Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 18:75–88, 2005

ISSN: 1072-0537 print / 1521-0650 online
DOI: 10.1080/10720530590523107

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

THIS IS MY PARTNER, AND THIS IS MY . . . PARTNER'S PARTNER: CONSTRUCTING A POLYAMOROUS IDENTITY IN A MONOGAMOUS WORLD

MEG BARKER

Department of Psychology, School of Health and Social Sciences, Middlesex University, Queensway, Enfield, Middlesex, UK

According to the writings of members of the polyamorous community, polyamory is a type of nonmonogamous relationship orientation in which it is considered acceptable to love more than one person and emphasis is placed on openness and honesty within one's relationships. The proliferation of websites, E-mail groups and books on the topic since the mid 1990s mean that polyamory can be seen as a burgeoning sexual story (Plummer, 1995). However, very little has been written academically on the topic, despite its fascinating potential to challenge mainstream discourses of monogamy and infidelity and to reveal the constructed nature of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980). In this article I draw on social constructionist and personal construct psychology perspectives to examine the ways in which polyamorous individuals construct their personal and group identities in relation to conventional monogamy and to explore the implications of polyamory for a person's own sense of self.

Polyamory (or "poly") is a term used to describe "a relationship orientation that assumes that it is possible [and acceptable] to love many people and to maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships" (Sexualities, 2003, p. 126). The term originated in the 1960s to refer to the type of responsible nonmonogamy advocated in Robert Heinlein's (1961)novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The term "polyamory" has come into popular usage during the last decade only, following the proliferation of poly websites and E-mail groups on the Internet (Anapol, 1997). Because polyamory is so new, definitions in the polyamorous literature vary, but a review of the most popular books (Anapol, 1997;

Received 22 May 2004; accepted 20 July 2004.
Address correspondence to Meg Barker, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA, UK. E-mail: barkermj@lsbu.ac.uk

Easton and Liszt, 1997 and Lano and Parry, 1995) and websites (alt.polyamory, bi.org/uk-poly, fvpoly, and ourlittlequad) reveals that most definitions of the term include the notion that it is possible to maintain multiple love relationships and desirable to be open and honest within these. Common polyamorous set-ups include people having one or two "primary" partners and other "secondary" ones, triads (where three people are involved with each other), and quads (e.g., two couples being involved with each other). Some polyamorous people live together in families or tribes, some have "polyfidelity" within their group and others are "open" (see Labriola, 2003, for a more extensive overview of various models).

Social science and psychological writing has paid very little attention to nonmonogamy within contemporary Western cultures, despite the obvious implications of such orientations for a constructivist perspective on relationships. The lack of research in this area is evidenced by the difficulties experienced when a group of academics tried to put together a special issue of the journal *Sexualities* on the topic (C. Klesse, personal communication, May 15, 2003). Polyamory, in particular, presents a fascinating avenue for exploring dominant constructions of relationships and the ways in which these may be challenged, since it involves an open refusal to conform to the standard ideals of monogamy and fidelity.

I begin this article by outlining the ways in which polyamory might challenge key elements of the dominant construction of sexuality, sometimes termed "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980) and also culturally dominant notions of selfhood (Butt, Burr, & Bell, 1997). I then draw on an analysis of responses to e-interviews with members of polyamorous communities to examine how they construct their identities in relation to more dominant cultural constructions and to explore the implications that being polyamorous has for their own sense of self.

POLYAMORY AND COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

Elsewhere (Barker, 2003a), I have elaborated the dominant construction of sexuality in Western culture, as reflected and perpetuated in endless Hollywood movies, pop songs, and self-help books (see Crawford, 2004 and Potts, 1998). Three key elements of this are that sexual relationships should be (a) between a man and a woman, (b) monogamous, and (c) with the man active and the woman passive. As Richardson (1998) argues, this version of heterosexuality is "constructed as a coherent, natural, fixed and stable category; as universal and monolithic"

(p. 2). Those who position themselves outside of it run the risk of being problematized and demonized by our society, seen as abnormal or even criminal (Rubin, 1989). Queer theorists have explored how those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities may be threatening since they can be seen as "disturbing and troubling heterosexuality" (Jackson, 2003, p. 70). The same may be said of those in the polyamorous communities.

