

Challenging everyday monogamism: Making the paradigm shift from couple-centric bias to polycule-centred practice in counselling and psychotherapy

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Introduction

This paper explores *everyday monogamism* and *couple-centric bias* in counselling and psychotherapy. The term *monogamism* (Anderson, 2010; cf. Twist, Prouty, Haym, VandenBosch., 2018) describes the systemic oppression enacted through ideas and practices that valorise monogamous people and relationships while systematically devaluing polyamorous and multi-partnered ones. One component of monogamism is *mononormative bias*. Mononormative bias stems from *mononormativity* (Pieper & Bauer, 2005). Anapol (2010) explains mononormativity as a cultural bias that treats polyamorous relationships as inferior and unworkable, instead framing the topic of relationships around notions of monogamy and “infidelity”.

Mononormative bias involves the hierarchical positioning of monogamous people and relationships as being superior, healthier, more mature, and more “natural,” while simultaneously devaluing multi-partnered people and relationships as “alternative,” “different,” inferior, immature, or abnormal (cf. Cassidy & Wong, 2018; Ritchie & Barker 2006). *Couple-centric bias* is a common sub-type of mononormative bias that involves the specific monogamist belief that all people have or desire a “couple” relationship and that other relationship configurations are inferior, immature, unnatural, abnormal, or unsustainable.

When critiquing the relational logics that sustain mononormativity, Kean (2018) identified 11 mononormative biases¹

- the passionate/romantic ideal of “one true love”;
- the steady/companionate ideal of a “soul mate”;
- the idea that the measure of commitment is sexual “fidelity”;
- the idea that the measure of commitment is emotional “fidelity”;
- the fact that “fidelity” and “faithfulness” are understood as synonyms of “monogamy”;
- the beliefs that having one sexual-romantic partner at a time is mature/natural/best;

- the idea that there is a clear, coherent and sustainable distinction between the categories “friend” and “lover”;
- the belief that sex is healthy only in the company of romance and commitment;
- the way romance and commitment are understood as leading to or synonymous with monogamy;
- the belief that sex means you are serious about someone; and,
- the contradictory belief that sex with more than one person shows you are not serious about those people.

These mononormative biases can influence people’s affective, behavioural, and cognitive processes. The ubiquitous nature of these mononormative biases means that many polyamorous and multi-partnered people can experience their impact on a regular basis during such routine activities as using public transportation, attending a social event, or buying groceries. Consequently, these experiences of monogamism can be termed *everyday monogamism*, in the sense that they are often enacted in tangible and mundane interactions that occur in everyday life, and not solely in rare administrative and legislative contexts.

Language can enact, reveal, and perpetuate ideological biases. In this article, I apply the anti-oppressive practice strategy of shifting the analytical gaze: I am not writing primarily *about* polyamorous and multi-partnered people as targets of inquiry but instead writing as a polyamorous psychotherapist *about* everyday monogamism within counselling and psychotherapy. I have chosen to use the phrase “polyamorous *and* multi-partnered people” to acknowledge polyamorous people who may or may not have multiple partners at any given time, as well as multi-partnered people who do not identify as polyamorous.

I will discuss some ubiquitous language, concepts, clinical practices, and policies through which therapists—particularly relationship counsellors—enact everyday monogamism. I will also challenge the couple-centric bias endemic to both explicitly monogamist and ostensibly polyamory-inclusive relationship counselling approaches. I will explore how everyday monogamism in counselling ideology harms people with polyamorous and multi-partnered lived experiences and kinship bonds, explain how everyday monogamism can impair therapists’ clinical judgement, and provide suggestions for therapists who wish to move from couple-centric bias toward polycule-centred practice.

Defining Polyamory (Noun) or Polyamorous (Adjective)?

The term *polyamory* is a compound of the prefix “poly-,” meaning “many, much, or one or more,” from the Greek singular “*polys*,” meaning “much”. The suffix “-amory” comes from the Latin “*amare*” meaning “to love” (Klesse, 2006). As noted by Klesse, some variation of this definition can be found in almost all publications on polyamory. The words polyamory (noun) and polyamorous (adjective) were added to the official lexicon of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2006 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006).

Although it is often translated as “many loves,” the term *polyamory* can also describe affectional and relational orientations, kinship systems, and lovestyles that have the potential to include “one or more” loves. This definition can provide a deeper understanding of how polyamorous approaches to human intimacy often differ from monogamous ones, beyond the exact number of simultaneous partners. This definition can also include situations in which a person has only one partner or no partners at a particular time, while retaining their polyamorous orientation or lovestyle. (Some people use the term *solo polyamory* to describe this situation, although—as mentioned later—this term is used in contrasting ways that vary by community, culture, and context.)

In fact, defining polyamory solely in terms of romantic love is indicative of the mononormative biases critiqued by Kean (2018). This definition valorises some forms of human interactions while devaluing others. As Klesse (2006) observed, “the emphasis of love frequently correlates with a de-emphasis of sexuality” (p. 568). Klesse quoted a polyamorous participant, “Marianne,” who explained that “although sex is an important side to her life, having many sexual relationships is not the point of polyamory” (ibid) and claimed that “many people who are polyamorous would have fewer sexual partners than people who practice monogamy” (ibid). Palpable tension persists between polyamorous accounts that explore the role of sexuality in relationships, with dialectic dissent between an authentically sex-positive ethos that values erotic interactions for their own sake and an ethos of respectability politics that values erotic interactions only where they serve as means to mononormative relationship aims. The false dichotomy between “love” and “sex,” the attempt to rank-order people’s relationship roles and interactions in hierarchical terms, is both strategic and unsustainable (Kean, 2015, 2018).

