college, I had discovered the term polyamory, and it kind of resonated with me. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Here, Amy described her frustration and confusion in the constant dilemmas of choosing a monogamous relationship in emerging adulthood before gaining awareness of the polyamory concept. The discovery of polyamory gave her a sense of validation of her feelings and beliefs in relationship configurations. Later, she continued to discuss that entering a polyamorous relationship was a significant decision to "be true to myself" and "be true to what's happening" even with the fear of potentially losing the life that centered her monogamous relationship with her ex-fiancé. Similarly, Sylvia also echoed the same dilemma of conforming to monogamy (e.g., "end the first relationship" "cheat", "not let this relationship escalate") despite uncertainty for her relationship outlooks at early adulthood. In her early dating experiences, Cat described that she was "faking" and "being somebody I wasn't" as she tried to fit into the relationship expectations and standards of monogamy. For these participants, Lynna's sense of liberation from monogamous constraints during consensually non-monogamous experiences was shared.

> I think my year of casual dating or whatever when I was just in multiple relationships and stuff, that was very much like an awakening kind of wake-up moment for me of like, oh, okay, non-monogamy is a thing you can do and it feels really good for you. It feels natural. It feels correct with what you're looking for in terms of your relationships with other people. It was this realization that like when I meet a new person, I love having all

> possibilities on the table for where that relationship is going to go. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Lynna utilized casual dating and short-term relationships in adolescence and early adulthood to avoid the feelings of being “trapped” and “weird” in monogamy. Later, her one-year-long experiences in multiple relationships simultaneously contributed to her realization of the naturalness and fitness of nonmonogamy for her expectations of flexible and organic relationship development. While these participants discussed the sense of personal liberation through non-monogamous and polyamorous experiences, some others opened their monogamous relationships to fulfill unmet needs in the dyad. For Gabe, polyamory allowed him to engage in varying explorations that were inaccessible during his early adulthood and within the dyadic relationship with his nesting partner (i.e., partner with whom he cohabitates).

> I grew up in [city and state names]. The gay culture is also just particularly limiting. If you don't look a certain way, if you're not white, and then, or older and wealthier, it's not like there is really a place for you, and if you don't drink, forget about it. So having, accessing gay culture through sex and leather was pretty interesting. And it's a space that we could not have accessed through a monogamous relationship if that makes sense because those spaces somewhat require you to be of a similar open mind to those kinds of things…‘Cause we both wanted to connect more with gay culture. We wanted to connect more as adults, post-graduation of school. We didn't want our jobs to be the main thing. We wanted to explore all parts of our identity, and it was hard. It was hard to try to access it in this particular way, as our identities. And I think part of the benefit of being open is that, like people, are more likely to connect with you in a lot of different ways. There was a difference with when people connected with me platonically only versus when people

> almost allowed them to feel an infinite possibility with us. (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

This quote encompasses the challenges Gabe experienced in exploring different aspects of gay culture due to his intersectionality and monogamous relationship. Polyamory opened the access to explore all possibilities (e.g., sexual, romantic, platonic) with different people. A few participants also shared a similar mindset of fulfilling unmet personal needs and interests in their dyadic relationship with other individuals. For example, Rosa's reported only having had sexual experiences with one person, her husband, which facilitated her "curiosity" in extradyadic sexual encounters. Dominic and his nesting partner "stumbled into" polyamory because of sexual incompatibility with different levels of sexual desire. Luna discussed how the relational challenges in her marriage (e.g., unsupported romantically and as a father to children) contributed to her "ultimatum" to her partner to either "reopen the relationships" or "seek a divorce." In addition, Rachel emphasized the "stress and complication" related to "having an inactive sex life" for "over a decade" with her then-boyfriend motivated her to initiate multiple conversations on opening their relationship after marriage. It is worth noting that although sexual incompatibility contributed to the opening of monogamous relationships for some participants, all stressed the benefits of polyamory for allowing all relationship possibilities (e.g., romance, emotional connection, friendships, sex).

In contrast, some participants entered non-monogamy or polyamory with an organic entry in their relationship experiences. Reports of 'unplanned' paths to polyamory exploration were characterized by openness, organicness, and experimentation. For Jack, his first triadic journey "fell into my lap."

> I was in a relationship with my ex...And so I was with [ex-partner's name] at that time, and there was another one of our friends who we both kind of wound up having a sort of crush on. And that wasn't something that was new to me, because like until that point I had been identifying as bisexual. And so like other people who I had been in relationships with like, there was often an amount of, you know, like aesthetically appreciating other people like, "Oh man, look!" right. But kind of having a crush on an additional person while I was in a relationship, and my partner also having a crush on that person, was kind of new. Uh, and it wound up, working out such that that person had a crush on both of us as well. And so it kind of just fell into my lap that way. (Jack, trans White pansexual man, 27, upper-middle class)

Jack pointed to the shared crush that facilitated the development of a triadic relationship even before he had "explicitly considered or evaluated" the concept of polyamory. He considered the triadic experience as "organic" and "experimental," which aligned with his experiences of attraction and affection in relationships. Such openness to organic and experimental experiences in nonmonogamy also resonated with Puffin who greenlighted his then-wife to pursue an extradyadic experience with a mutual friend after she developed "a crush," which later led to a development of a triad characterized by "strong feelings" and "a very strong emotional connection." In sum, participants shared diverse pathways that led them to enter a polyamory journey, during which they all went through the trial and error stage.

Participants experienced high degrees of personal and relational challenges at the exploratory stages of polyamory. Specifically, many participants mentioned "insecurity" in self and relationships, making "mistakes," and "unethical" practices as they initially engaged with polyamorous partners. For example, Glenn temporarily paused polyamory after being "hurt" by

her husband's "infidelity" and dishonesty in extradyadic experiences. While the dyad improved transparency and honesty in a later extradyadic exploration, Glenn also considered it unethical.

> And so we ended up having a relationship with this person, it really was not ethical, but it did bring us more experiences…The relationship wasn't ethical for a number of reasons, because they worked together and his job role was a position of power compared to hers, she was a lot younger than us, and also that person's partner didn't know. Also, I couldn't see it at the time, but once it was over and I gained more perspective about the situation, I could see that I was coerced in a way. While it was happening, I felt that if I didn't go along with participating in this relationship, they would cheat anyway, their connection was clearly very strong, and they wouldn't be able to resist, so it seemed like the better option for me to be involved. I also didn't totally trust her. I was between a rock and a hard place. I think she also felt coerced in a way, I don't think she was really interested in being with me, but going along with dating both of us allowed her to be with him. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

For Glenn, the unbalanced dynamics (e.g., power, connection) contributed to a sense of coercion and mistrust in the triad that seemed only to benefit her husband. In addition, their triadic relationship also violated the ethics of consensual nonmonogamy as one partner engaged in infidelity. As such, Glenn and her husband ended the triad to avoid further "hurt" and practice polyamory more "ethically." Personal struggles due to unbalanced power and connections are also echoed in Peter's newly established polycule. For example, Peter experienced "powerlessness" "stress" and "sadness" in the early stage of his polyamorous relationship because it reinforced relationship hierarchy as a barrier to his relationship goals in polyamory. While connections with partners may vary in their polycule, some participants also identified a

decrease in connections between original partners because of the prioritization of new relationships at the exploratory stage. For Rosa, her reflection on the mistakes that the dyad had made at the beginning of their polyamorous journey:

> It was scary at the beginning because I definitely didn't wanna ruin my marriage. And I wanted to be careful, but I also blew it multiple times. And I've done things that I should run by my partner, by my husband. I prioritize sometimes partners over our… I've made mistakes. Same thing for him; he has made mistakes. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Rosa experienced fear of destroying her marriage because of the mistakes in her early polyamorous experiences such as the prioritization of other partners over marriage. In addition, the prioritization of new partners in the exploratory phase of polyamory exacerbated the sense of insecurity for some other participants. For example, Sylvia developed more insecurities and jealousy when her husband started dating his other partner because "I could tell he was really excited about her." Puffin also grew insecure in self and relationships because of the charming characteristics and unknown intentions of the new metamour. To many participants, the bumpiness in the early polyamorous explorations related to personal insecurities and relational mistakes.

Contrary to some participants' stressful experiences, a few reflected on perceived stability, security, and confidence in their relationship as a foundation for positive experiences at the exploratory stage of polyamory. For example,

> I came to it slowly through this explorative kind of process of like, "What do I want? What will create a meaningful experience for me and my husband?"... And I can say, and my husband can, also have said this before, all of the connections that we have made in

> this poly sort of way have been very satisfied, very meaningful, you know. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here, Elijah points to the importance of reflection on personal and dyadic needs for "intentional" polyamorous explorations that contributed to positive experiences. He stressed that open and honest communication about desire and attraction contributed to a solid long-term dyadic relationship in which he was able to explore polyamorous relationships that fulfill both his needs and his husband's. Similarly for Gabe, the stability of a long-term relationship contributed to a sense of feeling "secure" and "safe" between the dyad to "access the cis gay community in a very different lens and different avenue" through polyamorous exploration. It is worth noting, however, that a long-term dyadic relationship does not guarantee a smooth polyamorous exploration, especially when there is existing relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., infidelity (Glenn), frustration of inactive sex or sexual desire discrepancy (Rachel), unsupportive partner (Luna). In spite of varying reasons for entering polyamory and experiences during polyamorous explorations, all participants shared the commonality of continuous investment in improving their polyamorous relationships.

Continuous Improvement in Polyamorous Relationships

Participants discussed individual and relational efforts made to maintain and improve polyamorous relationships. Relational efforts included teamwork and communication to help establish or manage effective boundaries. Personal efforts are characterized by self-reflection and self-education. Additionally, personal and relational areas of effort interacted to support collaborative efforts for deeper connection such as ongoing assessment of the needs and goals of the relationship. For many participants, their primary improvement in the early stage of their

polyamorous journey was an increased ability to address personal and relational insecurities. For example,

> We had set updates or just, for me and him, where we hang out and have time together, and also check-in, in specific dates there are check-ins. And then we have to talk about how we are feeling, how things are going through the week. You don't have to do them weekly. You can do a monthly as things progress better, but we had that. So we knew that that date was coming, there was gonna be specifically to talk about what has happened in the past week and discuss openly what made you uncomfortable, what didn't. That's how we approach that. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa pointed out that the regular "check-ins" and "updates" with her husband helped the dyad to process their polyamorous experiences and "uncomfortable" feelings, which facilitated the "progress" of their polyamorous relationship. Similarly for Puffin, realization of the importance of open communication in a previous polyamorous relationship facilitated his comfort level to be vulnerable and vocalize his relationship anxiety. His growth in confidence in open communication later enhanced the trust level between him and his current partner, as she "began opening up a lot more about her desires and her anxieties." In contrast, Lynna and Luna discussed how they "negotiate" "veto power" with their partners in open communication contributing to a deeper understanding of their "concern," and "jealousy" to better navigate dyadic and extradyadic relationships. For these participants, teamwork with their partners (i.e., communication) increased the sense of security in self and relationships.

While some participants collaborated with their partners to reduce insecurities during polyamorous exploration, others went through the process with more individual efforts. For example, Glenn conducted "internal work" to increase "self-esteem" and decrease insecurities to

"make polyamory functional." As Gabe started to address his "own insecurities" that were "less emphasized in monogamy," he realized that

> [Polyamory] means to me, is reinforcing like I have to, I am responsible in our relationship too making sure [partner's name] feels important, and [partner's name] also is responsible for taking that energy and appreciating it. So if anything, it just kind of highlighted the work that we have to do for each other. 'Cause like he'll talk "Well, you don't get jealous or cheating." And I told, I started to realize over time it's not… No other person really hurts our relationship; it's just how the two of us end up reacting and holding each other accountable or trying to hold things against each other. It's the two of us that make or break the relationship, not anyone else. (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

For him, the realization of personal and dyadic responsibility for each other led to an increased sense of security in exploring "cis gay culture" through polyamorous experiences while maintaining the dyadic relationship. When Amy started exploring polyamory, her self-reflection assisted her in recognizing the toxicity in her relationships, which motivated her to "make a commitment" to "listen to my gut more and stop letting fear make [relationship] decisions." Following her true feelings enabled her to let relationships "develop naturally" and "cut off" relationships if "major incongruity" was identified.

In addition, individual and relational efforts to improve polyamorous relationships also involved seeking education from outside resources (e.g., literature, poly groups). For example,

> And also outlets. We had a good resource of friends that we can reach out to whenever we have questions. And there is people in the group that are… They know what you're

> going through at the beginning, so they're very helpful. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Rosa pointed to the support that she received from the poly group helped her "grab some of their experiences to work for me, for my marriage." Similarly, Dominic discussed that by immersing himself in queer culture with "non-monogamous people, he "identified, and then disidentified, and counter-identified" elements that worked for his polyamorous journey. Luna also discussed that her "network[ing]" with different people and learning about "values," "cultures," and "etiquette" through the local poly community provided a sense of enjoyment in polyamorous relationships, which increased energy for social and dyadic relationships. Sylvia attributed the improved communication on personal feelings with her nesting partner to the "non-violent communication" workshops hosted by a local poly group. To these participants, access to community resources added strengths and skills to improve their relationship experiences. Meanwhile, the value of literature on personal and relational improvement in polyamorous exploration was emphasized by almost all participants, which will be discussed in detail in GET: Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance.

Furthermore, constant reflection and communication on the changing needs and expectations contributed to the development of polyamorous relationships. For example, some participants discussed a shift of their expectations in polyamory experiences from sexual gratification to building various connections with extradyadic partners.

> At this time, the idea of a steady partner was appealing to us. Our desired situation had evolved from just a fun sexual experience like a threesome to more of a true ongoing relationship where we were all three partners and loved each other and could develop into

> a deeper relationship between the three of us. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

Glenn remembered a transition of relationship expectations during their polyamorous exploration after episodic nonmonogamous experiences with her nesting partner. Instead of seeking casual sexual monogamish encounters, the dyad desired to build a triad that centered on love and deep connection. In parallel, Gabe discussed honest acknowledgment of the "closeness" and "romantic connection" with extradyadic partners led to the dyad evolving their open relationship to polyamory. In addition, Peter entered polyamory "flippantly" with the mindset of "hooking up" with extradyadic partners. Later after developing love and romantic connections with his polyamorous partner, his ideal polyamorous structure changed from "need a lot of hierarchy" to "feel comfortable even entertaining" the theoretical conversation on polyamory to "looking for non-hierarchical" polyamorous relationships. It is common for participants to develop new relationship expectations during their polyamorous exploration, and many stress their openness to different "possibilities" as they continue their polyamorous journey.

Current Polyamorous Structure Reflects Relational Philosophy

This sub-theme was constructed on the convergence and divergence in participants' polyamorous relationship structures that reflect their beliefs, values, and expectations in relationship experiences. Particularly, participants discussed two types of relationship structure hierarchy (e.g., explicit hierarchy, de-facto) or non-hierarchy (e.g., non-hierarchy, relationship anarchy). In addition, some participants discussed the meaning of a closed polyamorous relationship system. For example,

> I am in a triad with a female and a male. Female and I started dating about two years ago. About a year into that, she expressed interest in another male. I'm pansexual myself so I

> didn't really have a problem with it. He's [bi] curious, but nothing has progressed between the three of us. We have a relationship where me and the female have our relationship, and then separately, she has a relationship with him…It is closed. In the beginning, the relationship that wasn't made clear to the other male, but that was quickly brought out between the three of us that if I had wanted to enter into another relationship, or he wanted to enter another relationship, that the three of us would have to agree on that to prevent jealousy and really mainly prevent a sexually transmitted disease, kind of protect the three of us. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin discussed the dynamics in his current 'closed Vee' relationship structure and the factors contributing to the agreement on closing the system. Later he appreciated the "egalitarianism" in relationships and the appealingness of a "close" and "strong" multi-partnership involving no "more than four people" over monogamy or open relationships that were "purely sexual or friendly." Likewise, Glen described her closed non-hierarchical triad as "very much like a marriage" where the relationship between partners was characterized by commitment (e.g., "wedding ceremony"), togetherness (i.e., "nesting"), equality (e.g., "we are equal") and belonging (e.g., "own our home together"). For Glen and her partners, the decision to close the system was based on their "content with our triad" "having the commitment," "knowing we are solid" and not having "bandwidth or interest to continually date." The closed system reflected also reflected their evolved relationship expectations from having recreational sex to building deeper relationships.

In contrast to these participants who created a closed non-hierarchical system, some discussed their non-hierarchical polyamorous relationship in an open system within which they avoided prioritization on particular partners, even if they had a nesting partner. For example,

Rosa emphasized the dyadic intention of maintaining equal priority and importance in non-hierarchical polyamory to fulfill different needs and expectations (e.g., “relationship” vs. “simply dating”). Gabe and Cat enjoyed different types of relationships (e.g., “romantic relationships,” “friendships” “partnerships”) in the practice of “relationship anarchy.” Specifically, Gabe described practicing relationship anarchy led to him “decolonizing of relationships” by “think[ing] critically” about people involved in his relationships and “highlight[ing]” different components of relationships. Similarly for Cat, the meaning of relationship anarchy lies in the experiences of uniqueness with “everyone” and “every relationship” so that she is “considering each relationship on their own terms” without “having the same societal and gender expectations.” Cat enjoyed immersing herself in a community where relationship anarchy is emphasized to deconstruct the “colonialism” and “imperialism” that contributed to the “arbitrary social norms about monogamy” and relationships.

Some participants managed to avoid emotional hierarchy during their engagement with different partners. Nevertheless, a de-facto hierarchy seemed to exist in their polyamorous structures, mainly due to cohabitation with their nesting partner or outside perceptions of the pre-established dyadic system.

> The thing is for us, there's a de-facto hierarchy. That the city we live in, the fact that we are both from the same place. So he [husband] is [nationality], I am [nationality], we've been together for 13 years, we're married to each other, we are both very educated people. We, although each of us has different class backgrounds, we do occupy a similar kind of class and social economic status now. So there were things, which, de-facto to the outside world, make us seem like primary, does that make sense? So we don't need to be like, “Oh, he's the number one or anything,” because for any person who comes into even like

> just friends or whatever, a word I have heard only use once but I think it's accurate, is intimidating, that there's a sense of a couple who are comfortable with each other, that there's a rapidity for where we have similar cultural references, and that can be intimidating for people who are trying to come from outside in. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic stressed the de-facto hierarchy manifested in the intimidation to newcomers entering the existing dyadic system in which two partners had shared cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. Later, he discussed how the dyad had made efforts to flatten the hierarchy by focusing on equitable attention to partners and removing relationship labels and rules. Similarly, Rachel expressed the dilemma between trying to practice a non-hierarchical relationship and outside perception of relationship hierarchy due to her marriage and relationship lengths with her nesting partner. In contrast to outside perceptions, some participants recognized the natural existence of a de-facto hierarchy due to their nesting with one partner even though they did not perceive an emotional hierarchy among partners. For example,

> I would say that the reason that we live together is not because they are my primary partner, but the reason that they are my primary partner is because we live together, right? That necessitates, you know, a certain amount of communal decision-making, etcetera. And we have, you know, a 6-year-old kid, which is my partner's from a previous relationship. But the necessities of maintaining a household, and child raising together does mean that we have more involved communication on the day-to-day. Where my other partners who I have uh are not like less involved, but they're long-distance, and we don't have the same sort of stuff going on. (Jack, trans White pansexual man, 27, upper-middle class)

For Jack, even though partners differed only in terms of the emotional connection (rather than a predetermined hierarchy), a de-facto primary partnership influenced negotiation and coordination to balance different relationships and nesting responsibilities. In parallel, Luna discussed the reason for "classify[ing]" her nesting partner as "primary partner" from a "realistic day-to-day standpoint" is based on more "logistical" and "emotional" support in shared lives and responsibilities. Regardless of differing practices in the non-hierarchical relationship structure, these participants tried to strive for "equity," "equality" and "egalitarianism" in their polyamorous relationships.

Meanwhile, a few participants discussed the existence of hierarchy in their polyamorous relationships. Specifically, Elijah and Lynna both explicitly identified their nesting partner as their primary partners. For example,

> The way that tends to play out in other relationships that I might pursue is that my husband is an active part of my decision-making in kind of every other relationship…The way the hierarchy really plays out is that right now one of our rules is that every time I'm about to take something that would be considered a next step with someone, and that can be as minor as, "Oh, we've been talking on the dating app and I want to give them my phone number, or we've been texting and I want to meet them in person, or this is a person who's already a friend of mine and I'd like to take them on a date and see what happens or something." (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

For Lynna, her marriage with her husband was an implication of a hierarchical relationship structure under which her husband, as the primary partner, had certain power and control in the decision-making for her extradyadic relationships. While experiencing challenges due to a perceived loss of freedom and autonomy, she believed the structure helped her to have more

intentionality in polyamorous experiences. Therefore, her current hierarchical relationship structure resulted from a series of negotiations with her primary partner to balance the maintenance of dyadic marriage and freedom from the constraints of monogamy. For Elijah however, it was the opposite. He highlighted the importance of primary partnership as "it's all about the dyad" and "it all comes back to the dyad." The hierarchical relationship structure allowed the dyad to simultaneously engage in the same polyamorous relationship where he experienced a high level of "compersion" and "joy" as his primary partner was "desirable" "relationally, emotionally, physically" "by another person." While polyamorous experiences were "meaningful" and "satisfying," they were also "extra" "like frosting on a cake" to Elijah. Such hierarchical structure ultimately strengthened Elijah's relationship with his primary partner by deconstructing homonormativity in the dyadic relationship through polyamorous engagement together. In fact, participants shared varying areas of relationship satisfaction under their current relationship structure. Their unique systems provide additional resources to fulfill needs and wants, which they were unable to access in their previous monogamous relationships.

GET Two: Poly Satisfaction Is a Systemic Experience

This GET comprises two subthemes that describe the various areas of satisfaction and the benefits of a polycule that participants experience in their multi-partnered relationships. Particularly, participants discussed their satisfaction in romantic, platonic, physical, and emotional domains. Most participants highlighted the difference in areas of satisfaction they experienced in polyamory rather than comparing the level of satisfaction across their relationships.

Multi-Partnership Satisfies Needs and Wants in Different Ways

A multi-partnered relationship, to all participants, means that they can diversify their needs and wants across different partners. Needs and wants met in the relationships varied by partner, were fluid over time, and included elements of support, enjoyment, pleasure, fulfillment, shared interest or identity, and connection. A majority of participants discussed how their partners were fulfilling their needs in different ways.

> Like again [nesting partner] and I really resonate in our, in our shared therapy journey. I really appreciate the entrepreneurial spirit of my partner, [another partner]. He encourages me to try doing a lot of different businesses that I never would have considered doing and gives me that energy and drive. I enjoy the ways that both [nesting partner] and [another partner] have supported us all like exploring sexually. So, for example, as [nesting partner] and I like explored early on in our sense of safety of like, at the time, of trying gay bathhouses or going to different events. And [another partner] helps me express it by being excited about it, interested in and knowledgeable about going into public sex spaces like gay bathhouses, or bookstores, or sex bars, and what have you, and feeling more interested in and exploring those things together. (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

Here, Gabe listed different types of satisfaction with two partners based on shared interests, spirits, and experiences that fostered a sense of companionship. He described that his life was "enriched" by his partners in different ways "like multivitamins," which made comparing satisfaction levels between each relationship like "comparing apples to oranges." Such a mindset was shared by many other participants who denounced the quantification of relationship satisfaction. For example, Dominic shared having different partners who "scratched different itches" (e.g., "platonic, the academic, and the romantic, economic, and erotic" needs).

Similarly, Cat elaborated on the unique experiences she had with different partners to fulfill different needs (e.g., “math nerd” “romantic attraction” “sexual attraction” “communication” “honesty” “trust”, living compatibility with nesting partner) to explain the unproductiveness in comparing levels of satisfaction with each partner “on a ladder.” To her, varying types of relationships are “different flavor[s]” and comparing relationships was a “pressure” based on mononormativity. In addition, Cat and Jack also acknowledged satisfaction with partners could fluctuate based on specific situations. Specifically, Cat used an analogy of saving one person from a sinking boat to describe the fluidity of satisfaction based on specific moments.

> Who I save in that situation [from a sinking boat] doesn’t mean who I like the most. Truth be told, in a weird situation like that, heaven forbid, I’d probably rescue a particular person just because in terms of living situations, and convenience, and all that stuff. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Ultimately, Cat valued the unique satisfaction each relationship could offer instead of comparing their levels of importance. Jack also discussed how the level of satisfaction with partners fluctuated depending on how needs were met in specific contexts while experiencing different “affectional” and “romantic” expressions with different partners. Specifically,

> I think the levels of satisfaction. It feels like it varies, based on what need feels most prominent at a given time. Right? Like when there's really something that I need or like I'm feeling really insecure about work or something. And one of my partners is able to kind of say the right thing that makes me feel better, right, naturally, I'm going to feel a little bit more satisfied with that partner than potentially the other 2 at that time. Right, but then, like the next time that something happens, right, and I get a different by a

> different partner, it'll kind of just fluctuate in those ways that I feel like are pretty organic and natural, and I imagine that it's the same way you know, with them and their partners, including me, right when they get their needs met by those different people as well. (Jack, trans White pansexual man, 27, upper-middle class)

In summary, most participants who practice non-hierarchical polyamorous relationships hesitated to compare the levels of satisfaction with different partners. Meanwhile, some participants addressed the influences of intensified satisfaction with their nesting partner on their polyamorous experiences. For example,

> I would say that because of how satisfying my relationship has become with [nesting partner], because of the fact that we have found ourselves to be sexually compatible, lifestyle compatible meaning like the family compatible, you know that sort of thing. Because we have been able to reach a certain level of satisfaction with each other and a comfort and trust level, when we do go out and explore you know possibilities with new partners, it makes me a lot more discriminating or discerning when I do take on new partners. And it makes it easier to determine what level of commitment there is going to be if that makes sense. (Luna, cis White pansexual woman, 46, upper-middle class)

The high level of satisfaction with her nesting partner led Luna to set higher standards for potential partners. She would assess different areas of compatibility between potential partners, self, and current polyamorous structure to determine the worthiness of building a new partnership. Such a mindset is also shared by Lynna who set higher standards for low-stakes extradyadic relationships and lowered expectations for companionship with extradyadic partners because of a high level of fulfilled needs. This approach allowed her to withdraw from extradyadic relationships when experiencing dissatisfaction. For Luna and Lynna, polyamorous

experiences need to add more satisfaction to the already satisfied dyadic relationship with their nesting partner. Similarly, Puffin and Sylvia expressed their high level of satisfaction with their current triadic relationship, which reduced their need to actively seek new relationships.