Polyamory contests the ideal of the monogamous relationship (b) above, and in some cases the idea that relationships should be between only two people (a). Even now, most accepted psychological theories propose "natural" human development as the process of forging a monogamous partnership with someone of the opposite sex and starting a "biological" family. However, some past theorists have questioned this. Engels (1951) considered monogamy a restrictive state reflective of the ownership of goods and people inherent in capitalism, with women being degraded and reduced to servants, slaves to male lusts, and instruments for the production of children (Stelboum, 1999). Robinson (1997) argues that the challenging of monogamy as the dominant institution is one important avenue for women to explore in order to radically rework gendered power relationships within heterosexuality. Therefore, polyamory may have the potential also to question the heterosexual ideal of the active man and the passive woman (c).

When combined with the notion that it is possible to love more than just one gender, as was the case for most of the participants in my research, polyamory also presents the potential for challenging the idea that people are attracted to members of the "opposite sex" only. It challenges this in a more overt and explicit way than monogamous bisexuality, since polyamory makes it possible for people to have relationships with people of different genders simultaneously. This troubles the male/female and straight/gay binary constructs at the root of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980; Jackson, 2003).

POLYAMORY AND SELF IDENTITY

Polyamory has the potential for revealing not only the constructed nature of compulsory heterosexuality, but also the constructed nature of identity. The conventional way of viewing the self, both in everyday life and in traditional psychology, is as one coherent, stable whole. However, as construct theorists have pointed out, this can be an unhelpful view leading to conflict over what the "real" self is (Butt, Burr & Bell, 1997). More appropriate metaphors may be of the self as a

plurality of voices (Hermans, 1996), a community of selves (Mair, 1977), or even as a range of different selves with no underlying "core" self, which we construct together with other people in social situations (Potter & Wetherell, 1989). It seems that polyamory has the capacity to help people to explore the different facets of themselves and perhaps come to a alternative understanding of self identity through the different ways they might see themselves reflected in the eyes of others they are closely involved with.

Polyamory could be seen as part of the wider transformation of intimacy and relationships in postmodern society, as proposed by Giddens (1992). It seems to be an extension of the general move towards love relationships being based on equality in terms of choice, desire, trust, and compatibility rather than on tradition or arrangement. However, it is also a relatively new "sexual story" (Plummer, 1995) which is trying to establish itself in a social climate that is still hostile to transgressions of sexual and gender binaries and the "rules" of monogamy.

METHOD

This research represents the first, exploratory stage of a much larger study into polyamorous identities and practices. For this stage, the Internet was used as means of obtaining data from participants because it has been such a major factor in the growth of polyamorous communities. Thirty people responded and took part in an e-interview, where I asked them to write about their experiences under suggested headings such as: how they became involved with polyamory, what their current set-up is, and how they feel it is perceived by society in general. E-interviews seemed an appropriate way of obtaining data since so much of the work of negotiating polyamorous identities and the rules of polyamorous relationships takes place on the Internet. From a discourse analytic perspective, the naturally occurring data on the discussion group or journals would be preferable to e-interviews (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), but there are ethical problems with obtaining consent from all members. Many participants draw on their online discussion in order to provide their answers. The questions asked were based on those commonly posted on these communities, so they were ones people were used to addressing. I hope that my own membership of the communities encouraged an open response, as did my suggestion that participants write what they felt was relevant, rather than strictly adhering to my list of possible topics.

Most of the participants lived in the UK, with just a third based in

the US/Eruope. Two-thirds of the participants identified as female and one third as male, with one person describing herself as a male-to-female transsexual and two as otherwise "gender-queer." Participant ages ranged from 20 to 60 with a mean age of 33. Most of the participants said that they formed relationships with both men and women, with only two identifying as straight men and two as lesbian women. This may reflect the fact that the UK poly list is tied to the bi.org website and might therefore be more known among bisexuals than gay/straight individuals. Participants represented a range of the different relationship set-ups mentioned above. The data from the participants was anonymized (O'Brien Libutti, 1999), and I considered issues of accountability and reflexivity in depth (Bannister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1995), aiming to achieve a balance between giving my participants "a voice" as a minority group in society, of which I myself am a member, and retaining enough analytical distance to make my discussion meaningful and interesting.

ANALYSIS

A social constructionist discourse analytic approach was taken to the data. Discourse analysis seeks to understand how accounts are constructed and what is gained from these constructions. The participants' responses were coded to collect sections of text where polyamory was constructed in relation to conventional heterosexual monogamy and also sections referring to participants' own self-identities within polyamory. Following this, I explored patterns in the data (differences and similarities within and between the accounts), and the functions and effects of the ways in which accounts were presented (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). I continually asked myself what was being achieved by the accounts and how it was achieved, in terms of microlevel language use and structure and wider discourses being drawn on (a more macrolevel analysis). I am aware that there is some dispute amongst discourse analysts over whether it is appropriate to combine micro and macro level analysis, particularly since these two focuses originate from quite separate traditions (discursive psychology on the one hand and Foucauldian thought on the other). Here, I am following Wetherell (2001) and colleagues who have called for an eclectic approach integrating the two types of discourse analysis. I was interested in both the ways in which participants drew on wider societal discourses to construct their polyamorous identities and how they structured their accounts and chose particular words to support their constructions. I am using Coyle's (1995) broad definition of discourses

as "sets of linguistic material that have a degree of coherence in their content and organisation and which perform constructive functions in broadly defined social contexts" (p. 243).

It quickly became apparent that participants were employing various discourses in their explanations of polyamory. Two interrelated pairs of discourses in particular will be focused on here because of the interesting tensions implicit in them.

- Polyamory as different and threatening to monogamy vs. polyamory as normal and similar to monogamy.
- Polyamory as something I (naturally) am vs. polyamory as something I (choose to) do.

Often the same participants would draw on both discourses at different points in their responses. It should be emphasised that discourse analysis does not see such seemingly contradictory discourses as problematic in the way that our culture generally views inconsistencies as weakening or undermining an argument. Rather contradictory discourses are interesting aspects inherent in most speech. We all use different rhetorical devices at different times, when we are trying to create specific effects or achieve different ends (Potter, 1996). For example, at some points in our talk we may make efforts to put ourselves across as a "normal" person, so that the listener can relate and sympathize with us. At other points we may seek to emphasize our individuality and uniqueness, since these are qualities that are valued in our society.

POLYAMORY AS DIFFERENT AND THREATENING TO MONOGAMY/POLYAMORY AS NORMAL AND SIMILAR TO MONOGAMY

Elsewhere (Barker, 2003a), I have argued that polyamory is generally invisible in our society, but that when it is present it is constructed as evil or, at best, strange. Mainstream media representations can be seen as one place where dominant cultural discourses are reflected and perpetuated, and certainly here any kind of nonmonogamy is labeled "infidelity," shown as wicked, and punished severely (e.g., in films like *Fatal Attraction* and *Unfaithful*). There is rarely any mention of open nonmonogamy. In the few examples there are, it is punished (e.g., wife-swapping in the film *The Ice Storm*) or presented as weird and *New Age* (e.g., in the TV show *Friends* and *McArthur,* 2003). Participants in the current study presented a similar summary to this,

stating that polyamory was "not seen" by society, but if it was it was confused with "cheating" and disapproved of, seen as bad or "weird."