> I know that if I did develop feeling for somebody else, it's something that could be talked about. But I don't feel the need or the want to search outside of our relationship, because I am getting everything I need from our relationship now. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

For Puffin, a high level of satisfaction in intimacy, romance, and trust with the current 'closed Vee' relationship contributed to no perceived need for or interest in seeking new relationships even if it is acceptable. Sylvia also shared that "my needs are met by my current relationship" but wanted to have the freedom and ability to explore new interests (e.g., "go to movies" "kinky lifestyle") with additional partners. To these participants, polyamory provided a sense of openness and freedom to explore new relationship experiences even if their needs are highly satisfied in their current relationships.

In addition, certain participants pointed out an increased level of sexual satisfaction in their polyamorous relationships. For Luna, a high level of sexual satisfaction was a result of exploring and enjoying different kinks with different partners who have differing kink skills and techniques to elicit different sensual experiences.

> Definitely the sexual part of it. It's been really exciting to be able to explore different areas of kink with different people, you know. Maybe one person is really good at impact play, which is essentially spanking, but it can mean other things too obviously. But impact play. But you know, there's some people, yeah, it's something of somebody's just like spanking you. But if somebody's really good at it and as practice different techniques

> with different implements and different, you know, different things like that. And if it's with different people, it can be a whole different experience, because they know how to elicit certain responses from you right? So that can be very interesting to explore in a way that honestly took me by surprise. I always thought that part sounded boring, but it's actually something I found that I really enjoy. I would not have known that if I hadn't been able to explore different partners. So different areas of kink. (Luna, , cis White pansexual woman, 46, upper-middle class)

Here, Luna pointed out the differences in kink experiences even though they all contributed to a high level of sexual satisfaction in polyamorous relationships. In common, Rachel commented on the high level of sexual and intimate satisfaction with two partners that wakened long-ignored sexual needs in previous monogamy. Specifically, she described different kinds of two kinky" itches" that her partners "scratch" that stimulate "physical," "emotional," and "mental" connections which led her body from "hibernation and dormancy" in monogamy into "overdrive." Similar to Rachel's experiencing higher sexual satisfaction with non-nesting partners, Peter also gained a sense of sexual appeal from the sexual dynamic in his non-nesting partner's shift of sexual preference (from "topping" to "bottoming"). In addition, Dominic discussed how multi-partnerships helped fulfill complicated sexual desires and needs. Puffin briefed a stable and high level of sexual satisfaction in his polyamorous relationships. And, Gabe attributed to polyamory his access to explore sexuality and different kinks outside his nesting partnership.

It is crucial to emphasize that all participants discussed the importance of emotional connection with their partners, even though the level of emotional connection may vary. For example, Puffin was surprised by how quickly a deep connection with his current partner was

developed in a short period of time even “without constant physical attachment,” compared to his previous experience with his wife in monogamy. In addition, Elijah and Jack described the importance of building a connection with partners in polyamorous relationships because they were on the asexual spectrum. For Jack, the essence of emotional connection manifested in the fact that his relationships were typically “born out of” close friendships. Elijah discussed the cruciality of connection and enjoyed “texting and having butterflies” to express his desire to facilitate emotional experiences in polyamory. To further make his point,

> When I'm in connection, when you connect with me, you're gonna get a lot, you know. I say, I'm like the advanced level, you know. And because, you know, you're, I'm going to notice you. I'm going to observe things about you, going to care about things, about you like. I reserve that for very few people, because of how intense that connection can be. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here, Elijah explained he gained satisfaction and even self-growth from providing emotional care and support to partners in polyamorous experiences once he connected with them. To him, polyamorous encounters helped him “ convey human empathy and human connection” to extradyadic partners. As aforementioned, for all participants, the connection among partners has significant meaning because it opens different possibilities in their polyamorous relationships, which as many mentioned “love is not finite.”

Polycule Satisfaction Enhances Connectedness

This sub-theme reflects the special benefits participants experienced in their relationships unique to a polyamorous structure. Overall, participants reported belonging and joy from the sense of connectedness to a larger whole in their poly network. Many participants described their

multi-partnership as “community,” “tribe,” “family,” and “marriage,” which indicated the togetherness and connectedness dynamic. For example,

> I'm not like hiding who I am, I'm having this true relationship, even though it's unconventional and… Also I'm proud of myself for living my truth, and doing the emotional kind of work that it has taken to get here. I think it's no small thing what the 3 of us have done to get here. I'm proud of us to have navigated this, there's not like a rule book or many examples, you know. We've created a really nice life. So I am proud of it. I'm proud of myself for that. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

Glenn pointed out the sense of pride from her polyamorous relationship. On one hand, she felt proud of herself for living authentically and creating a meaningful triad relationship through “growing pain.” On the other hand, the togetherness of the triad exploring and navigating life in a monogamous world also gave her a sense of pride. She discussed the triad had enriched her life by receiving multiple love, support, and intimacy from her two partners. Their recent wedding symbolized deep connection and commitment among all partners despite the political unrecognition of polyamorous marriage in the U.S.

For Dominic, even though his polyamorous relationship was not a closed system like Glenn’s, commitment and togetherness across his nesting partner’s two separate relationships were also evident. Specifically, Dominic would have “a 10-year wedding anniversary, restatement of vows” with his nesting partner and also stand in the wedding where his nesting partner and metamour were “getting handfasted.” Later, he discussed that despite relationship complexity, the process of creating a new relationship system with more fluidity challenged the dyad to deconstruct the mononormative middle-class structure and dynamic, which in turn strengthened the dyadic relationship.

> I mean, still, like with [nesting partner], for example, I feel like our relationship actually got better after becoming poly. I think maybe, you know, well, the thing is though, it's like measuring an electron right? Like the moment you measure it, suddenly it changes, because, like the very effect of like us opening our relationship, which is what we needed to do, as we became consensually non-monogamous change the nature of our relationship because we would suddenly talk about it. And so changing the dynamic, challenging the kind of normality that we had internalized as to what our relationship should be, gave us the pathway to greater satisfaction. We could be able to examine the things that you know if we were to knock this down and start again, this institution of relationships, we could create them in a way that works for us which can be more fluid. So yeah, I think I, I think there is greater satisfaction. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here again, Dominic emphasized "we" during creating a new relationship structure, which implied togetherness and commitment both he and his nesting partner had to their dyadic relationship besides additional ones. Such relational effort in restructuring their relationship contributed to greater satisfaction. Dominic's experience resonated with Elijah who also discussed that by deconstructing mononormativity together, the dyad enjoyed more openness and honesty in their relationship and gained more "insights" into their relationship quality. As a result, Elijah experienced greater satisfaction from relational effort in validating and strengthening the dyadic relationship. Likewise, for Lynna, there was a perceived "recursivity" between her primary and extradyadic relationship, as her "confrontation with newness in extradyadic experiences" increases positive attitudes toward her primary partner.

In addition, Dominic and Glenn's narrative indicated the differences between commitment in polyamory and commitment in monogamy, given the nature of a

multi-partnership. While this mindset was hinted by all participants, some explicitly discussed their perspectives on commitment in polyamorous relationships. In particular,

> I think a lot of people take commitment meaning I'm only gonna be faithful to this one person. But I think commitment is I am committed to making this relationship work, and not because I wanted to work, but because it's a good relationship, like we have an excellent relationship and I wanted it to work…I think commitment, like I believe the meaning of that word changes a lot when you're polyamorous because it's not about…I think a lot of people think commitment is the only being with that person. But you can make a commitment to a friend and still have other friends. So you can make a commitment to somebody romantically, and like we have financial commitments to each other because we own a house together, we have a child together. And those aren't gonna change if I start dating somebody else. This commitment still remains. So my romantic commitment can still remain. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia used the friendship analogy to explain the possibility of having varying types and levels of commitment to multiple partners simultaneously. For her, commitment in a polyamorous relationship is different from the mononormative definition of commitment as being faithful to one person. Therefore, she recognized the two parallel commitments that her nesting partner had: one to her, the other to her metamour. Similarly, Amy also believed that relationship potential in polyamory contributed to her having multiple commitments, which differs from the monogamous definition of commitment. Specifically,

> I tell people "I don't think I'm polyamorous 'cause I am unwilling to commit. I'm polyamorous 'cause I'm too willing to commit." I'm ready to commit to multiple people. And so that's what I'm doing right now, is I'm committing to building these relationships

> because they feel like they have a real potential, and they're making me very happy. I'm feeling, I'm feeling I'm appreciated for all of the facts of my being. I feel very seen. I have a very fun time with them. They both make me laugh. They both think I'm funny. That's a big thing for me. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

For Sylvia, Amy, and other participants, multiple commitments exist simultaneously. The existence of multiple commitments and connections in a polyamorous relationship also provided a sense of communality. For example,

> One thing I love about polyamory in our larger family is that it does allow us to go take vacations more often and easier, because things like, if we flew to [country], I go see my mom very often, the four of us could split the cost of a car way easier, you know. Or if we, if we went to [city] together, the four of us sharing one hotel room is extremely viable and fairly affordable, you know. Two is not bad, two is really good, especially if, like financially if you share all the costs, but four could be really helpful. And we did five recently, and that was actually nice. (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

Here, Gabe pointed out the communal element of polyamory manifested in the financial distributions among partners and metamours on vacations. Later, he also shared how the shared experiences and understanding of otherness despite different racial identities deepened connections with his two partners. Similarly, Donomic also described his metamour as an extended "family member" with whom he socialized and maintained a friendly relationship through his nesting partner. Luna also gained a "family perspective" or "tribe perspective" through various relationships in polyamory that bonded through "child-rearing," "politics," or "professional work." To these participants, the larger family concept in polyamory helped them

navigate different relationships with partners and metamours. It was also noted that many partners described the support they either received in polyamorous relationships. For example,

> Nothing will be stranger to me than being in tears on my husband's shoulder about having broken up with my boyfriend. That was a new experience, and I feel like, in terms of you know it to be a book about formative poly experiences, that will be one of them. Like, oh, is it okay to be like go to your existing partner for support for a breakup with another partner. Am I allowed to feel this? So that was, so that was a moment. But realizing that that is like, that's a great strength to be like, what is the point of having a relationship if they're not the people that you can turn to when you're upset right? (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic pointed out the relationship strength manifested in receiving emotional support from his nesting partner for the dissolution of one extradyadic relationship. He later discussed having multiple partners also give him more insights into relationship issues with a particular partner. In a similar way, Peter also narrated the relational support he had received from his nesting partner when he was “at odds” with another partner. As for Luna and Lynna, their nesting partners were like a “sounding board” to their extradyadic relationships. To these participants, the relational support signified the togetherness with partners in navigating polyamory. For others, the communal aspect of polyamory reduced the pressure of fulfilling their partners’ needs as they were diversified across partners. Specifically,

> With her having another partner, it helps kind of diffuse, I won't say burden, but some distress on me, and trying to meet her physical and emotional needs, especially with us living separated. She currently lives about an hour away. We spend our weekend together. But because we only saw each other two days out of the week, there was a lot of texting,

> phone calls towards the beginning of relationship where she felt she needed more emotional connection that I couldn't always provide, because with work and school and the stress of my own things, sometimes it was difficult to keep that up. Sometimes with her being in a separate relationship, she's able to defuse that to where if I'm not available, she'll talk to him, or if he's not available because he also has a full-time job, she'll talk to me. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Puffin discussed how the closed Vee relationship helped diffuse his distress over his inability to meet his partner's needs due to long-distance and personal responsibilities. His partner having two resources to meet needs in polyamory increased a perceived sense of closeness between the dyad. Puffin's experience also resonated with Jack as he discussed how polyamorous practices released the pressure of not meeting his partner's needs for physical intimacy as they were able to fulfill them somewhere else. Regardless of their relationship with metamours, they acknowledged the additional resources metamours provided that reduced their own pressure in dyadic relationships. For Dominic, Rachel, Gabe, and Peter, their distress over inactive sex with nesting partners was reduced or minimized in polyamory as both themselves and their partners were able to meet physical and sexual needs outside the dyadic relationship. For some, love with nesting partners persisted even without the sexual component.

Furthermore, a few participants discussed the remaining connections with ex-partners after the relationship dissolution, which was the communal component manifested in the larger poly network. Specifically, Elijah, Puffin, Sylvia, and Dominic discussed the end of a romantic relationship had been a transition to another relationship. For example, Elijah attributed the meaningfulness of polyamorous experiences to lasting connections with extradyadic partners after relationship dissolution. Puffin maintained positive connections with his ex-partner and

ex-wife after leaving the triad, which to him did not fit into the operation of monogamy. He assumed that his strong feelings toward his current partner would motivate him to continue maintaining a different relationship if the Vee relationship dissolved. For Sylvia,

> And a lot of times, failed romantic relationships have become some of my best friends. I have two, two of my best friends were failed romantic relationships that I just remained, remained friends with them. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia specified the dissolution of romantic relationships in polyamory as a transition to friendships. For these participants, the change in the nature of relationships did not terminate their connections with ex-partners, as they were still a member of the larger poly network or community.

Lastly, compersion arose in many participants' polyamorous relationships as they witnessed the happiness or joy that their partners experienced in extradyadic relationships. For example,

> I love it when my partners find new people. Especially when I introduce people and they really like each other. I'm a very compersionate person. I don't know if you heard that word thrown around in polyamory circles or anything. I just love seeing my partners and loved ones happy. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Here, Cat pointed out her constant experiences of compersion from her partners' joyful experiences. To her, it was part of her nature as a person. Similarly, Lynna also described a high level of compersion in her current polyamorous relationship because of the stability and trust with her primary partner. In addition, Elijah described that "for compersion of my primary partner in that he gets joy and meaning out of it, and then I get joy and meaning out of that." His compersion arose when knowing his primary partner was desired by another person and

experienced joy and meaning out of polyamorous experiences. These participants gained the benefit of communality in polyamory by experiencing compersion.

GET Three: Dynamic Interplay of Sense of Self and Interpersonal Experiences

This GET consists of three sub-themes that encompass the dynamics between participants' sense of themselves and their experiences in different types of relationships. All participants discussed how they perceived certain compatibility between themself and polyamory. Some reflected on their journey of exploring their intersectional identities through their polyamorous experiences. In addition, all participants shared the impact of managing the level of outness of different non-normative identities on their relationships.

Compatibility between Self and Polyamory

This sub-theme discusses how participants perceived the compatibility between polyamory and their sense of self. Compatibility included associations with sexual identity, personality, and personal values. For example,

> Previous to my relationship with my husband, I was with a woman for about 10 years, and prior to that, I had had male partners. So that previous relationship went a little longer than it probably needed to. And there were times when I felt kind of constrained, and I guess sort of missed being with men, while at the same time, I did enjoy being with her. That relationship went longer than it maybe needed to. When I ended that relationship and became single I kind of wondered "Is monogamy right for me? Am I really going to be satisfied long-term with just one partner?" And I came across that book *The Ethical Slut*…So I read that book, and I found it really intriguing and just interesting. And I thought the concept was really cool, like the ability to love multiple people, and

> that that could work out, you know, ethically, and everyone would be honest, and that was sort of that. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Glen pointed out the dilemma she had experienced in previous monogamy because of her pansexuality. After the monogamous relationship dissolved, her reflection on the relationship configuration led her to seek self-education from literature where she found and personally resonated with the concept of polyamory. During her exploration of polyamory, she continued to develop her pansexual identity through learning and exploring. She used the metaphor of "having your cake and eating it too" to describe her current closed triad where she was "able to be intimate with both a man I love and a woman I love." While she believed that her pansexuality never undermined her capability of committing to monogamy, the happiness and fulfillment she was experiencing in the current triad were "the best of all worlds." The positive influence of pansexuality on polyamorous relationships was also highlighted by many other participants. Many described pansexuality "unlock[ing] possibilities" in their relationship with partners of all genders. For Puffin, his pansexuality led to his acceptance of a male metamour in the closed Vee relationship and openness for a possibility of a throuple relationship. Additionally, a few participants discussed the compatibility between asexuality or demisexuality and polyamory. For example,

> So as a demisexual person, and this is very important and key to my experience in polyamory, I need connections. Connection fosters, you know, both relational and sexual desire for me. I mean, and so, which desire being different from just attraction...So for me, the demisexual component to my polyamory was really important, because the connection is so crucial, and that's how I discovered, oh, demi and poly can work right. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here Elijah discussed his realization of the compatibility between demisexuality and polyamory. He remembered his struggle to fit into the hookup culture and emotional distress in the exploration of open relationships. For him, the "connection" was the central piece that connected his sexuality and polyamory, which led the dyad to develop meaningful extradyadic relationships together. In a similar way, Rachel, Cat, and Jack discussed their need to foster connections with partners in order to experience affection and attraction. For Jack in particular, polyamory fit his sexuality as he was able to maintain different connections with different partners without facing pressure to meet their sexual needs.

In contrast, some participants also discussed how polyamory aligned with their personality traits. For example, Lynna and Peter pointed outed their "flirtatious nature" in social interactions. Specifically, Lynna described herself as an "extremely extroverted and flirtatious person."

> I'm a very flirtatious person, and I flirt platonically, and I flirt professionally. It's part of the way I move through the world. I think there is a certain politics to informing people that you are in fact sexually available when they might not have thought you were. I think that always comes up for me a little bit in terms of like when telling someone that I'm polyamorous, what I'm basically telling them is I am available for sex. I'm on the table as a romantic or sexual interest. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Here, Lynna discussed how polyamory fits her personality traits of enjoying the freedom to experience flexible and spontaneous attraction and stimulation outside the nesting partnership. She remembered her sense of constraint in early monogamous relationships during adolescence. Her engagement in non-monogamous relationships contributed to her realization of the compatibility between such relationship configurations and her desire for fluidity, openness, and

ambiguity in relationship development without constraints. Similarly, Peter described the "affirming" moment, when he received friends' support and validation of him being polyamorous because of his personality (i.e., flirtatious) and relationship history (i.e., hookup dating). He attributed the external affirmation to his decision to explore polyamory with his nesting partner and build multiple relationships.

Furthermore, while diversifying needs across multi-partnership was implied by all participants, a few also explicitly denounced the value of one partner meeting all of their needs, which led to the awareness of the compatibility of polyamory and relational values. For example,

> It's very much, like I said, I have some partners who like to do some things with me and for some partners, those aren't their things. I'm a math nerd. I love talking about mathematics and stuff. I have some partners such that just terrifies them. Gives them flashbacks and stuff so I don't talk about math with them. If I weren't polyamorous, it would almost be a thing where it feels like I'd have to find somebody that was an exact copy of me to even fulfill every niche. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

For Cat, polyamory matched her values of relationship anarchy to experience "free association" with different partners based on shared interests, which seemed impossible to her in monogamy. Similarly, Lynna elaborated on accepting the reality that the dyad would not always connect in the same way for varying reasons (e.g., intersecting identities, mental well-being). She valued polyamory as it fit her non-monogamous mindset that one partner did not have to meet all her needs. With retrospection, these participants discussed certain levels of compatibility between polyamory and their sense of self, whether it was their sexuality, personality, and/or value.

Continuous Development of Intersectionality

This sub-theme was constructed based on the journeys of participants to develop various aspects of their identities (e.g., sexuality, race, gender, disability, parent). Intersectionality was evident in how participants described engagement with different partners, exploration of sense of self, redefining norms, and in how participants conveyed diverse meanings of polyamory. Many participants rejected or hesitated at the idea of polyamory as part of their identity for differing reasons. For example,

> Yeah, I've thought about that a lot, I've thought about that a lot because, on the one hand, it's part of who I am. I see it as non-negotiable part of who I am. I see it as non-negotiable in the sense that I don't see myself being successful in a monogamous relationship. I don't think that those structures work for me, work with my needs, work with my desires. Whenever you talk about something being like a non-negotiable, it kind of feels like you should tie it to an identity category. But to me, it feels more like a non-negotiable the way like I'm a lifelong vegetarian. That's not going to change just because my partner wants to eat meat. I'm not going to compromise on that. There are certain things about myself that like I don't... But I don't consider myself like an innate vegetarian, like that's a part of my identity. I think my problem with the discourse around polyamory as an identity category is that I've very quickly seen that get co-opted and turned into people appropriating discourses of queer oppression into the conversation of polyamory…I have complicated feelings about this. I'm a little resistant to discourses of polyamory as an identity even while I do recognize it as a non-negotiable part of the way I engage with other people. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Here, Lynna elaborated on reasons for her resistance to consider polyamory an identity, even with the recognition of it as a non-negotiable part of her relationship configuration. Her

perceived appropriation of queer oppression in poly identity discourse was based on straight White men appropriating polyamory, which historically had been part of queer relationship structures, for pure sexual benefits. To Lynna, identifying oneself as polyamorous could foster a self-serving mindset while ignoring relational dynamics. Similarly to Lynna, Gabe also rejects the idea of polyamory as a primary part of his identity.

> When I think of what identities I ascribe to, I don't necessarily think of poly as one of the fourth or even the fifth thing you know; I have a lot of other identities that perhaps take more priority. It is a part of my experience and part of who I [am]. But I don't know, it's, I don't really adhere to it in the same. But I will say I have some mixed feelings about the greater polyculture, I think, in [city] in particular, like people who… I don't, I don't necessarily always enjoy talking with people who specifically ascribe themselves as poly as one of their primary identities, because it also just demonstrates a difference in values and how we express these identities. If polyamory is like a huge part of your identity, what about the other parts? And that doesn't really, it doesn't really show curiosity if that makes sense or a letter of reflection. It kind of reminds me of younger, early twenties people exploring themselves through identities, you know, rather than being.

For Gabe, it was more important to prioritize other aspects of identity and demonstrate differences in values and identity expressions. He later discussed his distance from the general polyamory culture because of his own intersectional experiences blended with gay, polyamory, and open relationship cultures, which were different from heterosexual polyamorous relationships. To him, there was an interwoven influence of his sexuality, race, polyamory, and kink on his “breathing.” Gabe and Lynna actively reflected on their relationship with the polyamory concept. Whereas, Puffin and Peter hesitated to identify themselves as polyamorous

because of new experiences in polyamory and not "dwelling much" on the meaning of polyamory. Regardless, these participants believed that polyamory was their preferred relationship configuration.

In contrast, some participants discussed that polyamory had grown into part of their identity over time. For example,

> Now that I'm thinking about it, like, maybe it is part of my identity, because if I can't go back to being monogamous. I don't know, I can't think of a situation where I would be like, "Okay, I'm gonna be monogamous now." So maybe it has become…Like it hasn't always been, but maybe it has become part of, part of my identity over time because I don't think, I don't think I could go back to not being poly…I guess it has become part of my identity over time. I didn't, I didn't realize that until you asked me that question. That's funny. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia experienced a realization during the interview that polyamory perhaps had become part of her identity over the years of polyamorous experiences. Although she had situational monogamy after entering the polyamorous journey (e.g., pregnancy, childcare), she considered it a temporary break. For her, polyamory is preferred over monogamy and other types of CNMs because of her value in building different connections with a fluid mindset. Similar to Sylvia, Rachel also discussed the consolidation of polyamorous identity through her exploration of and reflection on polyamorous experiences. To Elijah, it was important to acknowledge polyamory as part of his identity because such identification provided him with a sense of power to deconstruct monogamy. Identifying herself as "polyamorous" also liberated Cat from the struggles of conforming to monogamy and gave her strength to resist the institution of monogamy under

"capitalism" and "imperialism." In sum, to different participants, the meaning of polyamory and its association with identity remained different.

In addition, many participants discussed the development of other aspects of their identity through polyamorous experiences. Some particularly reflected on the deepened understanding of dynamics between their sexuality and relationship experiences. For example,

> I think my pansexuality has influenced my view of polyamory itself, because I can relate to the guys who would say "How can you let somebody else be with your woman," because I think I might have felt that way myself a while back. When I thought of a polyamorous relationship or a throuple, it was always a guy, girl, girl, you know; my girls with somebody else, I'd be okay with that, but if my girl was a guy that I wouldn't be okay with that. So, finding the attractiveness in men more so, you know, being with masculine women has helped me get into see myself more as a whole and not be threatened by other men, because I see more than myself that makes me think more highly of myself that makes me feel less threatened by somebody else, because you know how I might find them attractive, too. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Puffin remembered that his friend questioned his masculinity when disclosing his Vee relationship. Through his pansexual identity development in polyamory, he gained a deeper understanding of his attraction to masculinity, which increased his self-image and self-confidence. Meanwhile, this development journey also led him to deconstruct internalized sexual double standards in polyamorous relationships, which then helped him process and address his jealousy due to a metamour's gender. Similarly, Cat described that through polyamorous experiences, she was able to explore all relationship possibilities with people

without “the same societal and gender expectations.” For Lynna, the fulfillment of relational preferences by her primary partner motivated her to make intentional choices in extradyadic experiences to seek solidarities of other aspects of her queer identity (e.g., sexuality, gender). Specifically,

> Now, it's like now that that part of my life is stable and secure, I feel a lot more liberated to have these more alternative relationships with women, with non-binary people, with gender fluid people, and kind of feel that out in a way that feels safer than it did when I was like single and looking to settle down. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

In addition, Lynna pointed out the sense of liberation in developing relationships with people of different genders, which facilitated her growth in understanding her bisexuality and gender fluidity. Because of the difference between herself and her primary partner (e.g., race, gender, queer expression), she made intentional decisions to seek solidarities of queer identity through extradyadic experiences with people sharing similar identities or experiences. During the “disidentification” process of “spouse identity,” she reached a high level of integration between polyamory and queerness. Similar to Lynna who emphasized “queer” as their whole identity, Elijah and Cat also reflected on how polyamory had integrated as part of their queer identity, as it allowed more fluidity, ambiguity, and growth than prescribing a specific label. Furthermore, Cat and Jack discussed their trans identity development in polyamory (e.g., awareness of non-binary, gender transition, coming-out) and how their gender identity influenced their relationship experiences. Specifically,

> I’m open completely, who I am and everything. I don’t want to get into a relationship with somebody, and then it turns out we’re just incompatible. I want to weed that out

> right off the bat. If you're incompatible with all this, whatever. That's cool. But I'm looking for particular people that I am compatible with. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Here, Cat pointed out the importance of being upfront about non-normative identities as a filter to establish compatible relationships where openness and spontaneity of feelings were allowed and accepted. She remembered living openly as trans, queer, and polyamorous "flourished" her relationships because she was able to "approach every relationship on their own terms." To many participants, there was a mutual reinforcement of their queer identity and polyamory.