Participants wrote about the potential of polyamory to be oppressed and demonized because it troubles culturally dominant ways of viewing relationships. Several participants argued that monogamous people were threatened by polyamory because it represented an honest way of having more than one lover, something many monogamous people might do, or considering doing, but might not be open about due to the dominant cultural rules around infidelity. In their discussion of this notion of polyamory as threatening, participants generally put polyamory across as something very different to conventional monogamy. This included suggestions that polyamory might be a better way of relating than monogamy, or that it might be more realistic, given that many people are attracted to more than one person. For example, one participant said.

> [Polyamory is often perceived] negatively because it's "different" . . . I think a lot of people feel threatened by it. They've spent all the time that they've been in their "normal" relationships behaving themselves, feeling guilty if they realise they're attracted to someone else, worrying that it could screw up what they've got. Worrying that their partner might leave them for someone else. Feeling jealous.

Another said:

> To me polyamory is much simpler than Western conventional monogamy . . . [monogamy] is all very contradictory and cruel.

As well as questioning rules around fidelity, polyamory can be seen to challenge the supposed mutually exclusive categories of "friend" and "lover" inherent in the dominant version of heterosexuality. Burr and Butt (1992) argue that we generally divide relationships into "friends" and "lovers," and that these culturally available categories exert a "terrific pull on people's behaviour and experience" (p. 23), according to the Kellian notion of "anticipation." People are expected to have one "lover" and anyone else should fall into the category of "friend," with strict cultural rules around what behavior is appropriate in a friendship and problems experienced when a relationship seems to fall somewhere between the either/or categories of friend and lover (e.g., a close opposite sex friendship or a lover one is no longer sexual with). Friendships are generally seen as less important than love relationships, as exemplified in the common language of two people being "just" friends. In polyamorous relationships, there can be more than one lover, and the distinctions between friends and lovers may become blurred. Several

participants spoke of such a blurring of the distinctions, for example, by having "sexual friends" or by placing emphasis on people they were close to, whether or not the relationships were sexual. For example:

> Good friends now are former lovers or the former or current partners of former lovers. This whole community is kind of like that. It's a strength.

Again, it was argued that this could be threatening to people outside polyamory.

Despite this common discourse of polyamory as very different to monogamy, participants also frequently argued that polyamory was *not* so different. For example:

> I don't think it's vastly different to monogamous relationships. Romantic relationships are always about the same kinds of things: fun, friendship, sex.

Many participants used the word "just," as in "polyamory is just another equally valid way of doing relationships," or stated that it was really "normal" or "ordinary."

Also interesting to note here was the way that several participants referred to themselves as a "family." For example, one said she would like to be seen as "a family. That's all. We're just a family." Another took this further stating

> Polyamory really is an extended family . . . something that has worked exceptionally well for the human race for 1,000s of years.

Plummer (1995) has argued that one of the major shifts in sexual stories in recent year is in construction of the "family," from the story of "traditional nuclear family values" to the "postmodern family" (p. 153) where family members are chosen rather than biologically given. Participants seem to be drawing on this discourse, and perhaps focusing on the notion of "family" ties rather than "sexual" ones, since these might be more acceptable to those outside polyamory. The second quote also draws on a common cultural discourse that what is ancient is somehow superior to what is new, implying that the "traditional" nuclear family that polyamory differs from is not as old as other models which polyamory might actually be similar to.

It would seem that the discourse of "difference" serves to recognize the trouble polyamory has being accepted by monogamy. It also constructs the ways in which polyamory is different as potentially bet-

ter or more realistic than monogamy. The discourse of "similarity" acts as a normalizing device (Jefferson, 1984), serving to present polyamorous people as "just like anyone else" and therefore acceptable.

Polyamory as Something I (Naturally) Am/Polyamory as Something I (Choose to) Do

Many of the participants' statements strongly related to an implicit either/or question of whether polyamory is a part of one's identity (generally linked to the idea that it is part of one's "natural" make-up) or whether it is simply a behavior people carry out (generally linked to the idea that people can "choose" to be polyamorous or not).