Meanwhile, participants of color discussed the relationship between their racial identity and polyamorous experiences. For example,

> I tried to move away from thinking about relationships like rejection and approval if that makes sense. It's really rather trying to find compatibility. And people who are not able to respect that part of my life, like people who don't understand my relationship with [nesting partner], even if we don't necessarily engage in sex anymore, we still love each other. People don't understand that [nesting partner] is an important part of my life, that I like "No, that's not gonna work." People who don't care about my experiences with racism, I can't, I can't do that. So if anything, both these negative experiences that I did is microaggression or just aggression, and also I would prefer to see that and not have to find out later. (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

Here, Gabe discussed how he determined incompatibility when experiencing aggression toward his racial identity or relationship dynamics with his nesting partner. For him, sexuality, polyamory, and racial identity were interweaving; and together, they provided him with access to explore his sexual preference and connection with his own ethnic community through different

lenses. For Rosa, her polyamorous experiences allowed her to deconstruct internalized mononormativity under the religious and cultural influence of her home country. Rejecting mononormativity for its limits to fulfilling personal needs and growth, she developed a belief that happiness could be found in different relationships rather than in the longevity of monogamy. Similarly, Lynna rejected the hegemonic beliefs and values of her ethnic identity and maintained a strong sense of ethnic identity with queerness and poly relationship even though they are perceived as incompatible in her conservative ethnic community. For these participants, their polyamorous experiences and relationships facilitated the development of their own sense of racial and ethnic identity rather than following certain norms, beliefs, or values in their racial and ethnic community.

Moreover, for some participants who identified themselves as neurodivergent, most of their relationships were developed with people who share a similar background. Specifically, Jack and Cat mentioned that almost all of their partners were neurodivergent (e.g., autism, ADHD). To them, the need for "explicit" and "honest" communication was crucial when interacting with partners because they could not "read minds." For example,

> I'm also autistic and have ADHD. Growing up neurodivergent, I questioned a lot of social structures, and authority, and stuff like that. A lot of it just never made sense to me. Finding out there's other people like me. We can live like this, and it's wonderful. Yesterday, I had a wonderful Valentine's Day with a couple of my partners. We went to dinner and just hung out together. Just really nice. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Cat remembered the sense of loneliness in questioning normativity and power because of her neurodivergence. Seeking and interacting with people with autism and/or ADHD gave her a

sense of togetherness. It was a significant aspect of her identity, which was disclosed upfront in relationship engagement as a part of the compatibility assessment for potential partners. For Jack,

> There's definitely an aspect of emotional object permanence. I guess. And part of that I know, is a factor with literally all of my partners are neurodivergent in some way. And so, part of that is just, baked into the way that we are, right? And also when you don't see someone for a long time like people say, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder or whatever.” But it's also like “I haven't seen you in months and months, maybe more.” And that can kind of blur a line that I feel has always been blurred for me, but I'm not sure how much of it is related to the way that I am, and how much of it is related to the experiences that I've had, right? But kind of the blurred line between friendship and romantic relationships, where, when, like, you can be really, really close with someone. But if you haven't seen them in a long time, and you haven't been taking care to kind of nurture that romantic aspect, right? Sometimes it feels like, “Oh, yeah, that's just my buddy who lives far away, who I say gay things about sometimes right?” And I guess that's something that I haven't quite untangled. What I do know is that tends to sort itself out. I guess. (Jack, trans White pansexual man, 27, upper-middle class)

Here, Jack discussed the perceived influence of shared neurodivergence with long-distance partners on the phenomenon of emotional object permanence in maintaining long-distance relationships. In the meantime, he acknowledged that the shared autism identity with long-distance partners createed a mutual understanding of its impact on the communication process. For both participants, their neurodivergence played an important role in their navigation of polyamorous relationships.

Lastly, some participants shared how their identity as a parent influenced their polyamorous experiences. In particular, Luna and Sylvia discussed their withdrawal from polyamorous relationships during pregnancy and the maternity period because of reduced "mental capacity" or "emotional capacity" for additional relationships. For example,

> Yeah, I didn't have time to, you know…There's like a searching process involved in dating, and I didn't, didn't have time for it, or like the emotional capacity to deal with it. So I was actually talking to somebody when I found out that I got pregnant, but, so I just put that on hold and told them I didn't, you know, "I wasn't able to proceed for right now." But I'm, I'm still kind of friends with them. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia shared about withdrawing from developing extradyadic relationships to give full mental focus on pregnancy. She discussed that this situational monogamy allowed her to focus more energy and time on pregnancy and maternal care. At the time of the interview, she had recently restarted seeking polyamorous experiences. Sylvia's experience highly resonated with Luna as she stepped out of polyamorous relationships during her pregnancy. Under this theme, participants' experiences in polyamory may relate or differ based on their intersectional identities. As they were living with non-normative identities and polyamory, all participants faced an important task in interpersonal relationships outside of polyamory: managing the level of outness.

Managing Outness under Hetero/Mononormativity

This sub-theme encompasses different levels of outness with regard to participants' sexuality and polyamory and how such levels of outness influenced their relationship experiences with partners, friends, colleagues, and family. For all participants, coming out is an

ongoing process, during which most of them need to conduct “internal processing” or “math processing” (i.e., intentional calculations about safety and needs) to determine whether they would disclose their sexuality and/or polyamory. In addition, it seemed unanimous that participants perceived coming out about their sexuality (e.g., gay, bisexual, pansexual, demisexual) as easier than coming out about polyamory. For example,

> I think polyamory is a lot more challenging to come out. Sexual orientation has definitely become more normalized in America right now to where I don't feel as much of a stigma saying that I have a preference of men or preference of women, whichever I happen to be feeling at the time, because there are so many other people out there who feel the same way and [inaudible] lives. And there's so many protests and everything going against a lot of the very biblical beliefs around the country; maybe that's the wrong term, maybe far-right biblical beliefs, because I don't mean religion as a whole as a bad thing, it’s just the way people tend to take it to an extreme. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin credited the community effort in normalizing sexual orientations in the U.S. to the de-stigmatization of pansexuality, which makes coming out as pansexual easier than polyamory. His outing process as pansexual was characterized by authentic being, subtleness, and activism (e.g., putting a gay sticker on his car, vocalizing support for LGBTQ+, disclosing sexuality when asked). Similarly, many other participants discussed the normalization of sexual orientation in the U.S. facilitated a reduced worry or concern about disclosing their sexuality. For example, Amy teased about the ease of coming out as bisexual because “these days everyone knows a gay person.” Elijah also discussed coming out as demisexual with same-sex attraction was not as challenging as coming out as polyamorous because “I can explain a little, then we move on.” It is

also worth noting that the level of outness about sexual orientation depended on the residing states of the participants. For example, Puffin used “hostile” to describe people’s attitudes toward non-heterosexuality in his state. Similarly, Peter also pointed out the perceived threat to personal safety as a gay man in his state. Specifically,

> [Patner] who's never explored with a man before, to him, holding a guy's hand on main street is awesome. Like he's like “This is cool. I never thought I get to do this before.” And I'm looking around A- for like do people know me, and they know [metamour], like they're gonna see me holding hands with the person they know as her fiancé, and B- just like in general, I'm in [state], thinking there is a chance that someone's gonna attack me. So Tim, who's not, had to grow up with that concern, It's different for him to like, it's easy for him to be, “Yeah, this is cool.” So that's been an unforeseen dialogue between him and I is what that looks like in public. (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

For Peter, there was a need to discuss with his partner about public display of affection because of differing perceptions of its consequences. Regardless, all participants, in general, had higher levels of comfort in coming out of their sexual orientation, even though some had experienced certain negative experiences in the past.

As for participants who identified as transgender, both pointed out the challenges in their coming out process. For example,

> It was really just them [parents], honestly. I was worried that they were going to disown me. They didn’t really take me being trans super well. They actually warmed up to it. I think honestly, seeing me really happy. Me and my partners went down to visit them because they live an hour south of where I live now. Them seeing me and my partners just really happy together, I think that really were like, “Wow, I’ve never actually seen

> them that happy in their life before. Maybe they're onto something." I think that really enlightened them, honestly. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Cat reflected on overcoming fears to disclose her trans identity to her parents, which contributed to a sense of freedom to live authentically in public. For Cat, the perceived fear was attributed to years of indirect "sexual repression and sexual abuse" through "the Catholic Church" during childhood. While Cat's disclosure of her trans identity to her parents was an active decision, Jack's trans identity was accidentally outed by one of his siblings. Jack shared how this outing "fueled that decision" to disclose his gender identity to his immediate and extended family because "when I come out to them it won't be like it's a huge, fucking surprise." In addition, Jack continued to navigate his trans outness at work and in public based on perceived safety and acceptance.

With regard to the level of polyamory outness, all participants had kept polyamorous relationships secretive in some aspects of their lives due to perceived mononormativity. There is a commonality that disclosure of polyamory among close friend circles has been relatively easy by comparison with family, professional, and general social settings. For example,

> My close friends know, a couple of my close friends. They, what's really cool is, it's, they share their stuff with me, you know their intimate stuff. We can talk about it without shame or fear of being judged. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here, Elijah pointed out that closeness with friends facilitated disclosing polyamory to them because of no perceived fear of facing judgment. For many other participants, the openness and acceptance of close friends toward their non-normative identities reduced their fear of sharing their polyamorous relationships and experiences. However, disclosure of polyamory to family

seemed to be more complicated for most participants. Some participants chose to maintain their polyamorous relationship in the closet. For example,

> I mean, my parents are certainly not aware that I'm polyamorous…I do have this fear of, like oh my gosh what if it got back to my parents somehow? What if the wrong person heard about it or saw me on Hinge? There is kind of this constant fear that I'm going to be found out and have to explain myself to my parents, which is a very fraught and toxic relationship that we don't really need to get into. But the stakes of that are very high for me and we can maybe just leave it there. The stakes of my parents finding out are quite high. It's something I would really like to avoid if I can help it. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Here, Lynna described her persisting fear of being accidentally outed to her parents, which would worsen the already complicated relationship with them. For Lynna, the decision to not disclose polyamory to her parents was based on perceived negative attitudes towards polyamory due to cultural and religious conservativism and disinterest in sharing relationship experiences due to a fraught parent-child relationship. Similarly, Amy chose not to share her polyamory with her parents because of perceived mononormativity based on lived experiences in heteronormativity against her bisexuality. Specifically,

> My parents still can't fully deal with the bisexuality thing. So if they, if they can't get their heads around that, the polyamory things absolutely going to, they're gonna see it as some moral issue, I feel. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

In addition, Dominic had not come out as polyamorous to his family because "I have a very, very distant, don't really have a relationship with my mom, dad, sister, that's my family." For these

participants, complicated relationships with parents and perceived negativity of parents toward polyamory contributed to the concealment of polyamorous relationships.

In contrast, many participants discussed their slow process of disclosing their polyamorous relationships to their families. For example,

> I had to tell her that we were doing this, and she got all these kinds of ideas from it, that you know it was his idea; that we weren't serious about each other, and you know, like all of these other things that happen, because I told her that we had an open relationship. And you know she's got an idea in her head of what that means, which is not the same, you know, idea that we had about each other. So, and it took like a couple of months for me to like get to all the things that she was coming up with that she thought this meant 'cause it didn't mean we weren't serious about each other, (pause) and it wasn't his idea. I told her; I said, "I was doing this before I met him, so this wasn't even his idea like he even knew this had existed before I met him." (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Sylvia pointed out her experiences of mononormativity when disclosing polyamory to her mother. Eventually, with a long process of educating on polyamorous relationships and experiences, Sylvia reduced her mother's negative perceptions of polyamory. Afterward, the specialness of a metamour motivated her to disclose polyamorous relationships to individual family members at different stages. In fact, it was common that participants had faced negative reactions from parents initially, which later shifted to more tolerant or accepting responses. For example, Luna remembered that her father was "flipped off" when she disclosed her polyamory. His change of attitude toward polyamory to tolerance was due to witnessing the merits of her polyamorous relationships and intention to maintain involvement in grandchildren's lives.

Rarely, few participants shared the privilege of having parental acceptance of their polyamorous relationships. For example,

> When I came out to her [mother] it was a matter of "So just you know, this is what's happening, this is what it is, this is how things are going, this is why." And I think there was some empathy there because I told her that Gabe had stepped out; she'd had that experience as well with my dad. But she also has always, despite us being very different people, has always been very open to hearing what my life experiences are because they're so different than hers. And as a result, she was like, "Is there a website or some kind of material you could tell me to read up on this more when we're not talking?" And I let her borrow a copy, my copy of *More Than Two*, the book *More Than Two*, the book *The Ethical Slut*, and the book *Polysecure*, the book *Unfuck Your Boundaries*. And I've given them to her, and she kind of educated herself and is kind of catching up so that she understands where everything is. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

For Rachel, the physical and emotional closeness with her mother facilitated the decision to disclose her polyamorous relationship. She also anticipated empathy from her mother for her relationship experiences based on shared adversity in their partners' infidelity (i.e., both Rachel and her mother had experiences of husband engaging in infidelity during monogamy). Rachel's disclosure of polyamory facilitated her mother's willingness to educate herself on polyamory despite her hetero/mononormative background. Similarly, Peter and Cat also identified their privilege of having accepting parents compared to most of their partners and metamours. Specifically,

> I don't really have any of the barriers with that. I mean, my parents don't really get it, but they're, they're like, “I don't get it, but sure tell me how many plates to have at the dinner table.” So they're, they're generally supportive. (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

Peter discussed that the lack of understanding of the polyamory concept was not a barrier for parents to demonstrate support. While many participants might not have supportive parents like Peter and Rachel, a few shared their disclosure of polyamory to family members in their same generation even though they had not come out to their parents. For example,

> I actually came out to them [cousins]. I told them, “Hey, listen!” I took them to dinner, I asked if this was a good time for them to talk, and that's when I told them that “Jake and I, we are polyamorous. If you see us with somebody else outside, it's, you know, we have consent. This is what we're doing. We’re not separating. And also, I want to explore other things. I might be dating a woman; I might not. And you just don't know. So I'm exploring myself right now, and that's something that we both have agreed that we're going to try to be supportive.” They listened. We did that, I'm gonna say, right before the pandemic, and they know, they know about me. They know that I've had girlfriends. They know that we have dated other people. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

For Rosa, the decision to disclose her polyamorous relationship to her cousins was driven by the sense of security and safety of having a support system (e.g., “husband,” “poly community”). Here, she discussed the intention of disclosing polyamory was to address the potential confusion of her cousins about her polyamorous experiences in public. Later, she also received support from her sister for her polyamorous relationships yet kept them secretive from older generations.

Similarly, Jack also disclosed his polyamorous relationship to one of his siblings based on perceived acceptance. To both participants, a perceived higher level of acceptance of polyamory in younger generations led to their decision to come out.

In contrast to the complicated coming out process to family, managing poly outness in professional and general social settings seemed straightforward: non- or minimum disclosure of polyamory. For most participants, such a decision helped avoid potential negative attitudes or consequences because of their polyamorous relationship. For example,

> I worked in a very conservative field. I was working in construction with a bunch of male engineers. Like I didn't, I didn't tell them that I was bisexual, I didn't tell them I was polyamorous, because I feel like it takes away from the job that I'm doing, you know. It's more focused on than you know the actual work that I'm doing. So I just never told. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia reflected on the reason for the concealment of polyamory and her bisexuality at work. She chose concealment to avoid perceived negative impacts of hetero/mononormativity when she worked in a male-dominant conservative profession. Later, she discussed a perceived increase in comfort for disclosing polyamory in the future because of varying factors: leaving a hetero/mononormative work environment, less concern about people's perception because of aging, and confidence in herself and relationships. The majority of participants sided with Sylvia to conceal their polyamorous relationship in their professional life. More importantly, a few of them made such a decision to avoid complaints or punishment. For example,

> I'm not gonna tell them [students], because some parent is going to end up calling the front office in a tizzy for promoting polygamy, you know. They all know that their kids are in the queerest classroom in school. It just, and that seems to be a trend, where it's like

> people who will be unashamedly out about certain elements of their queer identity will keep that part very quiet. That's where it's going to be treated as inappropriate as inherently sexual in a way that people used to treat queer identities. I think people are very strongly associated with a purely sexual experience, and therefore inappropriate for children inherently, instead of just like being like any other relationship, just different. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Amy decided to conceal her polyamorous relationship to avoid dealing with the negative consequences of mononormativity in school culture. While she felt comfortable disclosing her bisexual identity in the classroom, she perceived polyamory would be considered too radical to be accepted by the adults. Similarly, Puffin was "absolutely secretive about my polyamorous relationships" at work to avoid the negative consequences of mononormative culture and policy (e.g., violation of policy if married, unemployment). His inability to share his experiences and feelings about his relationships with co-workers contributed to a sense of shame (i.e., "it made it feel like it was almost a dirty thing") for disguising his polyamorous partner (i.e., "It was always just a friend"). For these participants, perceived negative attitudes and consequences based on mononormativity led to concealment of polyamorous relationships at work.

Meanwhile, some participants discussed how the closeness with certain colleagues facilitated their decision to disclose their polyamorous relationships. For many, there was a sense of trust in their colleagues to keep their polyamorous relationship in confidence. In particular,

> I'm definitely more of an open person. And also like I'm you know, "out" at work, I'm friends with my coworkers. I'm the only one that's friends with every single person in the department. So, it's easy for me to be open with them; some of them, not everyone knows that I'm dating [metamour] fiancée, just because we all do work together. But it's kind of

> an inside joke between [metamour] and I, you know. We'll hang out socially as "friends." But some coworkers do know. (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

Here, Peter pointed out that closeness with colleagues influenced the extent of polyamory outness at work. He later discussed that he deferred perceived closeness with people to determine his comfort level of disclosing polyamorous relationships. Similar to Puffin's experiences, Peter disguised his partners as "friends" before colleagues who were unaware of his polyamorous relationships. Likewise for Rachel,

> My bosses know. I'm in a, I'm in a very unique system situation where my bosses are also my friends. We used to work at a different place together, and our boss at our previous job was polyamorous openly and knew all his partners. One of his partners actually ended up being his business partner at one point. So they were already exposed to it via him. When [nesting partner] and I opened up, I, one of my bosses was one of my best friends; she was one of my bridesmaids. So I'm again in a kind of unique situation where coming out was easy. It was easy. I didn't, that wasn't a challenge at all, not at all. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

The "unique system" where colleagues were open-minded about polyamory because of different kinds of exposure eliminated Rachel's challenge in disclosing her relationships at work. Amy only disclosed her polyamorous relationship to two colleagues because of shared backgrounds (i.e., "polyamorous," "bisexual," "have ADHD"). To Peter, Rachel, and Amy, being "friends" with colleagues was an important facilitator in disclosing their polyamorous relationships.

Parallel to minimizing the level of polyamory outness at work, all participants discussed how they managed to maintain the secrecy of their polyamorous relationship in most social and community settings. For example,

> I kind of don't want my neighbors to know, because they could be totally cool with it or they could be super religious in a way that makes them kind of nasty to us, or whatever the reason may be. And if they are, they're my neighbor, and I have to live with that right next door, and that would make me very uncomfortable. I am sensitive to my surroundings, and I want to feel safe, even though I know that like "Who really cares or whatever." I would feel that negative energy, and I don't want to feel that. So I guess it's just, and this has been tricky, like I don't even totally have the answer to your question, because it's something that's been hard for me to figure out. Like what am I scared of, exactly? And I'm not totally sure. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

Here, Glenn discussed her intention to maintain her polyamorous relationship secretive in her neighborhood because of her proximity to neighbors and uncertainty about their attitudes toward polyamory. For her, disclosing polyamory to an unaccepting neighbor might lead to constantly living with a sense of unsafety and negativity. Later, she reflected that knowing people's political and religious philosophies (i.e., "liberal," "not right-wing religious" "appreciates diversity") was important to determine her level of safety in disclosing polyamory. Likewise, Luna chose not to actively disclose her polyamorous relationships to neighbors to avoid potential misinterpretation of her behaviors as promiscuous (i.e., "hitting on them"). In addition, for many participants, concealing polyamorous relationships in public was to avoid mononormative negativity. For example,

> The [ethnic] community is a place where I'm very hesitant just because people talk and my parents know everybody. It's just a... It's very specific... It would be complicated for that community. Even with people who I do think would probably be on board or would understand, there's this hesitation of, okay, but what's the trail? How is this going to get

> back to my parents with this person? I'm also, I'm a professional flutist in the [ethnic] community. So, I'm in a lot of more traditional conservative spaces. Obviously, that's not going to come up in those spaces. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Lynna had kept her polyamorous relationship secretive in her own ethnic community due to perceived cultural conservativism and mononormative values. For her, even if polyamory could be accepted by certain individuals, there was also a risk of being accidentally outed to parents. Similarly,

> [Husband] and [primary partner] and I would show up together at events, and just kind of not say anything, and let people wonder what the hell was going on. (Luna, cis White pansexual woman, 46, upper-middle class)

Luna remembered how she had managed the public presentation of their polyamorous relationship in her previous Vee relationship. The outside confusion of her relationship status brought enjoyment and amusement to fulfill her "mischievous" spirit. In sum, the level of polyamory outness in general social settings was determined by the sense of safety and comfort in a particular place, time, and relationship.

For most participants, they perceived coming out as a personal decision unless it would affect their partners. Many participants who had nesting or primary partners discussed the coming out process with them to determine the extent of polyamory outness. For example,

> We take our dog around the neighborhood, and we just walk. And that's like our therapy time when we talk to each other as a couple without our phones and stuff. And I told him I said, "You know, I really want to talk about what we've been doing." And he goes, "Oh, we have been talking about." I said, "Oh, yes, you and I have been awesome, and we're talking about that. I need to tell somebody else." Part of it is because I don't want it to be

> a secret, because secrets, people keep secrets about things are ashamed of. That was my belief. That I told him that. He kind of got that. I said, "I'm not gonna tell everybody, I'm not gonna write it on a big sign and put it in our front yard or anything. But there are important relationships in my life, of people I need to talk this through with because there are certain things that I just need to talk about that and get perspectives on. And he goes, "Okay, who?" And then I kind of told him who I was thinking, and he was like "All right, yeah, absolutely." (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here, Elijah discussed how his dyad had communicated to make decisions on coming out as polyamorous to certain people in his life. For him, coming out was to confront the perceived shame of polyamorous relationships. Similarly, Lynna and Puffin also reflected on the communication process with their partners with regard to whom, when, and how to come out.

As polyamory is a multi-partnership, many participants also discussed how the relational component of polyamory outness sometimes influenced their relationship experiences with partners. For example, similar to Peter and Puffin, many other participants labeled their partners as "friends" or "neighbors." While some partners offered understanding and empathy to the concealment of polyamorous relationships, a few participants discussed the negative impacts of such concealment on their relationships. For example,

> Some people that I have dated, they did in the poly community for so long that they're open, they're fine with it, and they get slightly uncomfortable because I do have to shy away from something. And that's been difficult because some people don't want that. They don't wanna be the second person, they wanna be a primary, and it (pause) makes it difficult. It does, at times. But some of them are okay to go through a transition, and even some of them have met my family. Sadly, some of them have met them as friends, and

> two of them have met them as friends, and they weren't my friends, and they… It, it puts us in a difficult position. It kind of causes a little bit of resentment without intentionally wanting to, because then they see my husband as a primary, and that's why they assume that there is some sort of hierarchy and it makes us so uncomfortable. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa pointed out the non-disclosure of polyamorous partners in family settings contributing to the resentment of some partners due to a perceived hierarchy. For Rosa, varying polyamorous experiences and cultural values (collectivism vs. individualism) influenced the comfort level of polyamory outness that had strained some of her polyamorous relationships. Similarly, Luna briefed on her challenges in managing the outness of polyamorous relationships because of individual differences among partners. As for Amy,

> But I make that clear to my partners, and it's like, you know, hopefully, by making that clear, they don't feel like I'm trying to hide them from people who are important in my life that I'm ashamed of them, 'cause I don't want them to think I'm ashamed of them. I'm not. My friends know about them. I'm happy to introduce them to my friends. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

By explaining to her partners her rationale for concealing polyamory from her parents, Amy tried to reassure her partners of their importance to her and her life even though she chose not to introduce them to her family. Amy believed her polyamorous relationships were not her parents' "business," and she considered her friends more trustworthy and important to introduce her polyamorous partners to. In contrast, Rachel discussed her mixed feelings about defaulting to her partner and metamour with regard to polyamorous outness.

> So, whatever her comfort level and her boundaries, as far as that goes, as far as being out with [one partner], I have made the choice to default to whatever [metamour] needs, to say as much as it sucks to let somebody else dictate your actions, if I have those specific boundaries, I would want those boundaries to be respected as well. So when it comes to being out with [one partner], I default to Misha's boundaries and comfort levels. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

For Rachel, her level of public outness with a specific partner depended on the boundaries and comfort level of her metamour. Her mixed feeling about managing polyamorous outness with her partner came from losing control of personal coming-out decisions and compromising to respect metamour's boundaries. Later, she discussed how she was able to enjoy a higher level of polyamory outness with another partner in the family and public due to his openness about polyamorous relationships.

Furthermore, Glenn reflected on how her own lower level of polyamory outness had influenced the triad on navigating social life together. Specifically,

> The effect that it has is that everybody already knows my husband and I are married right? That's been a very visible thing since he and I got together. And so it doesn't necessarily feel very good for my wife in the arenas where I'm not out, because it basically is like she's invisible, and I don't like that at all. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

Here, Glenn pointed out that her low level of polyamory outness contributed to a sense of invisibility in public for her wife who did not have a legal status. Again, because of the unrecognition of polyamorous marriage and low public acceptance of polyamorous relationships,

Glenn's triad experienced stress over making decisions on "how we can operate in the world, or the places we want to go."

As aforementioned, most participants considered coming out as polyamorous as a relational decision that needed to be made with certain partners. In addition, different levels of polyamory outness among partners influenced their relationship experiences. As participants navigate their polyamorous relationship in a hetero/mononormative society, they face various societal challenges that permeate their personal and relational lives.

GET Four: Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges

This GET include three sub-themes that describe various levels of challenges participants experience while maintaining their relationships. Some of the challenges were inherent due to the added complexity of a multi-partnered relationship; for most participants, however, the primary challenges come from a societal level that influences their personal and relational well-being. Overall, internalization of these experiences of challenge influenced psychological and relationship distress and resilience.

Prevalence of Hegemony in a Normative Society

Participants described various types of normativity in their lived experiences (across various social systems from school, work, home, and when accessing mental health support) with their intersectional identities (e.g., sexuality, gender, disability) and polyamorous relationships. For most participants, the additive stressors were rooted in the mononormativity against their polyamorous relationships. For example,

> Even as far as the HOA, right? So there're 6 units in my building. The rules say, how many keys you are allowed, right? So like well, it was like a whole thing to get [metamour] a key, so now we only have one key for our guests, because it was like, what

> if you have children? So wait, I could have like 10 children and get 10 extra keys, but because I've got like one boyfriend, it's a big deal. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic pointed out the mononormativism that contributed to his experience of injustice with the homeowners association. Later, he further elaborated on challenges in dealing with another social system (i.e., hospital) due to the systemic unrecognition of polyamorous relationships. Dominic's experience was not an exception. Particularly,

> If we were allowed to get legally married, we would…That can be a source of difficulty because that doesn't always feel great for her. That he and I not only have the history, but also the legal marriage, and also practical things like health insurance and…Uhm, owning property, we were able to do. We own our home together like we're all on the deed. Yeah. It does come up. It was important to us to have the wedding, you know, even though it wasn't legal, with our community and have that ceremony. But there is kind of a tricky spot sometimes that we can't all be legally married. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

There were systemic challenges that Glenn's triad had experienced due to the unrecognition of polyamorous relationships. Such discrimination then complicated their relationship. For Glenn, a triad effort to flatten the perceived hierarchy by centering equality, commitment, togetherness, and belongingness was important because of her long relationship and legal marriage status with her husband compared to her wife. Similarly, Jack also attributed the mononormativism in the U.S. healthcare system to the perceived dilemma in selecting her partners and child for insurance coverage. He also discussed how the perceived level of inclusion in different states to polyamory

along with non-heterosexuality and transgender identity would limit relocation options. Such a dilemma resonated with Peter. For example,

> So as far as politically or whatever, part of the concern just in general for being LGBT like, what states can I live in and not get, you know, kicked out of housing or fired from my job? And I'm already in [state]. And I don't want to go further south. But there's a pretty nice job opportunity, [state], which is even worse. So if that would be harder even with not just being gay, but having multiple boyfriends, just hard for people to accept potentially… But now it's, "Okay, is this where we want to be long-term? Do we want to be in a society or an area that is more accepting of not just LGBT relationships but polyamory in general, surrounded by friends or isolated in a Southern State? (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

Perceived levels of inclusiveness for sexual orientation and polyamory in different states complicated Peter's decision-making for housing, employment, and state of residence, which contributed to the experience of extra stress.

In addition, several participants discussed the influence of religion on negative attitudes toward their sexuality and polyamory. For example,

> We once got into a fight because I was wearing a t-shirt with a rainbow stripe on it and we were going to pick up my wedding dress. My mom was like, "For me, a wedding is a religious thing. I'm going to pray the Ganesh before we get your dress. I don't need you dressing this way in that context." It was this kind of this idea that Hinduism and queerness were these incompatible categories. I would say my parents would probably feel that way, that something about being poly is incompatible with Indian ideologies or Hindu ideologies or whatever. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Here, Lynna experienced criticism from her mother who perceived Lynna's queerness as a threat to her ethnic identity. Such criticism led Lynna to develop a perceived rejection of polyamory from her parents. Similarly, several other participants also discussed how their parents' religious beliefs contributed to negative attitudes toward their sexuality, which eventually led them to conceal their polyamorous relationships. Specifically, as quoted earlier, Amy's past experiences of encountering heteronormativity against bisexuality led to the perceived parental rejection of polyamory. Glenn, Puffin, and Cat also discussed the negative influences of religious extremism on the public attitude toward sexuality, gender, and polyamory. Similarly, Elijah and Rosa also discussed their decision to conceal their polyamorous relationships was based on unreadiness to unpack their hetero/mononormativism rooted in Christianity (i.e., Mormonism, Catholicism).

While mental health care is supposed to support and help clients in challenging times, many participants shared their unpleasant experiences of mononormativity in their interactions with mental health providers. For example,

> I've had, I had a counselor that they told me that I need to leave my marriage so that I can explore myself. I had that advice that maybe I just need to be on my own, so I can figure myself out. And I disagree with that. That's not what I wanna do. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa remembered experiencing an explicit anti-poly bias from her previous counselors who had hetero/mononormative philosophies. She reflected on her counselor being confused by her polyamorous relationship. Later, Rosa acknowledged the benefits of finding a supportive and affirming counselor, yet she faced another barrier to receiving mental health services: costs. Similar to Amy, the benefits of mental health care came with a financial cost that she was unable to afford. Meanwhile, Lynna elaborated that even though the therapist never "explicitly

denounced it," she perceived an implicit anti-CNM bias from her current therapist (i.e., "conflated the open relationship part of it with the other problems in the relationship"). In addition, Peter perceived the incompetency of his current relationship counselor due to his exhibition of microaggression toward his sexuality (i.e., "homosexual acts").

Some participants in the mental health field also recognized the perpetuation of mononormativity in the counseling curriculum and research. For example,

> I don't want to take you back to CACREP, But I'm doing Intro to Family Counseling. And, my goodness, you know I feel like I should invoice my professor for my therapy co-pays because tell you the textbook I had from 2011 written by professors in Chicago, I'm like "I wanna, I'm gonna write them an angry letter." As you know that the "alternative families." Oh my god, all that… and why is it that gay people have lifestyles but straight people have lives, right? But our idea of what home institutes a family, we're still in America, wedded to the nuclear family myth, which we've known has been a myth for 50 years, but I haven't got 50 years to wait for us to realize that like the nontraditional family is actually the norm. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic pointed out his frustration over the microaggressions toward his sexuality and relationship configuration in counseling course materials. He reflected on the constant emotional stress (i.e., "fish out of water") from stepping out of his queer bubble to experiencing hetero/mononormativity in CACREP-accredited counseling training. Later, he continued to discuss his perception of the mental health field perpetuating the unfair institution of marriage through biased research. Similarly,

> I'm not convinced that even your traditional couples are reproducing the developmental models because of social desirability and under-reporting in research. I'm, you know, for

> instance, it's even in the name couples counseling. Couples, that's exclusionary of poly practitioners. So I've really been pushing for like intimate counseling, and intimate relationship counseling, or some kind of way to frame it that says we're not just interested in the couple. We, it's so embedded in our culture, it's in our language. We don't have words to describe it. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

For Elijah, some of the findings to support the traditional relationship developmental models might not be as empirical as they had appeared to be. The mononormative language in the counseling field also contributed to a sense of perceived exclusion of polyamory. Joining Dominic, Elijah also intended to advocate for inclusion and justice for polyamory in the counseling profession.

With a high prevalence of mononormativity in society, many participants experienced challenges due to a lack of research and discourse on polyamorous relationships. For example,

> Because often like the culture that you're up against as a polyamorist, is that, well, like who is your partner, right? And we've been together, if I've been with my boyfriend for 6 months, but I've been with [nesting partner] for 13 years, generally, the duration is the marker of success. And one of the biggest lessons that [nesting partner] and I had to learn is, how do you know your relationship is healthy if you've already done all the things on a checklist that most people think is a healthy relationship, right? I already own a house, right? We don't want kids. I've got married already. I'm not doing all that again. So what does it look like with my other partners? (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic pointed out the dearth of models to assess the health of polyamorous relationships. He continued to discuss the lack of social discourse on the healing of attachment wounds perpetuating senses of isolation and insecurity that could hinder relationship

development. In addition, he experienced a lack of resources assisting him in navigating the complexity of polyamorous relationship dissolution. Elijah also echoed that the scholarly ignorance of polyamorous populations contributed to a sense of uncertainty in his lifespan development. In addition, Rosa and Elijah discussed the limitation of the current language to describe their polyamorous feelings and partners. Amy also attributed the lack of visibility and normalization of polyamory in society to the perpetuation of anti-polyamory biases that challenged her living and outing as polyamorous. In sum, these participants explicitly discussed their perceived or lived challenges in a mononormative society. It is also crucial to point out again, all participants either implied or stated their decision to conceal their polyamorous relationship was based on low acceptance of polyamory in the U.S.

In addition, some participants also discussed their experiences of micro/macroaggression in their interpersonal relationships. For example,

> And it's really funny, too, because I think, like some of my friends who have cheated like before, when I tell them that I'm doing this, they get offended, and I'm like, “But you..” you know, “You cheated on somebody.” I'm not doing that, like everybody knows about it. So it's different than what you did. I think that mindset, like you were saying, like the heteronormative relationship mindset, is so ingrained in our society that people struggle to understand how that works. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

For Sylvia, the anticipated receptiveness of friends to polyamory failed to match her experiences in reality. Friends who had engaged in infidelity exhibited negative attitudes toward her polyamorous relationship which contributed to her sense of confusion. Sylvia believed that the internalization of hetero/mononormativity had contributed to her friends’ biases against polyamory. Similarly, Luna also encountered implicit biases against polyamory from her friends

who were “curious” if polyamory caused the relationship dissolution with her now-separated husband. In addition,

> I feel like any challenge, they’re going to be like, “Oh, it's because you're polyamorous.” And I will be like, “Well, don’t you have communication issues with your monogamous partner?” So, some of it is that I don't want to set a precedent when it's in this negative state, it's going to influence the people, even though I feel safe telling them about polyamory, I don't tell them all the details, because I don't want them to be predisposed to be like “you shouldn't do that.” (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

Peter perceived biases from friends toward polyamory (i.e., judgment, blaming polyamory for relationship challenges), contributing to his lower comfort level of sharing polyamorous relationship experiences with certain friends. Many participants share the same “concern” and “stress” about seeking support from their monogamous friends because they might blame polyamory as the cause of their relationship problems. For these participants, the need to justify their polyamorous relationships was “exhausting.” In addition to Peter, Amy, and Elijah also discussed their emotional exhaustion from “justifying” their polyamorous relationships.

> I mean the poly thing is so, it's, it's such a loaded, I mean, there's so much explanation you have to do that you almost feel like you're trying to justify it to the person you're coming out to… If I say, “I’m a demisexual person who engages in polyamorous relationships,” that derails the whole purpose, you know what I mean. And you have to do so much explanation, and it's exhausting. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Amy and Elijah both perceived exhaustion from justifying their polyamorous relationships in hypothetical scenarios. For them, the institutionalization and prevalence of mononormativity

contributed to the internalization of mononormativity that challenges people to understand their polyamorous relationship. It is worth noting that a few participants (i.e., Sylvia, Amy, Elijah) perceived the institutionalization of polygamy also contributed to outsider misperceptions of polyamory that led to anti-polyamory biases and stigma.

In addition, the LGBTQIA+ community is not an exception to anti-poly biases and stigmas. Some participants discussed how mononormativity prevailed in the community. For example,

> Usually, we have a one-on-one shortly after [the pride event], we tell people we're gonna do that If they wanna come listen. And I had this person walk up, and I started to explain it, and they said, “I don't, I don't wanna be recruited,” or something, and then like walked away so fast, they were walking to the next sign from the next booth, and I was like, “I don't understand where this perception comes from that we're trying to recruit people.”...We wanted to tell people that it existed, but nobody's trying to recruit people into it. If you don't want to be there, nobody wants to date somebody who doesn't wanna be polyamorous. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Sylvia remembered an encounter with anti-poly bias while she helped her poly group to promote poly visibility in the LGBTQIA+ community. Such a bias contributed to the development of confusion because it contradicted her perceived diversity and inclusion within the LGBTQIA+ community. Similarly, Gabe and Dominic also discussed encounters of mononormativity on dating apps where people accused them of “stealing” “good candidates.” Particularly,

> I remember one interaction where someone on Scruff accused me of stealing all the single men. And I, and I said, “Okay, let me give you a math lesson, darling. We're two

> married guys who are poly. We are literally adding to the pool, the entropy of available men." (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Dominic discussed how prominent homonormativity that marginalized the intersectionality of gayness and polyamory contributed to the anti-poly stigma in the gay community. Adding to his encounter with poly negativity from another user in the dating app, he elaborated on the existence of mononormativity in the design of the current gay dating apps (i.e., Scruff). Similarly, Gabe faced various microaggressions on dating apps, such as "Oh, you're polyamorous," "You're just taking away people who are good dates," "Why can you just be happy with the one person that you have," or "You're just greedy." Eventually, Gabe rationalized these microaggressions were people's projection of their own "sense of scarcity and insecurity in themselves."

Furthermore, biases and misconceptions existed in many participants' polyamorous or CNM worlds because of their sexuality, gender, and relationship structure. For instance,

> I definitely have a self-consciousness of having like a straight presenting male husband especially when I reach out to women on the apps because a lot of them will assume we're just looking for a unicorn, looking for a threesome like looking for whatever. His picture is on my profile, and that's by our agreement. People need to be told upfront that he exists and that he's part of the conversation and stuff. But I definitely, like I see certain women's profiles where they're like — not interested in meeting your boyfriend and kind of like this whole... So, I definitely also have that experience of feeling like certain queer women will take me less seriously because I'm married to a man. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Here, Lynna perceived bias from other queer women due to their misconceptions about her marriage and her primary partner's involvement in polyamorous experiences. Later, she discussed her witnessing biases and dismissiveness from her CNM friends toward relational challenges in non-primary partnerships because they were considered "casual" or "less important." In a similar way, Sylvia also discusses internalized hetero/normativity of her polyamorous friends contributed to their misinterpretation of her relationship configurations as monogamous. In addition,

> I think a lot of people join, being like, "Oh, then I can sleep with whomever I want." And that's like it's not really the way that it works. On some levels of ethical non-monogamy, it does work that way, but polyamory specifically is that's not the goal, basically, for most people that are polyamorous. And I think that, too, is a misconception 'cause a lot of people come to our meetings about polyamory and call it ethical non-monogamy, and it's like, well, they're related, but they're not really the same (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia recollected the moments where newcomers to the poly group lacked an accurate understanding of polyamory. To her, polyamory was more than extradyadic sex, which differentiated it from the general CNM. A similar mindset was witnessed by Lynna in her polyamorous experiences, where some approached polyamory with a "free-for-all" mindset, which was contrary to Lynna's understanding of polyamory where rules and boundary setting should be an ongoing process to avoid hurting partners. In addition, Elijah experiences CNM friends' misperception of polyamory as an open relationship.

> My partner has disclosed it to a few people only after they disclosed their situations… When we say "We're poly, or we lean more in that, we kind of lean more that direction."

> They're like, “Oh, you mean you're open.” And it's “No, we're not open” because that difference makes is really important to me, because it doesn't describe who I actually am, right? Just calling myself queer or gay, or whatever. And so they'll go, “Oh, but you're actually open right?” “No, we're not.” (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

For Elijah, the misperception of polyamory as an open relationship was rooted in the “hook-up” culture and the prevalence of open relationships in the gay community. As he emphasized, the difference between polyamory and open relationships was crucial to acknowledging his demisexual identity.

Meanwhile, some participants reflected on their experiences of biases against their polyamorous relationship based on their sexuality and gender. For example,

> We opened up our marriage because there had always been a thought or a thread of practicing polyamory or having an open marriage since we had gotten together as a couple not necessarily just as a married couple. Also, it was one of those things where, when we started having discussions early in our relationship, it was something where he would have been more comfortable if we were both just seeing other women. My, in poly, they call that OPP; they call it a one penis policy, which means he can see other women, I can see other women, but I then can't see other men. That's inequitable, so that wasn't anything that I then pursued. I was like “It's gonna be, it's gonna be more equitable, or this isn't gonna happen.” So it didn't happen. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

Here, Rachel remembered her perceived unfairness and inequity from previous discussions with her nesting partner about polyamory led her to reject the idea of OPP (i.e., one penis policy)

polyamory. Later with continuous negotiations with his nesting partner, the dyad finally entered polyamory with an equitable agreement. Similarly, while Cat and Amy had not personally experienced such explicit unfairness, they witnessed the prevalence of OPP in the polyamory and CNM community. In addition,

> My bisexuality, it's interesting in that way, is that I found that men seem to be okay with the concept of having a female partner, of me having a female partner in a way they are not with there being another male partner. They'll find something attractive with me seeing another woman, and I think there's sort of this weird, it's not as real if it's a woman, you know. Yeah, that the cult of the penis, the idea that like, that's what's actually powerful. That's what's gonna change me and sway me. And so that's an interesting thing, is it's like men will be okay with the concept of their girlfriend having girlfriends, but the second a guy looks at her sideways, it's, that's when the jealousy kicks in. They'll even fetishize both my bisexuality and my polyamory for other women. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Here, Amy elaborated on her confusion about the sexual double standards of some male partners on her bisexual and polyamorous experiences with people of different genders. She attributed the internalized patriarchy to their negative attitudes toward her bisexual experiences with men. Similarly, Rosa also experienced such sexual double standards in her polyamorous experiences.

> The other thing is that I had to let go of some friendships because I don't feel comfortable with jokes. I don't feel comfortable with people questioning that my husband is less of a man because he's allowing me to do this, because I'm the one with the boyfriend right now. He doesn't, he's not dating right now. And that to me is disrespectful, and even in

> the small jokes, and even, I just rather go away from that, from that group that is not good for me. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa discussed the microaggressions towards her polyamorous experiences that had contributed to ending long-term friendships. Some of her friends perceived Rosa's polyamorous experiences with other men as a threat to her husband's masculinity. From her view, such microaggressions disrespected her bisexuality and her husband. Likewise, Puffin remembered a conversation with friends also led to developing a sense of discomfort.

> When I talked to men about polyamory, they go immediately to "How could you let your wife or girlfriend or whoever be with somebody else?" And they kinda make, they seem to take a frown to it. They, it's like, "My God. I can't believe you. I could never do that." They say that in a way that makes it sound like I'm less of a man for allowing that. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin discussed his encounter with patriarchy when sharing his polyamorous relationships with friends. In addition, perceived sexual double standards in society later led Puffin to communicate with his partner on the coming-out process to avoid negative impacts on her. To these participants, internalized patriarchal beliefs and values contributed to their lived experiences with anti-poly biases.

Moreover, two participants with trans identities discussed how the ongoing trend of anti-trans legislation had contributed to a perceived existential threat. For example,

> My entire community is scarred by that. My entire community, the shooting in Colorado really fucking tore a scar. Then all these Republican politicians started saying that it was our fault because we were "grooming children" or whatever. We're fucking deeply traumatized. We're constantly being killed and being the scapegoat for everything. The

> most recent trans teenager in the UK, brutal murder just happened. All these people get on TV and spread their hatred and lie. The lies. The fucking lies that they do. If you have the power to get on TV, and say that, and you spread your lies, people believe you. We don't have a lot of positions where you can speak the truth unless you're wealthy and have a platform. If you're wealthy and have a platform, you're probably invested in this system to begin with. You don't really have an interest in doing that. I'm very terrified of the future of the way that power is continually being consolidated. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

To Cat, there is a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness underneath her anger toward the attack on the queer community by the political far-rights to deflect the corrupt systems. She elaborated on how her understanding of the process of genocides also added to her pessimism about the future because there is a lack of united activism against the threat of anti-trans trends. Similarly, Jack relayed the unnecessary stress of making decisions on relocation because of ongoing anti-trans legislation in his residing state. In addition, he also shared Cat's sense of powerlessness (i.e., "they could just, instead of doing that, don't do that.").

Lastly, although the impacts of COVID on personal lives were not the focus of the interviews, some participants shared their unique relationship experiences during the pandemic. For Jack, the intensified sense of isolation during quarantine facilitated his dyad to enter polyamory and his building long-distance relationships with other partners. Lynna discussed the forced situational monogamy during the COVID pandemic gave the primary dyad an opportunity to deepen their senses of connection and security, which later reduced her primary partner's perceived threats by her extradyadic experiences. For Rosa, however, the pandemic-related stressors (i.e., loss of employment, social quarantine) challenged her previous triadic relationship

(i.e., “no outlets”), which eventually led to relationship dissolution. Through the interviews, all participants discussed their encounters with societal challenges, some of which permeated their personal and relational lives and negatively impacted their well-being.

Internalization of Adversity Strains Individual and Relational Well-Being

There were various personal challenges that participants experienced during their polyamorous journey, most of which also influenced their relationship experiences with different partners. Navigating stigma, shame, jealousy, and past trauma added strain at both the personal and relational levels. Some participants discussed their negative emotions due to the internalization of hetero/mononormativity. For example,

> So it's just a shame piece that just, ‘cause it's not like you conquer the shame and you move on. The shame is still there. It always comes up. It's in, it’s threaded into your everyday reality. And you, you get better at addressing it, but it never fully goes away. It's that internalized homophobia, that internalized heteronormativity is like there's a voice in my head going. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here, Elijah discussed the relationship between internalized heteronormativity, himself, and daily life. For him, internalized heteronormativity is an inner voice that he could only turn down rather than turn off. He remembered “grieving” the loss of heterosexual privilege when he came out as gay and desired to follow homonormativity (i.e., “replicate that heterosexuality” “marry” “have kids”). In his polyamorous relationships, he described the constant confrontation with shame due to internalized hetero/mononormativity. Likewise, Gabe briefed how his “own shame” about his “kinks” and sexual preferences had challenged open communication with his nesting partner when they started polyamorous exploration. As for Dominic, the internalized heteronormativity

delayed his healing process of sexual trauma that had changed his sexuality over time and challenged his relationship with his nesting partner. In addition,

> As far as heteronormative society, I feel a lot of my frustration with that is kind of embodied through [metamour] of what [metamour] expects, heteronormative monogamy, you know, a lot of those beliefs that I kind of thought is more external to the unit feels like it's inside the unit. And that's been a challenge for me, even though I can admit that he's making progress. (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

For Peter, the hetero/mononormativity came within his polycule, in which metamour's internalized hetero and monogamous beliefs had created a challenge for him. Specifically, he discussed the reinforcement of hierarchy from metamour contributed to an ongoing power struggle among members in the polycule. There was a sense of powerlessness and sadness in Peter as he continued to develop a polyamorous relationship with his partner in the hierarchical structure (e.g., "[partner] and I are being kept from each other" "more crying"). In addition, his metamour also developed negative attitudes toward him, which eventually led Peter and him to be "antagonistic with each other." Such a sense of powerlessness was also shared by Sylvia in her previous polyamorous relationship with a couple.

> I did try to date a married couple at one point, and that was extremely difficult because there is so many relationship connections. So it was like me and the wife, and then me and the husband, and then me and the married couple. Because they would have conversations, and then come tell me about their conversations, and I'm like, "Shouldn't I be involved in that conversation if it affects me?" And they only wanted to date me together, which is, it was very hard for me. I wanted to make connections individually with them. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

For Sylvia, the sense of powerlessness in relationship decision-making and development came from being a unicorn (i.e., a third partner joining with an existing couple to create a triad or throuple) in a hierarchical relationship based on an extension of heteronormativity. For these participants, the relational influence of individuals' internalized hetero/mononormativity manifested in different ways.

In addition, some participants shared how their trauma or adversity negatively impacted their polyamorous relationships. For example,

> Things fell apart a little bit with my platonic partner. It happened, and that was more with drama, with someone else he was seeing. I had the impression that she was less consenting to it than she was giving him the impression of. I was, I got the feeling that he put off telling her about me too long, and that made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to be a part of that, so I was like, "Listen, I gotta step back. This reminds me too much of what I've been through before. I can't be a part of this." (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Earlier, Amy discussed her confusion over her ex-fiancé's opposite attitudes and behaviors toward her polyamorous relationship (supportive prior to extradyadic sex v.s explosion afterward). The retraumatization in her relationship with her platonic partner and metamour resulted in her withdrawal from that polyamorous relationship. Similarly, Rachel and Glenn remembered the "pain" and "hurt" from their partners' infidelity in monogamy contributed to a sense of mistrust and insecurity as they explored polyamory together. Rachel also identified a generational pattern in one of her previous polyamorous relationships.