The notion of polyamory as "natural" came across strongly in participants' answers. This is perhaps unsurprising since a strong discourse in Western culture at present is that things with biological origins are somehow more "real" than products of socialization or cultural constructions (Barker, 2003b). People often counter potential prejudice against them by arguing that their difference is "natural" and therefore something they "can't help." Participants often explicitly stated that they were "naturally" polyamorous. For example, one participant said, "I'm essentially wired up or oriented for two primary relationships."

Such ideas were supported by use of extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986). These are rhetorical devices that take something to an extreme to make it more persuasive. Participants talked about "always" being different, or "never" being able to be monogamous. This was often incorporated in stories of the "at first . . . but then I realised" type (Jefferson, 1984). Most participants wrote about how they came to be poly in one of two ways:

- *At first,* they thought it was only themselves who had different ideas about relationships, *but then they realized,* often through exploring the internet, that other people lived this way and called it polyamory.
- *At first,* they couldn't help cheating *but then they realized* there was an honest way of having multiple relationships.

Both of these stories support that contention that the person was naturally nonmonogamous. Often there was an added notion that prior to finding out about polyamory, participants felt "wrong" or "didn't fit." Several of the participants also suggested that polyamory was inbuilt by ridiculing the question "what do you get out of being polyamorous?"

They argued that this was like being asked what they got out of being anything else they "couldn't help," for example being: six feet tall, white, a man or a woman, or "having a freckle on the inside of the fourth toe of my left foot."

However, participants occasionally proposed that polyamory was a behavior that people could choose and/or work at. For example, stating that it is a "valid individual choice of a way to live one's life" or saying "it's taken me a lot of practice to become good at polyamory." This explanation presents the speaker as an autonomous, rational individual and was often tied to the suggestion that polyamory was a "free" way of living but one in which people had to behave "responsibly."

Authors such as Weeks (2003) write that the understanding of sexuality as an identity, or type of person, is relatively new in human history. It seems widely accepted that people can identify as either heterosexual or homosexual, to the extent that sexualities that do not fit this binary construction are often problematized (Jackson, 2003). The way in which people conduct their relationships (monogamous, polyamorous, or otherwise) seems to have a more complex relationship to self-identity. Several participants in this study readily expressed their bisexuality, heterosexuality, or homosexuality as part of their identity, but were more reticent when it came to their polyamory. However, participants in general still seemed to draw on the either/or discourse of "natural identity vs. freely chosen behaviour" commonly used in debates about other aspects of sexuality. It would be interesting to further explore the extent to which various sexual practices are seen as behaviors and/or identities. Plummer (1995) suggests that new sexual stories may well begin to forge identities "around relationships and conscious choices over the life one wishes to live" (p. 160).

One polyamorous person explicitly addressed the tensions in the either/or natural identity/free choice discourse, saying:

> Being poly is the same as any matter of taste. If I say "I like [the band] Radiohead," nobody thinks there's something in my genetic makeup that accounts for why I like them and others don't, but equally you couldn't say I made a decision to like them and dislike other bands—I heard the music and found myself liking it.

In relation to self identity, constructivist research (Butt, Burr, & Bell, 1997) has found that people spontaneously talk about the possibility of "being themselves" as an important feature of relationships, drawing on the culturally dominant notion of a "real" or "core" self. However, people also recognize that they may express different "selves" in different relationships. Participants in a study by Butt et al. ac-

cepted that they could feel that they were "being themselves" even in two relationships where they were expressing very different, or even contradictory, versions of themselves.

Participants in my research certainly seemed to draw on both discourses of "being themselves" when being polyamorous and on polyamory as a way of expressing multiple versions of themselves. As part of the "at first . . . but then I realised" stories mentioned above, there was often a construction that people had not "been themselves" when they were cheating, but had become "true to themselves" when they became polyamorous. Participants also said things like:

> Poly means I can be myself, and don't have to give away part of who I am to get the relationships I want.