> When I began establishing a friendship with his wife and sharing her experiences of what her relationship with [partner] was like, it became clear that he was censoring and very

> heavily curating my perceptions of how he conducted himself towards me and also towards his wife. He was gaslighting and lying to both of us, either outright or by omission. He would use the idea that was jealous or feeling insecure against me by making me feel immature and irrational for experiencing these emotions. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

Rachel remembered her witnessing and involuntary involvement in the emotional abuse and infidelity of her father toward her mother, which traumatically influenced her values on relationships and marriage. Here, she pointed out the generational pattern where she had experienced similar emotional abuse and dishonesty in her previous polyamorous relationships, which led her to "question my self-awareness" and "emotional distress." In addition, Gabe briefly discussed how individuals' past traumas were manifested and amplified in polyamorous relationships through a sense of fear and insecurity in relationship stability, which then contributed to relationship "tumultuousness." It is noteworthy that although some participants reflected on the relationship challenges due to past trauma or adversity, no participants implied or stated the association between trauma and the decision to enter polyamory.

Furthermore, jealousy is not absent in participants' polyamorous relationships. For very few, such as Cat and Lynna, the feeling of compersion is constant in their relationship, which contributes to the rarity of jealousy. For many others, however, jealousy "creeps in" from time to time. For example,

> I had to learn not to be jealous. I grew up in a very traditional [ethnic] environment, and you even think that jealousy is a helpful thing and acting out on it; it's a healthy thing. That's how I grew up. And that's how I was for 15, 10 years of my life with my husband. I was extremely jealous, controlling, and we had to do a lot with my own insecurities. But

> opening up and going through the process of becoming polyamorous has helped me tremendously as well as him because we feel so secure with each other. We're gonna be together for a very long time at least, while we're still trying to make it work. And the jealousy part did hit my husband, who is not a jealous person, and we work through that, as well as me when I was constantly jealous. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa discussed how her jealousy was conditioned by her own ethnic community as a tool to manipulate her relationship experiences in monogamous marriage. As jealousy arose from a sense of insecurity, she experienced various relational challenges at the beginning stage of her polyamorous explorations with her nesting partner. For example, she remembered her complicated feelings (e.g., “happy” “jealous”) when her nesting partner developed extradyadic relationships and her challenges in respecting her partner’s privacy in other relationships. In addition, insecurity-driven jealousy was evident in some other participants’ relationship experiences. Specifically,

> I definitely think it [jealousy] was personal insecurities. With her being with somebody else, the sexual decline happened a little bit in the beginning, so I was insecure about whether I was providing enough gratification to her in that area. I didn't interact with him as often, so I didn't know what they were talking about or what his intent was. So I’ll be sitting there thinking what if she likes him better than me, and she does want to leave our relationship, because, even though I am absolutely amazing, he's also pretty cool? So there are definitely some insecurities going on in my side of the area to where I wasn't sure what she was thinking, or maybe he would get jealous, and wherever way that felt to

> him, and not want to be in a poly relationship with her, and kind of put a choice on her. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Puffin pointed out that the sense of insecurity contributed to feeling jealous at the beginning stage of his Vee relationship. The uncertainty about the changing relationship dynamic and comparison between self and metamour led him to question the relationship stability with his partner. Later, he conveyed that such a sense of insecurity was also shared by his metamour at the beginning due to skepticism of each other's attitudes toward the Vee relationship. Furthermore, Sylvia discussed her insecurities in a previously monogamous relationship contributed to "self-sabotaging" behaviors that eventually led to relationship dissolution. In her polyamorous relationships, her "self-esteem issues" contributed to a sense of insecurity in her dyadic relationship when her nesting partner was "very excited" about her metamour.

While these participants reflected on how their own jealousy influenced their relationship experiences, a few remembered the relational challenges they had experienced due to the jealousy of their partners. For example,

> I was constantly reassuring my fiancé, saying, "No, no, no, I still have feelings, exactly the same way. This doesn't steal from my feelings for you." Like "This isn't gonna make me want to leave you." You know, "I don't want to leave you for him, because that's not how I'm feeling." You know, "It's not like one or the other." You know we didn't talk, but it ended up being like I have to talk to him, reassure him, and comfort him for hours every day. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Amy discussed how her communication with her ex-fiancé after entering polyamory started to center on reassurance and comfort to reduce his insecurities. For her, her ex-fiancé's insecurities

manifesting in the daily polyamorous experiences contradicted his claim that “he was not a jealous person.” Similarly,

> It's something that my partner has articulated that he doesn't think he'll ever get to. He's kind of like, "I don't think that's on the table for me. I think what we're shooting for is neutral." He's like, "As long as your other relationships aren't hurting me, that's kind of what we should be shooting for. Don't hurt me with your actions." But I mean, he kind of feels pretty confident that he doesn't think he's capable of experiencing compersion at the thought of me hooking up with someone else. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

For Lynna, her primary partner’s feelings towards her polyamorous experienced would fluctuate based on perceived impact on himself. Lynna remembered constant negotiation of rules and boundaries to balance her own autonomy in polyamorous experiences and her primary partner’s sense of security in the established hierarchical structure. For these participants, insecurity was the primary factor contributing to the feeling of jealousy in their polyamorous relationships. For some others, jealousy arose from the desire for longingness. Particularly,

> Where, in the way that I feel like most people experience when they are interested in someone new, right? There's a lot of you know, warm, fuzzy feelings, and wanting to be with them all the time. And you know lots of hugs and kisses and love letters and playlists, you know, like all that kind of crap, and where [nesting partner] and I have been together for 5 years. A lot of our relationship has kind of burned down to something that is very steady and no less affectionate, but kind of lacks some of those grand gestures. And so there's always been like an understanding of, I get that this is not happening because you like them more than me, just because it's new and exciting. But also, “When

> was the last time you made me a playlist, bud?" (Jack, trans White pansexual man, 27, upper-middle class)

For Jack, the "jealousy-like" feelings were derived from longing for excitement, affection, and relationship gestures at the early stage of the dyadic relationship. He also perceived challenges in approaching communication on relationship gestures with his nesting husband because it could be "tricky" for causing perceived blaming or misunderstanding (i.e., "Why don't you do those things with me anymore?"). Similarly, Gabe and Elijah also discussed how they or their partners experienced jealousy in polyamorous relationships due to longingness (i.e., "fear of missing out"). For these participants, there was a lower level of jealousy in their relationships even though they perceived a high level of relationship stability and security. In sum, jealousy ebbs and flows in most of the participants' relationships.

Multi-Partnership Amplifies Relational Complexity

This sub-theme reflects the added relationship complexity due to the nature of a multi-partnership. Participants discussed how the involvement of multiple partners and metamours simultaneously created relational challenges. It seemed universal across participants that scheduling quality time with partners was challenging. For example,

> This is gonna sound so dumb (chuckle). But there's only so many colors on Google Calendar. Like, look at this, look at this (show his Google calendar). Okay, like this is just stupid. This is what I see every day, and Google only has so many colors for me to live my life. I needed, I need more colors…And so that becomes, that is a practical but actually a really central issue, right? Because when you're dating so many people, the time that we're spending with each other is important. And I'm not suggesting to be as any retentive as like, "I want like a weekly report like how much time did I spend with

> each of these people," like "How am I doing" so I can like, "Oh, hang on a minute, like my metrics are down last week for partner number three, I need to bump that up. But more just because of a sense of like, "Oh, I'm doing this thing" like, 'Who have I invited' or like 'How many people am I expecting" like "Is my parking spot gonna be available right now?" Or, it becomes very…There's a lot of practicalities, which one conventional calendar just doesn't really handle. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic pointed out a practical challenge in scheduling differentiated events with partners as such differentiation was not supported by conventional calendars. Similarly, Rachel, Gabe, and Lynna also discussed balancing self-care and quality time with different partners based on their schedules could be challenging. For Glenn, scheduling was still challenging even in her closed triad.

> I'm someone who likes to plan things when I'm in the mood, my mind works really fast, and I get ideas, and I want to make plans. And with two other people you have to consult, phew, it slows me down you know, So it's just different that I can't just go and schedule things and make plans and I have to wait till we're all together to be able to talk about it. By then, I'd have like a list of 5 things, and that can be overwhelming, you know, to the other person. 'Cause my wife is more of a processor and can get overwhelmed when presented with a whole list of things, my husband's kind of quick with that kind of stuff. So for her, to come home after a long day of work and for me to fire off 5 different things to think about, it's like a lot. So I had to adjust there and say, "When is a good time for me to run some things by you." And maybe even plan the time so that everyone knows we're gonna sit down and talk about some scheduling things. Otherwise, I can create overwhelm, and I've noticed that. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

There was a challenge in scheduling triadic events due to multi-partnership and different planning styles and personalities among partners. For Glenn, scheduling a meeting for a triadic meeting to schedule events was often needed to avoid overwhelming one partner. In addition, for three participants (i.e., Luna, Jack, Sylvia), child-rearing added complexity in scheduling because they and their nesting partners need to consider childcare when scheduling relationship events as a dyad and with extradyadic partners. As aforementioned, it is common that participants expressed limited time for their multi-partnered relationship maintenance. Rosa's experience was an excellent summary,

> I believe that you can love indefinitely; the only thing that's limited is time. That's what I run into. Time is the killer, and the killer of relationships, too. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa pointed out the finiteness of time in maintaining relationships even though love could be infinite. The metaphor "time is the killer," based on Rosa's experiences, had two meanings. As she tried to manage different relationships in polyamory, she encountered moments when she strained her relationships because of prioritizing one over others. In addition, she implied the decline of relationship satisfaction in monogamy over time. Particularly, Rosa experienced changes in her own values, beliefs, and expectations, which could have destroyed her marriage if the dyad were not polyamorous.

Another prevalent relational challenge existed in many participants' polyamorous experiences due to the relationship structure. Particularly, some participants discussed difficulties in establishing and balancing boundaries. For example,

> Because the three of us are so close now, if there's an issue between him and I, or him and her, and like I wanna help, but I also feel like I shouldn't get really involved in it. So I'm

> like open to listening, and you know, if they wanna throw information off me, I'm fine with that. But like, we basically handle those individually like, it's not like a three-person meeting, like our relationship is our relationship, and their relationship is their relationship. And I don't wanna get, if there's something going on between them, I don't want to be, you know, pulled into that necessarily. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia pointed to the emotional proximity with her partner and metamour creating a challenge for her to balance between providing relational support and maintaining the boundaries of two separate relationships. She continued to discuss the unique challenges in her previous experience of providing support to her partner throughout a polyamorous relationship lifespan (i.e., dating, conflict, dissolution), because she needed to manage her own emotions and maintain appropriate boundaries. Similarly, for many other participants, managing boundaries between separate polyamorous relationships was challenging. For example, Puffin discussed his discomfort with his partner sharing his personal information and dyadic relationship with metamour. For him, relational boundaries must be maintained in the current Vee relationship until developing a deeper bond between the three of them. In addition, some participants discussed relationship challenges where they experienced negativity between their partners. For example,

> One person tried to throw [nesting partner] under the bus for something. And I was like, and it was something that didn't sound like something [nesting partner] would do. And I was like, “Why would you shit-talk [nesting partner] to my face?” “Of all people, like [nesting partner] is my husband. I love them dearly. This doesn't make me want to talk to

> you, you know, at all. In fact, I would rather you get away from me now." (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

Gabe remembered one encounter where he ended the relationship with one ex-partner who disrespected his nesting partner. For him, it was crucial that potential partners maintained the boundary by demonstrating respect for his current partnerships. Similarly, Lynna also withdrew herself from polyamorous relationships when perceiving disrespect for her primary partners or primary partnership. In addition, Lynna and Luna discussed their challenges in navigating relationships because of the veto power of their nesting or primary partners. Both participants reflected on the negotiations with their partners to determine how to proceed with polyamorous relationships. The hierarchy itself posited a boundary between their dyadic and extradyadic relationships where Luna and Lynna needed to balance "delicately." While by agreement their nesting or primary partners could dictate their polyamorous relationships to some extent, extradyadic partners did not have such power to cross the relationship boundary.

Earlier, Jack discussed how long-distance relationships and neurodivergence contributed to experiencing the phenomenon of emotional object permanence in maintaining relationships. Similarly, Luna, Peter, and Cat reflected on physical distance as a barrier to relationship development or maintenance. For example, Cat remembered one of her polyamorous relationships had dissolved due to her partners' relocation. For Luna and Peter, residing in different states with some partners contributed to a sense of uncertainty in their relationship outlooks.

Furthermore, most participants discussed the challenges in communication with their partners. For some, a lack of openness, transparency, and honesty contributed to relational problems at some point in their polyamorous relationships. For example,

> Then a thing came up where my husband came to me after months of flirting with this woman and said, “Hey, I've got this thing with a woman all set up for us.” And I didn't know he had been doing that, and then a bit later, he confessed that there had been some infidelity as well, and it ended up being a very hurtful situation. It took a long time for us to work through that hurt. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

Glenn remembered the emotional harm caused by her husband’s dishonesty in communication and infidelity led the dyad to withdraw from polyamorous exploration to heal the dyadic relationship wound. It took the dyad years to rebuild the trust through consistent communication to resume their polyamorous journey. Similarly, Peter also briefed withholding certain information about extradyadic experiences from nesting partners, which contributed to emotional pain. Amy also experienced a sense of confusion after her ex-fiancé finally revealed his true feelings about her polyamorous relationships

> But then, the first time I had sex with my friend. I got home, and my ex-fiancé lost his mind, absolute screaming at me, furious. And it kind of turned out that he'd sort of secretly, internally been thinking of this as like a test, like, “If you love her, let her go, and she'll come back.” And I'd failed. And this was very confusing, because he had been fully supportive up until that point, and we've been communicating so much. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Amy felt confused by the sudden changes in her ex-fiancé’s attitudes and behaviors toward polyamory after her first experience of extradyadic sex. Her ex-fiancé’s explosion to her extradyadic encounter made her realize the concealment of his true intention for supporting polyamory: A test of her love and commitment to monogamy with him. The revelation of her ex-fiancé true attitudes and feelings toward polyamory eventually contributed to Amy dissolving

two relationships, including her engagement and polyamorous relationship. In addition, her experiences of emotional manipulation in her previous engagement caused a lasting negative impact on her later polyamorous relationships, as she developed nervousness and anxiety in disclosing sexual experiences due to perceived concern about her partner's unacceptance.

Amy was not alone in having the challenge of discussing sexual experiences with partners. In fact, several other participants commented that sex-related topics were the most challenging in their communication with their partners. For example, Gabe briefed about his shame and embarrassment in talking about his kinks and sexual preferences with his nesting partner when they started their polyamorous exploration. For Dominic, the discomfort in addressing sex-related topics persisted in his polyamorous relationships.

> It took a very long time for that to be anything like comfort around sex. I still don't feel like it's necessarily there. I still think that there's a kind of, you know, if [metamour] is here, whenever [metamour] is here, the white noise machine would be beyond the bedroom or something. But the white noise machine, I use it in my office for clients, but they use it, they use it when having sex, or be told that euphemistically right? (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

For Donomic, the white noise machine was a euphemistic way to indicate sexual encounters between his nesting partner and metamour, and the dyad continued to improve their comfort in communicating sex-related topics. Even though his articulation of past sexual trauma helped the dyad address their sexual incompatibility, such an incompatibility continued to linger in their relationship dynamic. In contrast, Luna experienced challenges in setting sexual boundaries with non-primary partners. Specifically,

> I feel like the barrier talk is often uncomfortable. People can talk about fluid bonding, all that stuff, basically having unprotected sex…But that can be a difficult conversation sometimes because emotionally, there's something to not using barriers. You're definitely more naked, literally with that person, and so that can be uncomfortable having to talk… (Luna, cis White pansexual woman, 46, upper-middle class)

Here, Luna reflected on the discomfort of communicating sexual boundaries because they could elicit certain emotional reactions. She continued discussing how different attitudes toward and costs of testing could complicate communications on sexual safety with non-primary partners. For these participants, approaching sex-related topics with partners contributed to personal discomfort, which many had made individual and relational efforts to address it. In addition, as all participants experienced various levels of challenges, they also managed to build a support system to help maintain their personal and relational well-being.

GET Five: Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance

This GET encompasses the strengths, resources, and resiliencies that participants built to address various challenges in their relationship maintenance. All participants credited their personal effort and relational support, especially in relationship communication, for managing relationship problems. For some, accessing community resources and cultures facilitated a sense of belonging, normalization, and liberation.

Ongoing Personal Work for Growth

This sub-theme reflects the personal efforts participants have made to achieve personal growth in deepening self-understanding and managing their polyamorous relationships. This ongoing work included the development of critical consciousness, self-acceptance, flexibility, and relational factors such as relationship effort, quality time with partners, and awareness of

partners' needs/wants. For many participants, literature was a resource to obtain informational support. For example,

> A lot of times it's just me reading also. There's a lot of resources on the Internet. You have to be careful which ones you choose of course, but even there are books out. There, just recently finished reading Polysecure. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa discussed seeking guidance and education from reaching high-quality materials to navigating relationship challenges. Similarly, Dominic also mentioned the importance of selecting non-heteronormative polyamory literature to gain relationship education. Rachel, Glenn, Peter, Sylvia, and Elijah also echoed the usefulness of seeking personal and relational wisdom from books or other materials. While these participants voiced different opinions about popular polyamory books, the book *Polysecure* was universally praised by them. Specifically, Dominic, Gabe, and Sylvia especially appreciated approaching polyamorous relationships from an attachment perspective. Specifically,

> And like, I've been, I'm enjoying, uhm, I forget which one it is, the attachment theory focused one where… (Interviewer: *Polysecure*?) Yes, *Polysecure*. I'm enjoying that one, where they're using a bit more attachment work, attachment healing involves relationship and connections (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

For Gabe, the emphasis of individuals in some other polyamory literature still reflect white supremacy in polyamory. Focusing on communal healing rather than individualistic healing provides an "antidote" to white supremacy. He later discussed decolonizing white supremacy as an important component of his polyamorous experiences. Similarly, Dominic sided with Gabe that a lack of social discourse on the healing of attachment trauma perpetuates a sense of

isolation and insecurity that hinders relationship development. He read *Polysecure* and recommended it to his poly friends for community healing.

In addition, many participants reflected on developing a critical consciousness that helped confront and resist oppressive messages. For example,

> Essentially what I've had to do is throw out my entire value system that is built on Christianity, Mormonism, you know Western ideals of family and everything heteronormativity, all I had to throw it all out, and there's, there's nothing left. What do you use then, as your value system If you had to throw out everything else that has oppressed you? So slowly, I've had to recreate and rebuild my own version of my values, and over in, the kind of key ingredients have been empathy, connection, and ethics…I forgot the fourth one, which is consent (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

For Elijah, living against Christianity, heteronormativity, and mononormativity could be exhausting and non-productive. It is crucial for him to deconstruct his old value system based on these types of normativity and recreate a new one to liberate him from shame about his sexual and polyamorous identities and create meaningful polyamorous relationships. Similarly, Lynna tried to deconstruct traditional beliefs in the institution of marriage through a disidentification process to "subvert" the traditional definition of "spouse identity" in polyamory. For her, the terms "marriage" and "wife" were defined by herself and the dyad, rather than the outside perception. "Chop" and "bleach" her hair, "change my pronouns," and "dress more masculine" after her wedding were her efforts for resistance to the traditional definitions of a "spouse" identity. In addition,

> I'm a wife, but again, I'm a wife in my way. I'm a wife who still gets to have sex with strangers, and I'm a wife who gets to flirt as much as she wants to and who's going to send her husband on vacation to Miami with his hot single female friend. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Again, Lynna managed to develop her definition of marriage and spouse through her polyamorous relationship experiences. Correspondingly, Rosa had gone through a process of deconstructing the conditioned value system based on Catholicism and the ethnic community in her home country

> The only standard, the only standard that we've seen is just marriage, one person forever, and the longevity of the marriage is what makes it happy, and that's not true sometimes, it's more short amounts of chapters in your book, like I call it. You can be happy. You can be, and you can find contentment in many ways. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Rosa discussed reconstructing her relationship philosophy under which she could find happiness and fulfill changing needs in different short chapters rather than in the longevity of monogamy. For her, disclosing her polyamorous relationships and experiences to her cousins and sister was an intentional effort to set an example of exploring one's own happiness instead of following pre-established norms. Similarly, developing political and moral radicalism, such as "moral antirealism," "anti-capitalism," "anti-white supremacy" and "anti-authoritarianism," Cat focused on empathizing and reducing the current suffering in the queer and poly community.

Furthermore, some participants reflected on the benefits of counseling in managing personal and/or relational issues. For example,

> Mainly I use my counselor. I had a counselor that I, (pause) that it's I guess impartial and helps me whenever we have issues. And they're friendly to their LGBTQ+ community, and they are supportive, and they understand the, it's slightly, I guess because I don't think it's very… Anyway, they… I bring my relationship to a counselor so that they help me navigate certain problems that we're having. And even though it can get expensive, it's, to me, it's worth it because it doesn't put me in a position because I am not good at dealing with this either. So I need guidance, and that's what I've done, through an appointment over Zoom to discuss when that issue gets bigger and heavier. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa pointed out the important characteristics of a multiculturally competent counselor, who helped her navigate challenges in polyamorous experiences. Similarly, Gabe summarized his current counselor's curiosity, humility, acknowledgment, and validation of his polyamorous relationships strengthened their therapeutic relationships and facilitated positive counseling experiences. In addition, Dominic stressed another important benefit of having a polyamorous counselor.

> The therapist, who is, themselves, poly…The person whose appointment is right before me in the office with my therapist is my ex-boyfriend's new boyfriend, right? I, we meet in the hallway, and it's like, "Oh hey, I don't know you started to see him. And it's like "We see each other once a week." And it's now got the point, so my friend goes to him, and then I refer someone else who's now his 10 o'clock on Thursday morning, and his 10 o'clock's husband is [friend] husband's client. And suddenly it's like the sense of community is initially kind of terrifying, when you're like, "Well, if I fuck this relationship up, suddenly that goes everything. But then it so very quickly twists into,

> “Oh, hang on a minute, there is more color, texture to be found in connections with people with whom you like in a relationship and then not, but that doesn't stop you from having connection to them. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Here, Dominic pointed out the sense of community built around polyamorous clients and counselors, even though intricate connections could be challenging to navigate. For him, there is a crucial difference between a counselor being “knowledgeable” and a counselor with “lived experiences” of polyamory or CNM; the latter acknowledged the diversity in polyamorous and CNM relationships. In contrast, Peter and Lynna discussed the benefits of counseling in addressing non-polyamorous problems or issues. In sum, almost all participants utilized counseling to facilitate their personal growth at some point in their lives.

Moreover, most participants made personal efforts (e.g., self-reflection, negotiation, setting boundaries) to address relationship challenges. For example,

> I do take some pride in the way that I was able to kind of recognize that about myself and hold steadfast in that even as I went through some really not effective and not healthy versions of non-monogamy. I was kind of like, "Okay, this isn't working, but the concept is good. We're still going to make this work for us somehow. This is not it. This is not working. So, we need to like to figure out another model that maybe does.” (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

Lynna remembered the self-examination of her non-monogamous relationship experiences that helped her explore more healthy models rather than questioning the validity of non-monogamy. Identifying the causes of her relationship failures later motivated her to interact with polyamorous people to adopt “healthy and ethical” practices. In addition, to overcome the

limitations of scarce poly models, she constantly negotiated with her primary partners on boundaries, expectations, and rules to address personal and relational challenges. Similarly,

> That's when I was really confronted by myself. It's just like this is gonna keep happening, if like I'm trying to force myself into a monogamous relationship structure without making it clear to partners that like, "If I'm in a monogamous relationship with you, it's a choice to not act on feelings for other people, not a promise to never have feelings for other people." I need to really acknowledge this about myself. And so then I spent like the next year, really exploring that. This last year has been very educational for me in terms of my own romantic inclinations. So that was kind of the journey to the full realization. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

For Amy, the end of her polyamorous relationship with her ex-fiancé and ex-partner forced her to reexamine her relationship orientations. Realizing monogamy was a choice to not act on extradyadic feelings, rather than denying their existence, motivated her to liberate herself from fear and make relationship decisions based on her true feelings. In addition, most participants stressed the "trust" in their relationships as one of the most important resiliency that had been motivating them to overcome challenges in polyamory. Furthermore, it is worth noting that all participants continued to develop and maintain their polyamorous relationships despite various types of challenges, which itself is resiliency. Some participants named this effort an authentic "being" and "living." For example,

> I was just like, "You know what? I'm just going to be openly queer, openly autistic, openly polyamorous, openly trans." It was like a freaking mental load was lifted off of me…Just committing to being just completely open and honest about everything. It's

> nice. It was just really, really nice. That's one of the guiding principles I live my life by. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Here, Cat discussed how disclosing her queer, trans, and polyamorous identities to her parents liberated her from the "baggage" of identity concealment. For her, it became essential to live openly and authentically with who she was despite the perceived danger to her life. Similarly, Glenn discussed her sense of pride in living authentically and creating a meaningful triadic relationship in the face of stress over the concealment of polyamorous relationships. In fact, all participants implied authenticity as resiliency as they continued to stay true to their sexuality and polyamorous inclinations.

Togetherness in Addressing Challenges

This sub-theme describes the importance of team support in the face of personal or relational adversities. All participants emphasized "we" and "us" when reflecting on overcoming their personal or relational challenges in their polyamorous experiences, which indicated a strong sense of togetherness with their partners and/or metamours. For example,

> It again comes down to like jumping in both feet first, like I know, I know what the pool that [one partner] looks, and I know [the other partner] Pool. And there's a matter of like your relationship with your metas as well, the other members of the village that's taking care of them, and being able to have that, those lines of communication open, you need them. Like, not having to bear the brunt and take the weight of everything yourself, and meeting those challenges head-on, and doing whatever you know is within your capability to take care of this other person, and be able to say to your metas, "Hey, I'm having these experiences. Can you shed any light on what's going on so that way I know exactly what I'm dealing with?" And just really again, just both feet forward, jump right

> in, and let's tackle this together, and see what we can do. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

Here, Rachel stressed the importance of collaboration in her polycule for personal and relational support. She believed it also takes a "village" to take care of an adult. For her, being fully involved in polyamorous relationships, socializing with metamours, and making joint efforts add strengths to address challenges. Likewise, Sylvia remembered moments when metamours supported her childcare, which reduced her logistical and emotional pressure.

Similar to Rachel, many other participants remembered seeking insights or perspectives from their partners in relationship problems. For Donomic,

> I guess the one advantage I have is I can also consult people whom I've been in a relationship with, so they have a little more insight into the dynamics. So I, 'cause I could be like, "Hey, hey, guys, you know what it's like having me as a boyfriend, like you have a perspective on this thing." (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Dominic's multi-partnership helped him gain more perspective to assess himself in relationships. He remembered his other partners reassured him when being blamed for relationship conflict by one partner (i.e., "those things that that person said about you, we don't believe that they're true because we have data about how we.."). As quoted in an earlier section, showing his emotional pain of relationship dissolution in front of his nesting partner and receiving support from him was "strange" and "new" but "a great strength." Such a phenomenon was also experienced by other participants, including Lynna, Luna, Rosa, and Elijah, as they discussed that they could always count on their nesting or primary partners if their extradyadic relationships ended. For these participants, relational support from other partners was a unique strength that polyamory

provided. Furthermore, Puffin also perceived another relational support unique to polyamorous relationships.

> In the fact that the older you get, God forbid something happens to somebody, in a one-on-one partner relationship, that sense of loss is… It creates a lot of grief, and you have friends, and you have family you can lean on. But the idea that if you're in a partner relationship, if you do come across that sense of loss, you have somebody absolutely cares about you and loves you and will help you through that loss while they're grieving through and going through the same motions. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin pointed out a perceived relational resilience in multi-partnership in the loss of a partner. To him, there is a difference between grieving with partners and receiving support from parents or friends.

In addition, many participants discussed that the continuous commitment and effort they and their partners had made strengthened the trust, understanding, and security in their polyamorous relationships. For example,

> And so we had to work through those triggers that we had for each other. But it's, and it's been a long, you know, long 8-year process. But we've gotten to a point now, where like if something's bothering me, we both trust each other now to the point, where it's still much easier to talk about things because we're in, we've learned the triggers, and worked through them. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia pointed out the continuous dyadic effort contributed to a deeper trust and understanding of different communication styles, which eventually improved their communication. Sylvia remembered providing support to her nesting partner in healing from

childhood emotional abuse to differentiate emotional expressions and blaming. Similarly, Jack also discussed the ongoing dyadic effort in deepening their relationship, which helped overcome relational challenges because of different communication styles and affectional needs. For Lynna, an increased sense of connection, stability, and security with her primary partner benefited both of them in polyamorous experiences (e.g., "compersion," less perceived "threat" by extradyadic partners). In fact, many participants resonated with Lynna's experiences. As they worked individually and together with their partner to deepen trust and security, jealousy became more manageable, and some started to experience the feeling of compersion more frequently.

Personal and Relational Efforts in Managing Jealousy

Many participants discussed making various types of efforts to address jealousy in their polyamorous relationships. For some, the process started within themselves. Particularly,

> When processing jealousy and processing anger or my views on certain things, I have been able to stop and think… I'd ask myself "Why am I feeling this way?" if I'm jealous about something, why am I jealous about it? And that's when I really kind of went in a deep think mode, forwarding through all the reasons why, like "Oh, it's because of this insecurity." "Why do you feel this insecurity?" (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin pointed out that personal reflection helped him process feelings of jealousy or anger, which facilitated his personal growth in polyamorous relationships. Gaining a deeper understanding of his feeling helped him increase his sense of security and confidence in himself and his relationships. Similarly,

> I've learned to hold on, to let go of anger or jealousy by working on myself, looking in, in myself "Why am I feeling like this? Why am I feeling insecure? Why am I feeling

> sad?" And then I address it, and a lot of times it has to do with me feeling insecure about myself (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

The process of self-reflection to process her feelings of anger and jealousy helped Rosa to identify and address her personal insecurities. Likewise, Sylvia discussed the improvement of self-esteem through personal work (e.g., "accepting of myself," "communicate effectively," "deal with my own emotions") increased her confidence in herself and relationships.

In addition, a few participants discussed providing relational support to help address the jealousy of their partners. For example,

> One time [nesting partner] said, "I'm kind of jealous that you got to go to this restaurant, and there was live music, and you had a great time." And I, and we kind of boil it down; it came down to "I wish I could go with you." And like "Then let's go, like Thursday? Do you have time Thursday? Let's go." And so like just addressing that need or just soothing that pain and fear, and vice versa for me, too. (Gabe, cis Asian gay man, 33, middle class)

Here, Gabe remembered providing support to help process his nesting partner's feelings of jealousy. This process helped the dyad to identify the sources of jealousy (unmet needs, longing) and generate solutions (fulfilling the needs, offering comfort). Similarly, Lynna discussed her "healthy" approach to address her primary partner's jealousy is to validate his feelings, process the sources of jealousy, and renegotiate rules and boundaries in polyamorous relationships. To these participants, open communication with partners to process jealousy helped reduce its negative effects on polyamorous relationships.

In contrast, a few participants reported that scheduling quality time with partners helped manage jealousy in their relationships. For example,

> Some of it is like taking active steps to spend more time together. Like, “You know, you and I haven't had a date night in, you know, a couple of months,” like, “Can we set aside some time to just do stuff right? Have dinner, play video games, whatever.” (Jack, trans White pansexual man, 27, upper-middle class)

For Jack, dyadic effort in planning for quality time together helped address jealous-like feelings. In parallel, Rosa also discussed intentional planning for relationship activities with different partners, which reduced their level of jealousy over time.

There was a high level of familiarity with the term “compersion” among participants. As aforementioned, few participants frequently experienced compersion, while some participants discussed managing jealousy helped increase the feeling of compersion. For instance,

> It’s basically like the, I would say, like it's light and dark, right? So when you take care of the problem that's causing jealousy; for me, it was low self-esteem. Then this compersion is much more likely to be able to happen because you're not focusing on this emotion...And then when she gets all, like “Oh, he's so cute!” Then I'm like, “Oh, he’s so cute!” (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

Here, Sylvia used the metaphor “light and dark” to describe the opposition and interconnection between compersion and jealousy. For her, improving her self-esteem, socializing with metamour, and receiving reassurance of her nesting partner’s commitment helped her reduce jealousy to experience more compersion. Similarly, Elijah discussed the rise of compersion in his primary partnership from the reassurance of relationship hierarchy to primary partner, knowing primary partner is desirable, as well as open and non-judgmental communication. In fact, as evident throughout the interview process, communication played a crucial role in all participants’ experiences of maintaining and strengthening their polyamorous relationships.

The Cruciality of Communication

All participants emphasized the importance of communication throughout their journey in polyamory. For most participants, open communication started when they entered their polyamorous exploration. For example,

> [Nesting partner] did say, "Peter, no, you're not going to be on the initial selection part. But maybe if I go on a date or two with somebody, and if you'd like to meet them, or look at their profile, or like, if you notice any red flags about how they're treating with, treating me," He said, "I will take your word for it." So kind of similar to veto power to some extent in the beginning, which made me feel a little bit more comfortable at the time, but we never explored that because we met [metamour] right away. (Peter, cis White gay man, 29, upper-middle class)

Here, Peter remembered discussing the selection process of polyamorous partners with his nesting partner, which increased his sense of power and control in polyamorous relationships. Such experience was shared by many others (e.g., Glenn, Amy, Sylvia, Rosa, Rachel), who discussed relationship expectations and rules with their partners when they wanted to open their relationships for polyamory. Similarly, Elijah also remembered communicating different CNM configurations to identify a fulfilling relationship structure for the dyad.

> So long as we've been 100% honest with each other, he's been extraordinary, you know, because it'd be very easy for him to be like, "Why can't we just find somebody to fuck and move on?" And I'm like, "We can do that; I can do this, but I'm not getting anything out of it." Like "It's just purely, we're inching, we're scratching your itch. I don't get anything out of that, and, quite honestly, it's just something I don't want to do. I'm not interested in that." So then he's like, "Well, how do we make this, interesting or

> meaningful?" And then that's this way. (Elijah, cis biracial gay man, 36, upper-middle class)

Here, Elijah discussed how open and honest communication between his primary dyad on desire and attraction helped identify a CNM structure that was equitable for both of them. Many other participants also discussed their communication with partners since the beginning of the polyamorous journey to explore and determine relationship structures.

In addition, for most participants, communication meant being "open," "honest," "transparent," and/or "explicit" to talk about anything and everything. For example,

> Really, just everything, because you have to, you really have to discuss everything, from the mundane, like grocery lists, grocery lists, picking up the kids at night, who's making dinner that kind of thing to "how do you feel about me seeing this person?"... Boundaries. "Are you planning, how far are you planning to go with this person?" "Is kissing okay?" "Is intercourse okay?" "If intercourse is okay, is everybody's testing up to date?"... So you're talking about safety. You're talking about the emotions that go along with some of these things, talking about the emotional relationships that you have with each person…So I can't think of anything we didn't really discuss even if it was uncomfortable. One of the things that I really enjoyed about polyamory is that I feel like it makes the uncomfortable more comfortable, or at least helps, for me personally, it's helped give me the bravery, the confidence to tackle those sensitive subjects that maybe other people, you know, don't wanna tackle. (Luna, cis White pansexual woman, 46, upper-middle class)

Here, Luna discussed various topics in her communication with her partners even though some could elicit discomfort. For her, communicating uncomfortable topics helps her gain insights into

how she and other people operate in relationships. Similarly, Lynna, Sylvia, Puffin, and Dominic discussed communication and/or negotiation with their partners about “boundaries,” “responsibilities,” “rules,” and“expectations” to balance different relationships. In addition, Puffin discussed polyamorous experiences that helped him realize the importance of open communication in polyamory.

> The polyamory that I've experienced, the communication is just so much more open than what I was used to in a monogamous relationship, in which seems kind of weird. But it turns out to be or has been very important for us to communicate everything like “Hey, I'm kind of being a little sexually left out. You've been with this other person like two weeks, me and you haven't been together in a month” that type of thing. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Puffin discussed that his realization of the importance of open communication helped him increase his confidence in vocalizing his feelings and insecurities without the fear of hurting his partners’ feelings. In addition, Puffin perceived a higher level of open communication in polyamory than in monogamy, as he mentioned that “I would have never said that [feeling sexually left out] to my wife when it was just me and her, because she would definitely feel hurt and I think it could have built some resentment between the two of us.” In fact, many participants echoed Puffin on an increased level of open communication with their partners after entering their polyamorous journey.

Furthermore, several participants shared their improved communication skills through polyamorous relationship experiences over time. For example,

> I've already mentioned how the strong communication piece of polyamory has definitely influenced relationships at work and that sort of thing because it helps me see the world

> in just such a different way. I feel like it helps me communicate with my children more, and I feel like it helps me communicate with them about being accepting of people's differences. (Luna, cis White pansexual woman, 46, upper-middle class)

Here, Luna reflected on the positive influence of polyamorous experiences on her improved communication as a professional and a mother. She had become more comfortable with "calling out BS" at work and normalizing polyamory with her children (i.e., "not be embarrassed or ashamed") while cautioning them against potential discrimination (i.e., "persecute us"). Likewise, Lynna, Sylvia, and Rosa reflected on how their polyamorous journey facilitated their growth in communicating with their partners on different topics.

Lastly, some participants pointed out the benefit of communication to their polyamorous relationships. It was common for these participants to experience an increased sense of trust and security in their relationships. For example,

> A lot of her worries were about me liking her enough, or she was doing something wrong. And whenever we discuss these things, she wouldn't entirely believe me, because you have to develop that trust how does she know that I really mean the things that I say. When I introduced her to be able to date someone else as well, I think it opened her door a little wider to trust me because it showed that I did mean what I said. It's like, "No, if you wanna date somebody else, if that helps meet your emotional needs, then that's okay." And I've been completely open and honest with her about attractiveness I feel for other people. It helped give more trust and weight to what I was saying to her. So that she knew that when I said something to her, she could believe it. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin reflected on how his openness and honesty in communication proved his trustworthiness and reliableness to his current partner, which helped decrease her insecure attachment to develop more trust in him and their relationship. Similarly, Sylvia, Elijah, and Rosa perceived a higher level of trust and security in their nesting or primary partnerships because of continuous dyadic communication. For Glenn, open and honest communication also helped her dyad overcome the emotional pain from her partner's infidelity at the early stage of their polyamorous explorations.

> It took a long time for us to work through that hurt. So then, you know, we left it [polyamory] alone again for a couple of years, and during that time, we communicated a lot about what was wrong with that situation, and if there were to be a situation in the future how it would need to be. So we grew through all that, and it got us talking more in-depth and realistically about how to go about it better. (Glenn, cis White pansexual woman, 43, middle class)

For Glenn, pausing polyamory and communicating with her nesting partner helped rebuild the trust between the dyad and reestablish approaches to develop polyamorous relationships. In parallel, Rosa remembered constant communication with her nesting partners benefited the dyad in overcoming their past mistakes (e.g., prioritization of extradyadic relationships over marriage). Clearly, all participants have engaged in building strengths and skills within themselves and their polycule to maintain their relationships. In the meantime, all of them developed a support system in addition to their polycule to tackle various personal and relational challenges.

Accessing Resources in a Support System

This sub-theme encompasses the importance of social support and the various resources participants accessed in their support system (e.g., family, friend circle, and community) to address challenges. For those participants who had disclosed their polyamorous relationship to family members, a few received care and support from family members for their polyamorous experiences. For example,

> Like introducing [one partner] to my mom, my mother asks about him every time we talk. She's like, "How's [one partner]? How's [the other partner]?" (Rachel)

Here, Rachel mentioned the acceptance and care from her mother about her polyamorous relationships. As quoted earlier, she had experienced a great sense of empathy and support from her mother who was willing to self-educate on polyamory. Similarly, Peter and Cat also shared their family's acceptance of polyamorous relationships even without a clear understanding of the polyamory concept. Specifically,

> What's funny is then I mentioned I'm here spending the holiday with my partners. She [grandmother] was like, "I didn't know." I said with my girlfriend. My partners are both… She [grandmother] was like, "I didn't know you had girlfriends." I said, "Yeah. You want to say hi to them?" They both said hi over the phone or whatever. She was like, "That's nice."...We visited her and everything. She's just really happy to see me happy. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Cat remembered the positive conversation during which her queer, trans, and polyamorous identities were accepted by her grandmother. However, she also acknowledges that her familial acceptance (i.e., parents, grandmother) of non-normative identities was one privilege among her polycule. In addition,

> I actually have, we call her Mamala, my, our adopted Jewish mother, the woman that [nesting partner] met at a party, who lives in the gay district, has two sons, same age as us, but we live with her, and she's like my adopted mother. She knows all about it. Like you, you know, she is having dinners with a bunch of us, so we've never had to do that coming out. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

Choosing not to disclose their polyamorous relationships to their families of origin, Dominic and his nesting partner received acceptance and support from their adopted mother. For many other participants, selecting supportive non-family members was part of living with non-normative identities and polyamorous relationships. They reflected on the support from their friends for their polyamorous relationships. For example,

> My friends, absolutely. My best friend and her partner and her husband, and, like some of my closest friends, are again polyamorous. So it's like, "What is your experience been with this?" Like "What toxic situation have you been in?" "What have you seen before?" "Even if you haven't experienced it firsthand, I know you probably know somebody, monogamous or polyamorous, who's gone through something similar. Can I glean from your experience?" "Can you offer me…" I'll get 1,000 different outside perspectives to help me be able to make me, advocate for my own self and my own relationship as wisely as possible. (Rachel, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 39, working-middle class)

Here, Rachel discussed various types of support she could access from her poly friend circles to address personal and relationship issues. Similarly, Rosa, Gabe, Dominic, Lynna, and Amy discussed seeking different insights and shared that these perspectives had helped them analyze their relationship experiences. Specifically,

> I mean, definitely my friend circle. I talk to my friends about my dating life a lot. What's cool is that I have queer friends and I have straight friends, and I have monogamous friends, and I have poly friends. I kind of, I'm able to source multiple perspectives on something like that where, you know. "As a straight monogamous person, how would you feel about being approached in this way," or like things like that. I have a very diverse friend group. I definitely use them as resources a lot to kind of talk through, like what am I not getting about this person's perspective or stuff like that. (Lynna, cis Asian bisexual woman, 28, middle class)

For Lynna, having a friend circle with diverse backgrounds and experiences helped her gain different perspectives to address relationship issues. In contrast, Amy discussed the support from friends with professional knowledge of relationships.

> Two of my very close friends are therapists. So I talk, talking to them about it. They have an education in being able to analyze that kind of thing, and even though I tell them, like "You don't have to be a therapist around me." They can't help but share their opinions on that kind of thing whenever it comes up. That can be nice, if I need that kind of advice, especially 'cause one of them absolutely would be brutally honest with me. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Amy appreciated the relationship insights or advice from her therapist friends, which she could apply to address her relationship issues. She remembered the conversation with one of her friends that helped her identify the toxicity in the previous relationship with her ex-fiancé and break the engagement.

As aforementioned, many participants had remained friends with their ex-partners, and some discussed seeking support from them to address their current relationship issues. In particular,

> The other one is the one that I was in a polyamorous relationship with. We just talk like normal and feel comfortable talking about the other partners rather than not bringing it up. (Puffin, cis White pansexual man, upper-middle class)

Here, Puffin pointed out a sense of comfort in sharing current polyamorous experiences with ex-partners the same way as before relationship dissolution. While unable to access community resources to benefit his polyamorous relationship maintenance, having support from previous and current polyamorous relationships helped him process personal and relational issues.

A majority of participants discussed that accessing tangible and intangible resources in the queer and/or polyamory community had provided them with strengths, skills, and resiliencies to tackle their challenges. For example, some participants shared that the utilization of community resources provided a sense of normalization, validation, and connectedness. Specifically,

> I mean part of the reason I wear this [heart infinity] bracelet is so that I can find other people so that we can see each other and know that we're out here and we're not alone. A lot of people complain about the polyamory pride flag thing; they think it's ugly and weird and stupid. I love it ‘cause it's older than I am. How can I be so odd and ashamed and alone in this if someone 26 years ago got in his equivalent of MS Paint to make a flag about it? I can't be. There's, we've been out here this whole time. (Amy, cis White bisexual woman, 25, lower-middle class)

Here, Amy described an increased sense of empowerment from polyamory symbols. For her, polyamory and bisexual symbols were self-validation and -motivation to live with love rather than in fear and shame. Similarly, Puffin and Amy also utilized social media to seek normalization and validation of their polyamorous relationships.

For many other participants, the polyamory community also provided a resource to seek education, information, and insights on polyamorous relationships. For example,

> I use the friends in that poly group mainly. And we have events once a month that we can go to or go to Reddit in case you have questions and address issues like that. And a lot of them are very open like, “Hey, I'm feeling jealous about this. My partner went out with someone and forgot that we had a date.” Or something like that. We talk about it openly, and it's uncomfortable, but it's worth it, and that's all what I’ve been doing. (Rosa, cis Latinx bisexual woman, 42, middle class)

Here, Rosa pointed out that discussing polyamorous experiences with her poly group helped her navigate polyamorous relationships. She remembered connecting with a local poly group which allowed her to learn about the diversity in polyamorous relationships and identify those that fit herself and her marriage. In addition, she discussed engaging in poly-community activism had reinforced her motivation to increase poly visibility through her own polyamorous relationships. Similarly,

> I think the support group has probably been the biggest because that's a place, they have, like monthly talk, so we can go there, and you know, even new people can ask questions and stuff like that. So that's, that's been, I think, the biggest help. (Sylvia, cis White bi/pansexual woman, 46, middle class)

For Sylvia, her poly support was the biggest community resource for facilitating personal and relational growth. There was a sense of privilege that she was able to receive support from her poly support groups since the beginning of her polyamorous journey. She remembered various moments utilizing poly group workshops to improve her polyamorous relationships, such as clarifying relationship configurations with her nesting partner and improving communication skills. Like Rosa, Sylvia also engaged in community activism (e.g., promoting poly visibility, normalizing polyamory).

In fact, it was not uncommon that many participants both received support from and gave back to the polyamorous community. As quoted earlier, Dominic also described how his poly friends and counselor created a sense of community where they could share resources.

> And then today in therapy session, my therapist said, "Oh, I got this book recommended to me by my client earlier today, and it was *Polysecure*." And I was like "You can either confirm or deny that the client that recommended it to you was probably called [friend] because that is my friend, who lives in the suburbs. I just started putting him to read that." He was like "I can't confirm nor deny if it was from [friend] who was.." So that is resilience, like that there is, there, that something that is kind of that network at the right moment. (Dominic, cis White gay man, 37, upper class)

For Dominic, sharing books with his poly network demonstrate the effort in building community resilience. He remembered moments when he scanned book chapters and sent them to his counselor. Helping his counselor stay educated on CNM and polyamory was his indirect support for more polyamorous individuals. Correspondingly,

> I also help maintain a community Discord server with a lot of people in the queer community. A lot of us are polyamorous, and a lot of overlap with different things. I have

> certain skills and stuff that I try to use when I'm able to help people. I do a lot of transportation for people. I'm always available to help people with mathematics if that ever happens. (Cat, trans White pansexual woman, 32, lower class)

Here, Cat pointed out a sense of enjoyment from engaging with and supporting other people in her queer and polyamorous community. Focusing on the presence and community advocacy provided her with resilience over her pessimism and uncertainty for the future queer community. In sum, while the size of support systems varies based on individual situations, it was universal that all participants had the awareness and made efforts to create one to support them through personal and relational challenges.

Conclusion

In summary, 14 participants discussed their relationship experiences during their polyamorous journey. I used interpretive phenomenological analysis to examine transcripts and explore the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals. Based on analyzing the convergence and divergence, five GETs were constructed to capture the meaning of participants' lived experiences in polyamorous relationships, including (1) polyamory is an evolving and purposeful journey, (2) poly satisfaction is a systemic experience, (3) dynamic interplay of sense of self and interpersonal experiences, (4) interwoven personal, relational, and systemic challenges, and (5) ecological systems for relationship maintenance. In Chapter Five, I will discuss interpretations of findings, implications for counseling, strengths, and limitations, as well as directions for future research.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The current study is the first known Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) study that explores the polyamorous relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in the U.S. through the lens of minority stress and resilience (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015). The four research questions were designed to investigate specific phenomena in the polyamorous journey, including the establishment of polyamorous relationship structure, the influence of sexual orientation on relationship experiences, the influence of a sense of identity on relationship experiences, and responses to relationship challenges. Based on data analysis of 14 participants who met the inclusion criteria, five Group Experiential Themes with 16 corresponding sub-themes were constructed, including (1) polyamory is an evolving and purposeful journey, (2) poly satisfaction is a systemic experience, (3) dynamic interplay of sense of self and interpersonal experiences, (4) interwoven personal, relational, and systemic challenges, and (5) ecological systems for relationship maintenance. Findings add valuable knowledge to the current limited understanding of polyamory and polyamorous relationship experiences. As such, this chapter includes the interpretations of findings from a minority stress and resilience perspective, followed by implications for counseling practice and counselor education. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the current study will be identified. Lastly, suggestions for future research will be discussed based on the findings of the current research.

Interpretation of Findings

Minority Stress in Polyamory

In the current study, polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals were investigated under the framework of minority stress theory (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003). The

model posits that individuals with a minoritized identity are subject to internal and external stressors (in addition to normal everyday stressors) that can influence coping, social support, and health. Distal stressors (e.g., discrimination, violence) and proximal stressors (e.g., identity concealment, rejection, internalized oppression) can create discrepancies in mental health outcomes that lead to disproportionate levels of mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) among minoritized individuals (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003). Yet, other factors, including salience, valence, and integration with one's other identities can modify the effects of minority stressors on one's life. While polyamory-based minority stress was not quantified in the study, participants discussed its existence in and influence on their relationship experience.

Hetero/Mononormativity

The minority stress model highlights the effect of norms within the environment on identity development and stress associated with minority status (Meyer 2003). The effects of hetero/mononormativity influenced each of the GET and sub-themes derived from participants in the current study. Most notably, participants discussed the *Interwoven, Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges (GET Four)* associated with their polyamory experiences and tied many of these to the *Hegemony across Cultures within a Normative Society*. Participants described various types of normativity in their lived experiences (across various social systems from school, work, home, and when accessing mental health support) with their intersectional identities (e.g., sexuality, gender, disability) and polyamorous relationships. For most participants, the additive stressors were rooted in the mononormativity against their polyamorous relationships. Lived experiences of anti-polyamory stigma, bias, and discrimination were evident in the worlds of many participants in interaction with different social systems (e.g., family, friend circle, neighborhood, legal and healthcare institutions). One possible explanation is the

marginalization of alternative relationship configurations due to the prevalence and domination of hetero/mononormativity in the U.S. (Anderson, 2010; Conley et al., 2013a; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). These stressors are consistent with findings of existing literature on the prevalence of negative attitudes toward polyamory (Conley et al., 2013a; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). For example, several participants discussed their polyamory was scapegoated as the cause of their relationship problems and challenges by their monogamous friends. One possible explanation for that bias can be polyamory being considered deviant and abnormal because of mononormativism (Conley et al., 2013a; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014. Moors et al., 2013). The lack of recognition for polyamorous relationships by the U.S. legal system may also explain the structural discrimination of polyamorous relationships in several participants' experiences. It is not uncommon that participants have experienced a certain level of anti-polyamory bias or stigma when interacting with their counselors. Their experiences seem to align with the findings of Schechinger et al. (2018) that counselors display explicit or implicit anti-CNM bias and stigma characterized as harmful and stressful. As such, these participants have perceived minimized benefits of counseling to support polyamorous relationships or changed their counselors to avoid continuous harm.