However, some participants also spoke of being different selves, or at least different "aspects" of themselves in different relationships. Several particularly related this to having relationships with both men and women, although others were keen to separate out their polyamory and their bisexuality. One participant said he liked:

> Being able to express different parts of a complex self in different ways with different people. I don't have to be only one side of myself; I can be different aspects in different contexts/times/company and that works well for me.

CONCLUSIONS

The fact that participants still present polyamory as relatively invisible in society suggests that it has yet to reach Plummer's (1995) final necessary condition for the "successful" telling of a sexual story: creating a culture of public problems. Once a sexual story has reached this point, Plummer argues, a large number of people are willing to claim it as their own and to tell their story visibly, and there is support and credibility from those outside the community. The polyamorous community is still relatively small, and participants in the current study often stated that they were not "out" to workmates and/or family members. However, as a burgeoning sexual story that has not yet reached this stage, it is interesting to explore how polyamorous individuals and groups construct their identity in relation to dominant ways of structuring relationships, and how they understand their way of living in relation to concepts such as sexuality, self identity and family. As with others outside normative heterosexuality (Kitzinger,

1987), I have shown that this process involves negotiating potentially conflicting discourses around difference and sameness, identity and behavior, nature and choice.

Constructivist social psychologists like Potter and Wetherell (1987) propose that we construct our identities through social interaction, generally in the form of language. Here, I have displayed how wider discourses of "difference" and "sameness" may be used by participants to present themselves as better or more realistic than monogamous people on the one hand and normal and acceptable on the other. The discourse of "natural identity" enables participants to reject claims that they could behave differently, while the discourse of "free choice" presents themselves as responsible and in control of their lives. In my continued research, I am exploring ways in which the possibilities opened up by polyamory may be limited by the conventional language of partnerships, infidelities, and jealousy as well as either/or constructions such as friend/lover. I am also examining alternative languages emerging as polyamorous people construct new identities and relationship patterns, for example, the reclaiming of the word "slut," and proposing positive versions of jealousy ("compersion" and "frubbling").

It was beyond the scope of this article to explore fully the gendered implications of polyamory, which is often assumed to fulfill male fantasies (infidelity without guilt and the possibility of sex with more than one women). However, some of the participants in the current study presented it as a more feminine way of managing relationships, with emphasis placed on open communication, expression of emotions, and support networks. Certainly, most published writers on the topic have been women (Easton & Liszt, 1997 and Anapol, 1997), and Jackson and Scott (2004) propose that it gives heterosexual women the potential to challenge gendered power issues. My continued research explores how polyamorous relationships may or may not still be structured around traditional gender roles and how polyamorous lifestyles might be seen as part of a feminist agenda (Barker and Ritchie, forthcoming).

During the preparation of this article there has been something of an explosion of media interest in polyamory in the UK. Members of the communities from which my participants were drawn have been approached to speak to journalists from British newspapers (*The Guardian, the Sunday Telegraph*), magazines (*The Big Issue, Red*) and TV companies (BBC 2, Channel 4). I myself have taken part in several interviews on my research and my own polyamorous relationships. On the whole the resulting depictions have (sometimes grudgingly) presented polyamory as a viable alternative (e.g., Jenkins, 2004) rather than demonizing or problematizing it as previous media coverage has done (Barker,

2003a). However, I am aware that Plummer (1995) and others are cautious about the possibility of any radical change in the current construction of sexuality. It is very difficult to confront the dominant version of anything, particularly sexuality, which is such a loaded topic at the best of times. I feel that this statement from Burr and Butt (1992) applies very much to the participants in my research: "It is a brave person who tries to defy the categories, expectations and anticipations of others. Individual reconstruing is not necessarily echoed throughout the rest of society. But surely there can be no such change without it" (p. 30).

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