In addition, there seemed to be a gender difference with regard to participants' experiences of stigma and bias in polyamory based on participants' experiences discussed under the sub-theme *Continuous Development of Intersectionality* of *GET Three Dynamic Interplay of Sense of Self and Interpersonal Experiences*. Particularly, participants' recollections suggest that women in polyamory can be viewed as promiscuous and overly sexualized, whereas men in polyamory can be seen as less masculine for letting their female partners date other men. It is

possible that the sexual double standards based on heteronormative tradition have contributed to such gender bias against women in polyamorous relationships (Rubin et al., 2014). Such a negative attitude toward men in polyamory may be rooted in the historically patriarchal beliefs and values that a man claims ownership of a woman through marriage.

Concealment of Polyamorous Relationship

Meyer (2003) discussed identity concealment as part of the proximal stress process which can contribute to negative mental health consequences (e.g., depression) among sexually minoritized populations. In the current study, all participants discussed the *Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges* (GET Four) due to the *Dynamic Interplay of Sense of Self and Interpersonal Experiences* (GET Three) in a hetero/mononormative society. Many participants reflected on how *Managing Outness under Hetero/Mononormativity* and *Internalization of Adversity Strains Individual and Relational Well-Being*. Almost all participants maintained a low level of polyamory outness, although the degree varies by participants and by specific contexts. Specifically, participants are more likely to feel comfortable disclosing their polyamorous relationships and experiences in close friend circles, while concealing their relationships in other settings (i.e., family, work, neighborhood). There are perceived biases, stigma, and rejection associated with participants' decision to concealment of polyamory. According to Meyer (2003), individuals with a sexually minoritized identity often choose to conceal such an identity in an effort to avoid discrimination. As such, it is highly possible that the naturalization and normalization of monogamy have led participants to conceal their polyamorous relationships to avoid potential biases, stigma, and rejection from family members, colleagues, and neighbors. In addition, many participants attributed religious beliefs (i.e., Catholicism, Mormonism, Hinduism, Christianity) to the perceived rejection of polyamory from

their family members. Several authors have discussed the institutionalization of monogamy in the U.S. through policy, religion, and social norms (Coontz, 2004; D'emilio & Freedman, 1997; Smith, 1993). More specifically, conservative religious beliefs predict the attitudes of social, cultural, and legal unacceptance of CNM and polyamory (Balzarini et al., 2018; Hutzler et al., 2016). Therefore, it is possible that lived experiences in a religious environment have contributed to the anticipated and perceived familial rejection of polyamory for participants. There was a common phenomenon among participants that their level of sexual orientation outness (i.e., gay, bisexual, pansexual, demi-sexual) is higher than that of polyamory outness. Almost all participants discussed that disclosing polyamory was more challenging than disclosing their sexual orientation. It is possible that social and political activism (e.g., legalized same-sex marriage) has contributed to the decrease of explicit and implicit stigma and discrimination against non-heterosexuality in the U.S (Ofosu et al., 2019)., which led to participants' higher comfort levels in disclosing sexual orientation. Another possible explanation for this phenomenon is that participants may have a higher developmental level of sexual identity, which increases their self-image and confidence to disclose their sexual orientation.

Many participants discussed the negative impact of polyamory concealment on their personal and relational well-being (e.g., stress, depression, resentment of invisibility in public, low self-image as less brave). Specifically, participants reflected on labeling their partners as friends, withdrawing from sharing relationship experiences, and avoiding appearing in social and family events with multiple partners simultaneously. Several participants also discussed the shame, embarrassment, and guilt associated with their polyamorous experiences and/or sexual orientation. According to Brooks Meyer (2003), identity concealment is part of the proximal stressor process, which is associated with disproportionate levels of mental health symptoms

(e.g., depression, anxiety) among sexually minoritized individuals (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003). In addition, existing literature echoes that concealment of polyamory and CNM can contribute to the internalization of heteronormativity or mononormativity and negative consequences (e.g., lower well-being, lower relationship satisfaction, and mental health symptoms; Borgogna et al., 2021; Deri, 2015; Moors et al., 2021; Weitzman et al., 2009; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). In the current study, a few participants discussed that either themselves, their partners, or their metamours had experienced shame, embarrassment, and guilt because of sexual orientation or polyamorous relationships. Such negative emotions rooted in internalized heteronormativity and mononormativity negatively influenced their relationship experiences (e.g., emphasis on relationship hierarchy, difficulty in communicating kinks or sexual preference, relationship dissolution, see sub-theme *Internalization of Adversity Strains Individual and Relational Well-Being* of GET Four *Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges*). Therefore, the proximal stressor process (i.e., concealment of polyamory, internalized hetero/mononormativity) may explain the personal and relational challenges participants have experienced as they navigate the world with multi-partners.

Ignorance of Polyamory in Society

Another minority stress participants have discussed is based on the societal and scholarly ignorance of polyamorous relationships, which is one specific demonstration of the sub-theme *Hegemony across Cultures within a Normative Society* within the GET Four *Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges*. In particular, many participants experienced challenges in describing their relationships and/or partners due to limited polyamorous terminology and language. Some other participants also encountered difficulties in assessing their relationship development (e.g., health, goals) in polyamory because of the scarcity of

polyamorous development models. It is also prevalent that most participants have gone through a trial-and-error phase during their polyamorous exploration because of limited models or resources for polyamorous relationship development. Specifically, many participants discussed more challenges experienced in the early stage of their polyamorous journey, which suggests a lower level of relationship satisfaction. Such a finding aligns with that of Flicker et al. (2021) that polyamorous relationships of less than five years reported a lower level of relationship satisfaction than those together more than five years. All the mentioned challenges may be explained by the dearth of polyamorous discourse in our current society. For example, societal ignorance of polyamory may have contributed to a lack of models, terminologies, and languages, which then lead to difficulties individuals experience as they start exploring polyamory.

Until recently, most research on intimate relationships in the U.S. has primarily focused on monogamous relationships (Conley et al., 2012b; Hazan et al., 2006; Schmookler & Bursik, 2007). With an increased interest among the general public in CNM in the last two decades (Moors, 2017, Monroe, 2013; Oppenheimer, 2011; Reich, 2014), scientists and researchers were slowly catching up to examine the prevalence of CNM, individuals' interest in and practice of CNM, and levels of social, cultural, and legal acceptance of CNM (e.g., Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Haupert et al., 2017; Klesse 2005; Levine et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2013; Rubin et al., 2014). While these studies have provided valuable insights into the structures and dynamics of various types of CNM relationships, the polyamorous relationship has been empirically understudied. Therefore, mononormativity may contribute to a lack of scholarly investigation and societal discourse, which has led to unique challenges in developing, maintaining, and measuring polyamorous relationships.

Relationship Complexity Amplified Due to Multi-Partnership

Amplified relationship complexity is a unique minority stress participants have experienced due to the nature of a multi-partnership. Many participants discussed challenges in their scheduling, balancing boundaries, and communications because of being in relationships with multiple partners simultaneously (see sub-theme *Multi-Partnership Amplifies Relational Complexity* under GET Four *Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges*). These challenges may align with the common concern of power dynamics manifested in the decision-making process of polyamorous relationship experiences (Weitzman et al., 2009; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Specifically, for participants in hierarchical polyamory, scheduling can be challenging due to the prioritization of the primary partnership while maintaining additional relationships. As such, the complexity of ongoing communication, negotiation, and maintenance of boundaries between their primary partnership and additional relationships can add more personal and relational stress (Bettinger, 2005; Veaux & Rickert, 2004). While participants in non-hierarchical polyamory may not experience such stress, balancing power dynamics to ensure equality and/or equity in a multi-partnership (e.g., shared decision-making in a closed triad, respecting relationship boundaries) may explain their experienced emotional exhaustion.

Multiplied Stress Due to Intersectionality

Participants with multiple marginalized identities have experienced different yet parallel minority stress in polyamory. For example, some participants discussed how *Hegemony across Cultures within a Normative Society* has contributed to *Interwoven Personal, Relational, and Systemic Challenges* (GET Four). As participants continued to develop their view of their own intersectionality, there was an interconnection between their sense of self and their relationship experiences (i.e., GET 3 *Dynamic Interplay of Sense of Self and Interpersonal Experiences*) Specifically, bisexual and pansexual participants experienced bi/pansexual negativity in their

polyamorous experiences (i.e., one pines policy, limiting metamour's gender, sexually fantasizing bisexuality). There is historical prejudice against bisexual and pansexual individuals by heterosexual and lesbian/gay people due to promiscuity stereotypes and illegitimacy of sexual identity (Barker et al., 2012; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Klesse, 2005). Witherspoon et al., (2019) also suggested that the stigmatization of bisexuality and pansexuality can be exacerbated when one bisexual or pansexual individual engages in CNM. Therefore, it is possible that such prejudice penetrates into the polyamorous community which added more stress to bisexual and pansexual participants in their relationship experiences. In addition, participants with transgender identities and autism discussed exacerbated challenges in society (e.g., family, work, general public) because of such intersectionality, even though the negative impact of such intersectionality on their polyamorous relationships was minimized or manageable. There are no known studies investigating the polyamorous or CNM experiences of individuals with a trans identity and disability. Nevertheless, the lasting stigma and discrimination against transgender individuals and persons with autism may have contributed to the exacerbated challenges experienced by these participants.

Furthermore, Gabe reflected on aggressions toward his racial identity in engaging in polyamorous experiences with potential partners. His experience of racism in polyamory can be explained by the perpetuating myth that polyamory is primarily practiced by White middle-class individuals. In addition, racism in the queer community contributes to the exclusion, microaggression, and stigmatization experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals who do not fit the Eurocentric concept of queer identity (Le & Kler, 2022; Patel, 2019). As individuals with different intersectional identities explore and develop their polyamorous relationships, they are susceptible to multiple minority stress.

Moreover, a few participants experienced anti-polyamory stigma and bias in the queer community. Such anti-polyamory negativity (e.g., stealing good dating candidates, recruiting, greedy) is rooted in hegemonic mononormativity in the U.S. Historically, political conservatives have connected CNM with their opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage (Kurtz, 2003; Lithwick, 2004). Specifically, Kurtz (2003) argued that the legitimacy of same-sex marriage would also lead to legitimizing all forms of passion deemed immoral or illegal while leaving society defenseless against an onslaught of unbounded desire. Perhaps fearing that advocating for CNM may jeopardize community efforts to fight for marriage equality, many LGBTQIA+ activists in the past distanced themselves from polyamory advocacy (Klesse, 2018). Therefore, despite the fact that queer individuals are more likely to endorse and engage in CNM (Balzarini et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017; Moor et al., 2014), institutionalization and normalization of monogamy have led to the internalized mononormativity within the queer community, which contributed to the anti-poly stigma and bias experienced by some participants in the current study.

Minority Resilience in Polyamory

Resilience refers to the "process or phenomenon of competence despite adversity" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 554). In the minority stress model, resilience includes coping and social support that address relevant stress associated with minoritized identities (Meyer, 2003; 2015). Resilience is an essential part of the minority stress process given that it only has meaning when one encounters distal and/or proximal stressors (Meyer, 2015). Some authors have suggested that a minoritized identity can be a source of strength to attenuate stress and that minoritized community can be a support system accessed to overcome life challenges and obstacles (Hobfoll et al, 2002; Meyer, 2015). In the current study, participants have managed to build an ecological

system that allows them to gain strength and resilience in navigating their polyamorous relationship in a hetero/mononormative society.

Personal Resilience

Participants discussed varying areas of satisfaction in their polyamorous relationships and their ongoing journey in polyamorous explorations, which seem to echo the findings of Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) that nonheterosexual or CNM individuals may have developed resilience to withstand and even thrive in the face of social stigma and discrimination. In fact, a majority of participants reflected on varying strategies to develop strengths, resources, and resilience to achieve personal and relational growth in polyamory. Specifically, many participants discussed seeking wisdom from online resources and literature to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and polyamory during the *Continuous Improvement in Polyamorous Relationship* (GET One *Polyamory Is an Evolving and Purposeful Journey*). In addition, under the sub-theme *On-Going Personal Work for Growth* of GET Five *Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance*, some participants discussed how they managed to develop critical consciousness by deconstructing internalized oppressive ideologies (i.e., hetero/mononormativity, imperialism, capitalism) and reconstructing their personal and relational philosophies. A few also discussed the benefits of counseling in managing personal and relational difficulties. It is worth noting that only one study has empirically investigated the buffering effects of resilience against the negative effects of anti-CNM stigma and discrimination (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). The positive effects of developing cognitive flexibility among participants in the current study contradict the findings of Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) that suggest greater cognitive flexibility may lead to increased anticipation of stigma and discrimination which in turn exacerbates stress. Moreover, the development of personal skills

(e.g., self-reflection, coping skills) and positive mindsets (e.g., a growth mindset, pride in authentic living) among participants seem to confirm the hypothesis that CNM individuals may utilize these methods to cope with the challenges of creating and sustaining multi-partnered relationships (Labriola, 2010; Sheff, 2014).

Some scholars have argued that layers of cultural identity might be sources of resilience against the negative effects of stigma-related stressors (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Figueroa & Zoccola, 2015; Hill & Gunderson, 2015). Such theory is partially attested by participants' experiences under the GET Three *Dynamic Interplay of Sense of Self and Interpersonal Experiences*. The strong association with polyamory as their preferred relationship configuration may be a source to develop resilience against the negative effects of stigma-related stressors, even though there is no agreement among participants on polyamory as an identity. It is possible that these participants have developed resilience to mitigate the impact of the negative effects of anti-polyamory sigma and bias on their personal and relational experiences (Sheff, 2016). However, further research is warranted to explore the influence of resilience building on polyamorous relationship experiences.

Finally, participants discussed how their *Current Polyamorous Structure Reflects their Relational Philosophy* in GET One *Polyamory Is an Evolving and Purposeful Journey*. Scholars have engaged in philosophical discourse for how to best conceptualize polyamory (e.g., relationship orientation, identity; Anapol, 2010; Barker, 2005, Emens, 2004; Klesse, 2007; Klesse, 2014). As aforementioned, many participants in the current study did not describe polyamory as part of their identity. However, all participants reported experiencing a sense of compatibility and congruence between their self-perception and identity (i.e., sexuality, personality traits, gender identity) with polyamory. Most participants discussed how their

openness to different possibilities led them to depart from monogamy and prefer polyamory over other types of CNM relationships. As participants developed their polyamorous relationships, many also deconstructed internalized relationship beliefs and values rooted in hetero/mononormativity. Several participants mentioned a liberatory mindset awakened during their exploration journey that affirmed a sense of self and relationship values such as equality, openness, and the potential of human connection. Therefore, it is possible that participants developed their own relationship philosophy during polyamorous explorations rather than ascribing to scripts associated with hetero/mononormativity. In turn, this polyamorous relationship exploration motivated and enabled them to create a relationship structure that reflects such relationship philosophy.

Relational Resilience

All participants have discussed the benefits of collaboration with their partners and metamours to address their personal and relational challenges. Specifically, many participants emphasized the interconnectedness between increased trust, commitment, as well as security and improved communication with their partners (See sub-themes *Togetherness in Addressing Challenges* and *Cruciality of Communication* under GET Five *Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance*). Jealousy is present in many participants' experiences in polyamorous relationships, which aligns with findings of existing literature (e.g., Deri, 2015; Heaney, 2011). However, relational efforts (e.g., open and honest communication, quality time together, reassurance of commitment) have led to a reduced level of jealousy over time. In addition, communication with partners on relationship expectations and coordinating, scheduling, and balancing relationship activities has improved mutual understanding in polyamorous experiences. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that open

communication on jealousy may have led to greater awareness of oneself as well as others and a rise in compersion (Deri, 2015; Veaus & Rickert, 2014). Moreover, relational resilience also manifested itself in GET Two *Poly Satisfaction is a Systemic Experience*. For example, participants discussed how they had diversified their needs across partners, which led to high levels of satisfaction in different areas of their relationships (see sub-theme *Multi-Partnership Satisfies Needs and Wants in Different Ways*). Under the sub-theme *Polycule Satisfaction Enhances Connectedness*, a few participants mentioned the communal and tribe perspective as having their partner's needs met by other partners or metamours had reduced their relational anxiety and distress. It is possible that participants see their polycule as a community and their high levels of relationship satisfaction derived from accessing different resources to meet personal and relational needs help build the community resilience to buffer varying types of challenges (Meyer, 2015).

In addition, under the subtheme *Accessing Resources in a Support System* of GET Five *Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance*, some participants reflected on the network with previous partners and metamours. A few of them discussed socialization with metamours has facilitated developing positive attitudes toward their partner's polyamorous relationships and receiving emotional and logistical support. While there are known studies on the role of metamours in polyamorous relationship experiences, it seems that building a positive relationship with metamours can be considered a part of relational resilience building in polyamory. Some participants also maintained a positive relationship with their partners from dissolved polyamorous relationships. It is possible that maintaining positive connections with ex-partners despite the change in relationship nature is a unique part of relational resilience in

polyamory (Sheff, 2016). In summary, participants in the current study have utilized relational resources within their polycule or poly network to build resilience in the face of adversities.

Furthermore, participants' experiences suggest their resilience in the face of the challenges in exploring and developing polyamorous relationship structures due to societal ignorance of polyamory. Under the GET One *Polyamory Is an Evolving and Purposeful Journey*, almost all participants discussed constant reflection, discussion, and negotiation that facilitated continuous adjustment and exploration intra- and interpersonally. The journey and evolving process of finding how polyamory worked for them helped to consolidate their current relationship structure in a manner that fulfilled the needs of themselves and their partners. According to Meyer (2015), resilience can be anything that facilitates positive adaptation that mitigates the negative impact of minority stress. As such, participants in the current study may have relied on relational efforts to continuously assess and adapt their relationships to meet changing needs and expectations, thus reducing the negative influence of different challenges on personal and relationship health.

Community Resilience

Individual- and relational-based resilience bears an important value in managing minority stress and strengthening personal and relational well-being in polyamory. Meanwhile, the sub-theme *Accessing Resources in a Support System* under GET Five *Ecological Systems for Relationship Maintenance* demonstrates the positive influences of community resources on participants' personal and relational well-being. In particular, many participants discussed the crucial benefits of accessing resources in the queer and/or polyamory community. For example, some participants discussed the support from local polyamorous groups and communities that assisted them in the exploratory and maintenance stage of polyamorous relationships (e.g.,

identifying polyamorous models, improving communication, seeking relationship advice, normalizing polyamorous inclinations). Amy also pointed out the special meaning of queer and polyamorous symbols (i.e., bi pride flag, poly pride flag, heart infinity bracelet) in validating and empowering her sexual identity and polyamorous relationships. In addition, several participants developed resilience in an increased sense of empowerment and togetherness through advocacy with the queer and/or polyamorous community (e.g., promoting visibility, sharing resources). While no study has examined the benefit of community-based resilience in polyamorous relationship experiences, it is suggested that tangible and intangible resources within a community can provide opportunities for social and legal support and for the reframing of social values and norms (Crocker & Major, 1989; Meyer, 2015). As such, it is possible that by accessing and utilizing various community resources, these participants manage to develop a stronger sense of self, strengths, skills, and resilience to maintain their personal and relational well-being in spite of hetero/mononormativity. As the benefits of community-based resilience depend on the capacity that communities have to further help individuals to develop and maintain well-being (Hall & Zautra, 2010), it is crucial that continuous effort is to be made to solidify the queer and polyamorous communities and ensure equitable access to community resources among its members.

Implications for Counseling

Counselors may apply the results of the current study in several ways. First, connections between experiences shared by participants and the ethical and multicultural practice of counseling will be discussed. Next, multicultural considerations for case conceptualization and treatment planning will be identified, with an emphasis on the minority stress theory as a framework for assessment. Furthermore, professional learning and continuing education need to

advance poly-affirmative counseling will be discussed. Finally, applications of findings to relationship counseling will be identified, although tentative given that this current study interacted with individuals only.

Ethical Considerations in Practice

The findings of the current study have several significant ethical implications for counseling practices on diversity, inclusion, and social justice. For counselors, it is crucial to understand the diversity in relationship configurations. Counselors must avoid assuming clients' relationship status or relationship inclinations based on hetero/mononormative beliefs and values (American Counseling Association, ACA, 2014). For example, using more inclusive language when inquiring about clients' relationship backgrounds can create a safe and non-judgmental space for polyamorous clients to disclose their partners and their relationship experiences (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020; Schechinger et al., 2018). It is also important that counselors minimize or avoid hetero/mononormative language (e.g., couple) when providing counseling services to polyamorous clients. Similarly, a discourse within the counseling field is warranted with regard to reframing certain professional titles (e.g., couple's counseling, marriage counseling) to include different relationship configurations. In addition, participants of the current study come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, counselors need to understand the diversity and intersectionality (e.g., sexuality, gender, race, ability, religion/spirituality) in polyamory, instead of perpetuating the myth of polyamory being exclusive to White middle-class populations (ACA, 2014; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020; Ratts et al., 2015). Moreover, the diversity lies in the varying pathways (e.g., establishing a polyamorous relationship since the beginning, opening monogamy) to and structures of polyamory (e,g., hierarchical, non-hierarchical, closed system, open system). For instance, the relationship experiences of a closed non-hierarchical triad can

differ from those of hierarchical relationships. As such, counselors must avoid assuming all polyamorous relationships are the same but approach the relationship experiences of polyamorous clients with an open mind and cultural curiosity (Ratts et al., 2015).

Moreover, counselors working with polyamorous clients must be aware of two other imperative ethical considerations (ACA, 2014). In particular, confidentiality and boundaries can be complicated when working with a polycule simultaneously. For counselors working with individual polyamorous clients who are in the same polyamorous network or friend group, maintaining clients' confidentiality and boundaries can be especially challenging. Therefore, it is crucial that counselors follow ethical guidelines to avoid breaking confidentiality and boundaries with an understanding of the unique cultures of polyamory (ACA, 2014).

Case Conceptualization

Meanwhile, rather than pathologizing polyamory when conceptualizing presenting concerns, counselors must understand the minority stressors individuals in polyamorous relationships experience because of hetero/mononormativity (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003; Schechinger et al., 2018). Due to a lack of polyamorous relationship models, polyamorous clients may experience different challenges at different stages of their relationships (e.g., transitional stage, exploring stage, developing stage, stable stage; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). Specifically, a dyad planning to open a monogamous marriage may face different challenges than a dyad thinking about changing the current hierarchical relationship structure to a non-hierarchical one. Therefore, it is imperative that counselors understand the relationship developmental stage of their polyamorous clients to develop treatment goals and plans. Additionally, polyamorous clients face hetero/mononormative stigma, bias, and discrimination at different levels (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). Therefore, many experience challenges disclosing

their polyamorous relationships and navigating social systems with their partners, which in turn negatively influence their personal and relational well-being. The current study also echoes the results from Moor et al., (2020) that internalized hetero/mononormativity negatively impacts relational attitudes and behaviors which then negatively influences relationship experiences. For polyamorous clients who have multiple marginalized identities (e.g., sexuality, gender, people of color, disability), their intersectional experiences may differ from those of Cis White heterosexual abled polyamorous clients (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). Thus, during case conceptualization, counselors must explore the varying and unique challenges polyamorous clients face while developing and/or maintaining their multi-partnered relationships.

Moreover, the nature of a multi-partnered relationship can add more complexity to relationship development and maintenance (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). For example, communication, balanced scheduling, relational dynamics, and relationship dissolution in polyamorous relationships depart from mononormativity and can drastically differ depending on the polyamorous relationship structure and the polyamorous relationship developmental stages. As a result, counselors must contextualize clients' relationships to provide targeted care and support benefiting their navigation of polyamorous relationships (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). For example, counselors may help a newly polyamorous triad to improve their communication skills to openly and honestly discuss their feelings and thoughts without blaming, whereas for a seasoned polyamorous dyad struggling with current relationship agreements, counselors can assist them in renegotiating them based on their changing needs and expectations. Relationship dissolution in polyamory can be complicated. For example, many polyamorous individuals grieve the loss of a romantic relationship while also considering it as a transition to another relationship. Counselors must approach such a relationship issue based on clients' specific

situations and needs while avoiding imposing hetero/mononormativity. Furthermore, counselors may advocate for and with their polyamorous clients on social justice issues (e.g., inequitable or discriminatory policies against polyamory and non-monogamy)

Poly Affirmative Counseling

Counselors can develop poly affirmative counseling approaches to more effectively work with polyamorous clients. At the beginning of the counseling process, counselors adapt elements of structural therapy to explore the boundaries and dynamics between different sub-systems within the polycule (Gebel et al., 2023). The findings of the current study suggest that participants faced complications in the development of boundaries and interpersonal dynamics within a polycule. Therefore, an exercise such as an adapted eco-map and/or genogram may be helpful to visualize connections between partners and metamours in polyamorous relationships or poly networks. For example, counselors may ask “How would you describe your relationship structure” and “How does your relationship structure influence engagement with individuals in the polycule” to guide polyamorous clients in the relational mapping process. It is crucial that counselors adopt clients’ language with regard to labels for relationships and specific individuals in the polycule, rather than imposing hetero/mononormative language or assumptions. As counselors collaborate with polyamorous clients on mapping out relationship structures and dynamics, they can gain a clearer understanding of the context for presenting concerns.

Schechinger et al. (2018) suggested that counselors approach polyamorous clients with an affirming mindset. For example, validating clients’ polyamorous identity, inclination, or lifestyle (depending on clients’ language) can strengthen the therapeutic relationship and increase a client’s comfort level for sharing about relationships and experiences during treatment. In addition, rather than overfocusing on their polyamorous relationships, counselors need to listen

effectively and ask relevant questions to gain a clear understanding of polyamorous clients' presenting concerns and needs from counseling services (Schechinger et al., 2018; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). Poly affirmative counselors must avoid scapegoating or blaming polyamory for clients' relationship problems or challenges; instead, exploration of polyamorous clients' experiences needs to be conducted without judgment and pathologization in order to identify the sources of challenges in their relationships (e.g., personal level, relational level, systemic level; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). For example, practice-based evidence suggests that attachment injuries and traumas can contribute to personal and relational challenges in polyamory (Fern, 2020). Likewise, several participants in the current study mentioned the need for 'personal work' and healing from past trauma as an integral step in their journey to polyamory that can enhance relationship quality. Thus, examining attachment styles among partners may facilitate a growing awareness of attachment, trauma, and current relationship behaviors, which leads to attachment-based healing and an increased sense of safety and security in polyamorous relationships (Fern, 2020). The influence of past trauma or attachment to relationship quality is not unique to poly relationships; however, participant statements about the management of jealousy as an ongoing process reflect a potential unique influence observable in poly relationships. So, poly affirmative counselors may support the process of assessing the influence of attachment and trauma for relational experiences associated with jealousy, compersion, and managing boundaries and logistics with partners.

All participants in the current study suggested communication is crucial to ensure a functional polyamory. According to their experiences, many discussed that challenging topics in communication include sex-related topics, jealousy, and negative emotions. As such, poly affirmative counselors must acknowledge the complexity of communication in polyamorous

relationships and assess polyamorous clients' communication skills. Depending on the stages of polyamorous clients' relationship development, counselors can utilize interventions (e.g., coaching, psychoeducation, role-play) to empower the clients to develop confidence and improve their communication skills characterized by openness, transparency, and honesty. Counselors can also provide communication skills training (e.g., active listening, managing conflict, shared problem-solving) for polyamorous partners in relationship counseling so that polyamorous clients can express their feelings and emotions without blaming. For example, open communication on jealousy may lead to greater awareness of oneself as well as others and a rise in compersion (Deri, 2015; Veaus & Rickert, 2014). Counselors can normalize jealousy in relationship experiences and assist polyamorous clients in communicating the source of jealousy and generating personal and/or relational solutions to minimize its negative impact on relationships.

In addition, it is imperative that counselors develop a strength-based mindset when collaborating with their polyamorous clients in the counseling process (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). For example, polyamory can provide many benefits for individuals, such as improved communication, diversified needs across partners, multiplied sources for support, and authentic being. Therefore, counselors can work with polyamorous clients to identify the strengths and skills developed in their multi-partnered relationships to tackle current personal and relational issues (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020; Schechinger et al., 2018). In addition, counselors can assist polyamorous clients in building a support system (e.g., family, friends, community) to access more tangible and intangible resources (Meyer, 2015). Counselors can apply the minority stress model by empowering and enhancing resources (internal and external) for coping and mental health.

In order to develop poly affirmative counseling, it is crucial that counselors take the necessary steps to address their explicit and implicit biases and stigmas against polyamory based on hetero/mononormativity (Schechinger et al., 2018). For example, continuing education (e.g., literature, seminars, continuing education workshops) can be valuable to challenge one's hetero/mononormative beliefs and values, reflect on one's positionality with polyamorous clients, and develop poly-affirmative counseling approaches. In addition, poly-affirmative counseling manifests itself through counselors' knowledge of polyamory concepts and terminologies (Schechinger et al., 2018). Therefore, counselors need to become knowledgeable about polyamory and its diverse relationship structures and experiences to avoid a monolithic and hegemonic understanding of polyamory. Developing awareness and knowledge of intersectionality can benefit counselors in affirming and validating polyamorous clients' intersectional experiences within and outside their multi-partnered relationships.

Counselor Education and Preparation

In order to train counselors with multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2015) to work with polyamorous clients, counselor education programs can take the following steps. It is imperative that counselor educators acknowledge the perpetuation of hetero/mononormativity in the counseling profession and counselor education pedagogy (Graham, 2014; Schechinger et al., 2018; Weitzman et al., 2009; Zimmerman, 2012). Counselor education programs need to reflect on the implications of the terms "couple," "marriage," as well as "family" in educational and clinical settings and adopt more inclusive and equitable languages that reflect the diversity of relationship and family structure. For example, replacing course titles, such as "couple's counseling" "marriage counseling," or "family counseling," with "relationship counseling" can demonstrate a departure from hetero/mononormative standards on relationship

formation, development, and health. In addition, counselor educators can add diversity to human sexuality and relationship education in the curriculum (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). For example, selecting reading materials (e.g., textbooks, articles) with inclusive language to sexuality, gender, and relationships can assist counseling students in developing multicultural awareness and knowledge. Integrating polyamory into sexuality and relationship education can also help students confront their internalized hetero/mononormativity and develop a fluid and critical mindset to relationship structures and experiences.

It is also crucial for counselor educators to avoid perpetuating hegemonic beliefs and values when educating counseling students on human sexuality and polyamory. Specifically, counselor educators need to address within-group diversity because of the intersectional identities and experiences of individuals. As such counselor educators can design research studies to examine polyamory through an intersectional lens to gain a deeper understanding of convergence and divergence in relationship structures and relationships (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). In summary, it is imperative that counselors and counselor educators continue to strengthen their competencies to provide ethical and affirmative care to polyamorous clients. In sum, counselors need to seek continuing education to develop their counseling competencies in working with polyamorous clients.

Directions for Future Research

The current study sheds light on the meanings of LGBP individuals have made out of their polyamorous relationship experiences. Therefore, the findings provide several directions for future research studies. First, participants in the current study used different terms (e.g., identity, lifestyle, or relationship orientation) to reflect the meaning of polyamory. Thus, future research can focus on the philosophical aspect of polyamory by exploring how people in polyamorous

relationships define the meaning of polyamory. A clearer understanding of the polyamory concept can add invaluable contributions to future research designs on polyamorous relationships. In addition, more individuals identified as bisexual and/or pansexual, which seemed to be consistent with the findings of Haupert et al. (2017). Some participants discussed specific biases and discriminations targeting their bi/pansexuality in polyamorous experiences. Therefore, future research can investigate how bi/pansexual individuals make meanings based on the relationship between sexuality and polyamory. As such, there is also a necessity to explore the polyamorous relationship experiences of individuals with a specific identity to develop a deeper understanding of the convergence and divergence within a relatively homogenous group. Since three participants in the current study also discussed how their ability status (i.e., neurodivergence) influences their interpersonal relationships, future research can explore the polyamorous relationship experiences of individuals with a disability. Moreover, participants in the current study came from different states in the U.S., which has influenced their access to social and community resources. Therefore, future research can focus on polyamorous relationship experiences in a particular geographic location to investigate relevant relationship challenges and resiliencies for multicultural and social justice advocacy.

Meanwhile, participants in the current study discussed the creation of their polyamorous relationship structure and their relationship experiences under such a structure. Given the nature of a multi-partnered relationship, future research design can utilize group interviews to gain multiple perspectives of polyamorous relationship experiences from different partners simultaneously. Since there is diversity in polyamorous relationship structures, future research can investigate relationship development and maintenance under a specific polyamorous structure. For example, exploring a closed triadic system can provide more insights into the

relationship dynamics among three partners and their interactions with the outside world. Moreover, the current research includes participants at different stages of their polyamorous relationship development. The findings suggest pronounced challenges at the early stage of polyamorous relationships and a higher level of relationship satisfaction as the relationship progresses over time, which is consistent with findings in existing literature (i.e., Flicker et al., 2021). Therefore, future research can investigate the association between relationship length and relationship experiences, which can provide more insights into counseling practice to support polyamorous clients. A longitudinal study can also be especially valuable to create polyamorous relationship development models that benefit not only counselors but also individuals in polyamorous relationships in examining their relationship growth and health. Moreover, given the paucity of research studies (e.g., Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021) on resilience as a buffering factor to mitigate minority stress in polyamorous relationships, it is crucial that future research explores how individuals develop resilience to manage various challenges in their relationship maintenance.

Furthermore, participants discussed the varying attitudes of their counselors toward polyamory and CNM. Future research can focus on examining factors that contribute to counselors' attitudes toward and approaches to consensually non-monogamous relationship configurations. It is imperative to understand counselors' barriers to developing multicultural and social justice counseling competencies in polyamory in order to develop relevant counseling training programs

Limitations

The current study is the first qualitative study to our knowledge that specifically explores the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals. However, the current study is no

exception to limitations. Due to the nature of an IPA study, the findings based on a small sample of LGBP individuals in polyamorous relationships are not generalizable to reflect universal polyamorous relationship experiences, and neither the goal of this current study is to reach such a generalization. Second, there are also limitations in the inclusion criteria of the current study. Specifically, LGBP individuals who have experienced dissolved polyamorous relationships and departed from polyamory were excluded from participation. Therefore, it is possible that participants in the current study discuss more satisfaction with their polyamorous relationship experiences, which may yield biased findings. Furthermore, there are limitations to the findings of the current study due to the recruitment strategy. Specifically, most of the participants were recruited through LGBTQIA+ organizations (e.g., SAIGE) and polyamory organizations (e.g., Polyamory Virginia). Access to or affiliation with LGBTIA+ and polyamory organizations may explain a high representation of counseling practitioners in the participants as well as participants' high levels of knowledge of polyamory concepts and terminologies (e.g., unicorn, compersion), utilization of community resources for resilience, and engagement in community advocacy. Most of the participants had at least a bachelor's degree and identified their SES as middle class or above, which also may have influenced access to and utilization of resources to maintain their polyamorous relationships. Therefore, these findings yielded based on the recruitment strategy have potential bias and may not be representative of the general polyamorous population. Meanwhile, all of the interviews were conducted at the individual level for convenience, safety, and privacy concerns. However, such an interview procedure only captures one party's perception of their relationship experiences while leaving out space for different perspectives and voices emerging from all partners involved in polyamorous relationships. Regardless of these limitations, the findings add valuable contributions to the

current limited knowledge of polyamorous relationships and experiences (e.g., relationship development, relationship maintenance, minority stress, resilience) within the sexually minoritized community. A significant strength of the current study is its qualitative nature which allows participants to discuss the nuances of defining their partnerships. In addition, the current study partially examines the influence of intersectional identities on polyamorous relationships, which avoids perpetuating a hegemonic understanding of polyamory and polyamorous relationships. Lastly, as mentioned in the previous two sections, the findings stress the diversity of polyamory which provides insights into counseling practices, counselor education, and future research.

Conclusion

The current study explores the polyamorous relationship experiences of LGBP individuals. Specifically, utilizing IPA (Smith et al., 2022), the study is designed under a minority stress theory framework (Brooks, 1981, Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015) to investigate the meanings made out of the polyamorous relationship journey, the relationship between sense of intersectional identities and polyamorous experiences, and resilience to varying challenges. The five GETs reflect the convergence and divergence of participants' experiences in their polyamorous relationships, including (1) polyamory is an evolving and purposeful journey, (2) poly satisfaction is a systemic experience, (3) dynamic interplay of sense of self and interpersonal experiences, (4) interwoven personal, relational, and systemic challenges, and (5) ecological systems for relationship maintenance. As the first known qualitative study that investigates polyamorous relationships within the sexually minoritized community, the GETs provide valuable contributions to the current limited knowledge of polyamory, which can be used

for future training for counselors to advance their multicultural and social justice counseling competence and poly-affirmative counseling approaches to working with polyamorous clients.

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Appendix A: Research Recruitment Email

Subject: Participation Opportunity in Sexual Orientation and Polyamory Research

(Designated contact of the organization),

Greetings, I am a doctoral candidate from the Department of Counseling and Special Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I am conducting a study for my dissertation on exploring the relationship quality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists. The study has obtained IRB approval from VCU (IRB No.: HM20025919). I am emailing you to inquire if you are willing to pass the study information on to the members of your organization.

I hope that the findings offer insight and knowledge to counselors to adopt affirmative counseling approaches to individuals who have alternative sexual, affectional, and relationship orientations.

The participants of the study will participate in one recorded interview lasting 65-75 minutes. All identifiable information will be removed after the completion of transcription to protect participant privacy. There is no cost for participants to participate in this study. Additionally, compensation (a $15 gift card) will be available to interview participants.

I sincerely appreciate your assistance. If you choose to pass the study information to your members, you can do so by posting our research flyer (see attached) and/or website request for participation (see attached) on your official website and/or official social media. You may also send the email invitation (see attached) to your members if you prefer. Please also let me know if you would be willing to pass my study information on to your members. If you have any questions, you can contact me at manj@vcu.edu. Thank you in advance for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon.

Kind regards,

Jiale Man, M.S.
Department of Counseling and Special Education
Virginia Commonwealth University

****Email/Social Media Request for Participation****

Subject: Research Participation Opportunity: Share Your Poly Experiences

Dear members,

We would like to share an opportunity to participate in research. The study aims to explore the relationship quality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists. This study has obtained IRB approval from Virginia Commonwealth University located in Richmond, Virginia

(IRB No.: HM20025919). The study is seeking participants with the following characteristics: Individuals who are:

- At or above the age of 18 at the time of joining the research,
- Identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer/questioning,
- Currently in a polyamorous relationship.
- Able to complete an interview in the English language.

Your voice will be valuable to provide counselors with a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBP polyamorists. In addition, we welcome individuals with all gender identities to participate in our study, although the focus of the study is on sexual, affection, and relationship orientations. The findings will offer insight and knowledge to counselors in college and community settings to provide appropriate and affirmative care and services to this population.

If you decide to participate, you will take part in one recorded interview lasting 60-75 minutes. The interview will mainly focus on your journey to polyamory, the perceived influence of sexual/relationship orientations on relationship experiences, and experiences of maintaining relationship quality. There is no cost to participate in this study, and compensation (a $15 gift card) will be available to interview participants.

If you, or someone you know, would like to express interest in participating in or ask questions related to the study, please contact Jiale Man, M.S. at manj@vcu.edu. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jiale Man, M.S.
Department of Counseling and Special Education
Virginia Commonwealth University

****Website Request for Participation****

Research Participation Opportunity: Share Your Poly Experiences

Thank you for your interest in the study on the relationship quality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists. The study findings will be valuable to provide counselors with a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBP polyamorists. The findings will offer insight and knowledge to counselors to provide appropriate and affirmative care and services to this population.

The study is seeking participants with the following characteristics: Individuals who are

- At or above the age of 18 at the time of joining the research,
- Identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer/questioning,
- Currently in a polyamorous relationship.

- Able to complete an interview in the English language.

We welcome individuals with all gender identities to participate in our study, although our study centers sexual, affectional, and relationship orientation. If you decide to participate in the study, you will take part in one recorded interview lasting 60-75 minutes. The interview will mainly focus on your journey to polyamory, the perceived influence of sexual/relationship orientations on relationship experiences, and experiences of maintaining relationship quality. There is no cost to participate in this study, and compensation (a $15 gift card) will be available to interview participants.

If you would like to express your interest in participating in or ask questions related to the study, please contact Jiale Man, M.S. at manj@vcu.edu.

Once again, thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Jiale Man, M.S.
Department of Counseling and Special Education
Virginia Commonwealth University

Appendix B: Research Flyer

LGBP AND POLYAMORY

Image retrieved from https://putanumonit.com/2019/10/16/polyamory-is-rational/

JOIN TO SHARE YOUR POLY EXPERIENCES

Participant Characteristics: 18+, LGBP+, in a poly relationship, able to speak English

Participant Involvement: Complete a 60-75 minute interview

Cost: No cost to participate

Compensation: Participants will receive a $15 gift card after interview

To express interest or schedule an interview, please contact

Jiale Man (He/him): manj@vcu.edu

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

LGBP Polyamorist Experience Interview Protocol

1. Start with the following script

Hi, I would like to thank you again for participating in the interview aspect of the study. I would like to briefly introduce myself, the study, and our interview process. My name is Isaac (Jiale) Man, and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. Although I have a background in counseling, this is not a counseling session and will be more like an interview because you will do most of the talking and I will primarily be listening and asking questions. This will help me to get a good understanding of your experiences and the meaning you make from having lived them. So, please feel free to take your time responding and know that at times I may inquire further to ensure I'm understanding. For the study, I aim to explore the relationship satisfaction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists and the meaning ascribed to maintaining relationship quality. I encourage you to share what you are comfortable with so that your responses will still maintain your privacy. Our interview can last 60-75 minutes, and we may talk about your experiences, beliefs, thoughts, and values related to this topic. After the interview, I will send you resources that may be helpful with processing anything that came up during the interview. Do you have any questions?

2. Reiterate Informed Consent

Before we start our interview, I would also like to talk about confidentiality. I want to assure you that our interview is confidential. This means that all of the information will be kept confidential between you and our research team. All identifiable information will be removed to maintain your privacy. In addition, I will send you mental health resources after our interview that you may find beneficial. I also encourage you to be mindful of only sharing what you feel comfortable with regard to the disclosure of sensitive or private information. Do you have any questions related to informed consent?

3. Prep Interviewees for Recording

As we are starting our interview, I want to clarify the recording process. We are using Zoom as a platform to conduct our interviews, and video recording, a default recording function of Zoom, will be used during the process. However, the video will be deleted immediately after the zoom session, and only audio recordings will be saved for transcription purposes. You can choose to turn off the camera during the Zoom session if you do not wish to be visually recorded. At the end of the interview, I will also ask questions related to your demographic information. However, I will turn off the recording so that such information will not be in the recorded audio. Do I have your permission to record our conversation today?

(After the participant agrees) Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.

4. Asking Research Questions

I would like to remind you that you can decline to answer any question that may cause you discomfort. If any questions arise for you at any point in the interview, feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer any questions.

Interview Questions:

1. Could you describe your current relationship structures?
    - Prompts: How would you describe the relationship hierarchy? How does the structure influence your engagement with your partners?
2. Could you describe your journey to enter polyamory?
    - Prompts: What has led you to polyamory? What was the experience like for you entering polyamory?
3. In what areas are you satisfied in your relationships?
    - Prompts: Many participants in other studies mentioned their satisfaction with intimacy, sexual activity, romance, trust, and commitment. Do any of these resonate with you? What differences do you notice in the level of satisfaction with different partners?
4. What challenges do you face maintaining your relationships with multiple partners?
    - Prompts: what personal challenges do you experience? What about relational challenges? What about challenges outside relationships, such as social, cultural, and political influences?
5. What communications did you have with your partner(s) when entering polyamory?
    - Prompts: What topics were challenging to talk about between you and your partners, if there were any? How did you and your partners address these topics?
6. Could you share your coming-out journey?
    - Prompts: What was the coming-out journey like for you? In what settings have you come out? Which part of your identity is more challenging to come out? How do you communicate with your partners about coming out? How does your coming out process influence the way you see yourself? How does your coming out process influence the way to view your relationships?
7. What other experiences related to your sexual orientation and polyamory have influenced the way you see yourself?
    - Prompts: How do you think about those experiences? What feelings do you have about those experiences? How do you manage those negative influences, if there are any? What about other intersecting identities?
8. How do you see those experiences influence your relationships with multiple partners?
    - Prompts: How do the experiences influence your interactions with your partners? How do you manage negative influences when they play out in your relationships if there are any?
9. How do you address the challenges as you maintain your relationships with multiple partners?
    - Prompts: What internal strength/resources do you use? What external strength/resources do you use?
10. What suggestions do you have for folks who are considering polyamory?

Ending Questions

Before I ask demographic questions, what do you want to share but didn't have the chance to in the interview?

Demographic questions:

The following questions are related to your demographic information. I am turning off the recording, and I will take notes while you are answering these questions.

1. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
2. How would you describe your gender identity?
3. How would you describe your racial identity?
4. What is your educational level?
5. Could you share your age?
6. How long have you been in your current relationships?
7. How is your state climate in terms of inclusiveness for poly and LGBP?
8. How would you describe your religion/spirituality?
9. How would you describe your social class? (For example, socioeconomic status considering education, wealth, occupation, and income)

5. Ending Script

For the final part of our time together today, you can choose a pseudonym that will be tied to your transcript. To ensure that your information remains private, please choose a pseudonym that is not related or connected to your name, nickname, or name that you have been called previously.

Once again, thank you for participating in the interview aspect of our study. In order to send the gift card to you, our university policy requires me to collect some personal information, including your name and address. I have put the link to a Google Form in the Zoom chat (https://forms.gle/AS2Lud31ReeyaRcr8). All your personal information provided in the Google Form will be securely stored. Please fill out the form and let me know if you have any questions.

(After the participant fills out the form) I sincerely appreciate what you have shared with me. If you think of someone you know who may be interested in and benefit from our study, you can share my contact information with them. The next step is that I will transcribe our interview within the next 3 weeks and send the transcript back to you. At that point, you will have one week to review the transcription in its entirety and you can edit or clarify the information as you wish within one week from receipt of the transcript. I will also remove any identifying information from the transcript to ensure your privacy, and only your pseudonym will remain. I understand that sharing personal experiences can sometimes bring up feelings of discomfort, so I will be sending you an email with mental health resources once we finish today. If you have any questions related to the study, please feel free to contact me. Thank you. Bye-bye.

Appendix D: Research Participant Information Sheet

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

STUDY TITLE: Explore Relationship Quality of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Pansexual Polyamorists
VCU INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Naomi Wheeler, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, (804) 828- 1332

ABOUT THIS INFORMATION SHEET
You are being invited to participate in a research study. **It is important that you carefully think about whether being in this study is right for you and your situation.**

This information sheet is meant to assist you in thinking about whether or not you want to be in this study. **Please ask the investigator or the study staff to explain any information in this information document that is not clear to you.** You may take home an unsigned copy of this information sheet to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND KEY INFORMATION
Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this research study is to explore the relationship quality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists and the meaning ascribed to their relationship maintenance experiences. Specifically, the investigators of the study aim to explore how polyamorists who have sexual/affectional expansive identities manage stress and build resilience as they maintain their relationship quality. The findings of the study aim to offer counselors knowledge to provide affirmative care to individuals who have alternative sexual, affectional, and relationship orientations.

What will happen if I participate?
Your participation in this study will include one interview lasting 60-75 minutes. This time is subject to change based on the length of responses. The interview questions will be focusing on participants' journey to polyamory, perceived influence of sexual/relationship orientation on relationship experiences, and response to stress as to maintain relationship quality. A maximum of 10 individuals will participate in this study. We hope to use the information shared and study results to enhance counselors' poly and LGBP affirmative counseling competencies.

What are the risks and benefits of participating?
There are both risks and benefits of participating in research studies.

Risks and Discomforts	Benefits to You and Others
• Participation in research might involve some loss of privacy. There is a small risk that someone outside the research study could see and misuse information about you. • The study questions include some that are sensitive and personal in nature and may make you feel uncomfortable.	There is no guarantee that you will receive any benefits from being in this study. However, possible benefits include the following: • Participants will be able to share their lived experiences related to their relationship and sexual orientation in a safe and non-judgmental space. • Participants will be able to voice their concerns and areas of improvement in various social systems without facing judgment and retaliation. In addition, we hope the information learned from this study will provide more information about how to best support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

In this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview with a member of the research team. During the interview, which lasts 45-60 minutes, you will be asked a series of questions centered on your experiences related to your sexual and relationship orientations. Following the interview, you will be given a transcription of your interview and have the opportunity to clarify or redact any information. Zoom will be utilized as a platform to conduct interviews, and video recording, a default recording function of Zoom, will be used during the process. However, the video will be deleted immediately after the zoom session, and only audio recordings will be saved for transcription purposes. You can choose to turn off the camera during the Zoom session if you do not wish to be visually recorded. Transcriptions will be de-identified to ensure your privacy. Additionally, interview recordings will be held in an encrypted database to ensure your confidentiality.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS?

There are no costs associated with this study.

WILL I BE PAID TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

You will be paid $15 after the interview. Participants will be provided a link at the end of each interview that will collect information needed for gift card distribution per the VCU Research/Survey Participant form. Gift cards will then be mailed to the physical address provided.

CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?
You can stop being in this research study at any time. Tell the study staff if you are thinking about stopping or decide to stop. Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the investigator without your consent. The reasons might include:

- the investigator thinks it necessary for your health or safety
- you have not followed study instructions
- administrative reasons require your withdrawal

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME BE PROTECTED?
Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has established secure research databases and computer systems to store information and to help with monitoring and oversight of research. Your information may be kept in these databases but are only accessible to individuals working on this study or authorized individuals who have access to specific research-related tasks.

Identifiable information in these databases is not released outside VCU unless stated in this consent or required by law. Although results of this research may be presented at meetings or in publications, identifiable personal information about participants will not be disclosed.

Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized representatives from the following organizations for the purposes of managing, monitoring, and overseeing this study:

- Representatives of VCU

In general, we will not give you any individual results from the study. Once the study has been completed, we will send you a summary of all of the results of the study and what they mean.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?
The investigator and study staff named below are the best person(s) to contact if you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research:

Name: Dr. Naomi Wheeler
Email: njwheeler@vcu.edu
Phone Number: 804-828-1332

Or

Name: Jiale Man
Email: manj@vcu.edu
Phone Number: 804-828-1332

If you have general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, or if you wish to discuss problems, concerns or questions, to obtain information, or to offer input about research, you may contact:

Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Research
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000, Box 980568, Richmond, VA 23298
(804) 827-2157; https://research.vcu.edu/human-research/

Appendix E: Mental Health Resources

Dear participant,

Thank you for completing our interview. The information we learn from this study may help us learn more about the relationship satisfaction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual polyamorists. If you feel that you may need to speak to someone about any issues or concerns after participating in this study, we have listed below several national helplines for you.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-8255**
The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.

Crisis Text Line
You can text **HOME to 741741** to connect with a Crisis Counselor. The service is free 24/7 and confidential.

The Trevor Project
You can access **https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/** to chat, talk, or text with a crisis counselor. The service is free 24/7 and confidential.

SAMHSA's National Helpline: **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**
The SAMHSA helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental health concerns.

Again, we thank you for your participation in the study. If you are willing to do so, you can also pass along the enclosed information to friends who may also be interested in learning about this research study. You are under no obligation to share this information and whether or not you share this information will not affect your relationship with the staff at Virginia Commonwealth University. If you have any questions, please contact Jiale Man, M.S. at manj@vcu.edu. Thank you very much.

Thanks!

Jiale Man, M.S.
Department of Counseling and Special Education
Virginia Commonwealth University

Enclosure: Study flyer