Klesse (2006) and Barker and Langdridge (2010) have explored how de-sexualisation can be a strategic response by polyamorous people subjected to sexually objectifying and sensationalist media representations. Although the current article is limited in scope to polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships, other articles have explored in depth the many valuable and rewarding forms of erotic interaction people can experience beyond the confines of romantic feelings, love, erotic intimacy, or partnerships (e.g., Kean, 2018; Klesse, 2006; Nordgren, 2006). My emphasis on the sub-set of interpersonal activities that involve romantic partnerships is not intended as a valuation or exclusion of other forms of human interaction, but rather as a way to address some specific manifestations of everyday monogamism in counselling and psychotherapy substantively within the limited word count.

Polyamory is often abbreviated as “poly,” although recent shifts toward anti-racist practices that demonstrate recognition and respect for Polynesian culture have led to the increasing adoption of “polyam” instead (Manduley, 2015; see also Urban Dictionary, 2006). Although some people consider being polyamorous to be an identity or affectional orientation, others consider “polyamorous” to be a description of what they *do* rather than an *identity* (Klesse, 2014b). Some multi-partnered people do not describe themselves or

their relationships as polyamorous, instead adapting and innovating other terms to describe their relationship configurations. Literature discussing some of these terms will be discussed later in this article.

Numerous distinct terms are used in a variety of languages to describe polyamorous and multi-partnered relationship configurations and approaches. The term *polycule* is used to describe polyamorous and multi-partnered people's relational networks of kinship bonds. Author and illustrator Tikva Wolf's² suite of English language resources on healthy communication and relationship dynamics includes the Kimchi Cuddles comics, which often feature polyamorous people and polycules. Due to high international demand, some of Wolf's polycule-centred work has been translated into Czech, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

It is important for counsellors and psychotherapists to find out which words feel meaningful and accurate to therapy participants in their own languages, instead of presuming that English words have universal relevance across cultural and linguistic communities. Although some cultures and societies have their own traditional terms and concepts to describe multi-partnered relationship systems, Ritchie and Barker (2006) found that English-speaking polyamorous communities in particular had to develop new language to describe their relationship partners, kinship systems, and even their emotions. Ritchie and Barker's study of English-speaking, primarily UK-based online polyamorous communities found that polyamorous people had felt the need to create new language to describe their identities, define their relationships, and express their emotions.

Ritchie and Barker (2006) noted that vocabularies of emotion ascribe value and meaning to emotions; such vocabularies are not merely matters of terminology, but also inextricably entangled with ideology. Before people can express and process their experiences with us as therapists, we need to have a shared language of emotions (see also Barker, 2005). Citing Harré and Parrott's (1996) claim that vocabularies of emotion can operate as forms of social control, Ritchie and Barker explained how the construction of jealousy as both a "natural" response to "infidelity" and a "negative" emotion functions to perpetuate the dominance of monogamy. Therapists need to consider the implicit ideology of our own language about emotions or risk failure to recognise that the people with whom we are working are polyamorous or multi-partnered. The harmful impact of mononormativity in therapeutic contexts has been discussed widely (e.g., Cassidy & Wong, 2018; Henrick & Trawinski, 2016; Jordan, 2018; van Tol, 2017).

Therapists' failure to recognise polyamorous or multi-partnered people and relationship configurations is not merely a *demographic* issue, but a *clinical* issue. This failure results in major gaps in therapists' awareness and understanding of a core part of people's lived experiences. These gaps endanger our ability to make accurate therapeutic judgements and thus to achieve optimal clinical outcomes (Jordan, 2018). We also need to consider whether our vocabularies of emotion are inclusive enough to support people to communicate and process their own experiences.

Ritchie and Barker (2006) found that polyamorous participants needed to create their own vocabularies of emotion in order to describe their experiences accurately. Mononormative vocabularies of emotion entrench a couple-centric bias and label all romantic and erotic connections outside of that dyadic confine as “infidelity” and “adultery”. Although such activities are often treated as aberrant within mononormative contexts, research suggests that engagement in romantic and/or sexual interactions with more than one person is much more common than therapists may presume (e.g., Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017). Findings across studies that between 20% and 70% of ostensibly monogamous, married people engage in *non-consensual* non-monogamy highlight the permeability and incongruity of the mono/polyam binary (see Kipnis, 1998, particularly footnote 4, p. 293). In contrast to these negative depictions, Ritchie and Barker’s (2006) study included polyamorous participants who described their emotions about their partners’ other partners using affective terms such as *compersion* and *frubbly*.

Ritchie and Barker’s (2006) participants provided multiple definitions of *compersion*, with one participant expressing appreciation for those who coined the term as “an exact antonym of jealousy” (George, 1997, cited in Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 595). Other participants used a polycule-centred frame of reference, describing compersion as “taking joy in one’s partner’s other partners” (Cathy, 2000, cited in *ibid*) and “the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another” (moderators, LiveJournal Compersion community, 2003, cited in *ibid*). However, some participants disliked the word compersion. One participant said that “it somehow brings to mind the two words... compelled and coercion” (Jane, 2000, cited in *ibid*). Jane (2000, cited in *ibid*) expressed a preference for the term *frubbly*, due to being “all in favour of a ‘snuggly’ word”.

Subsequent studies support Ritchie and Barker’s (2006) finding that monogamous people differ from polyamorous people in their feelings and reactions to people with whom they have partners in common. In a study of 529 monogamous and 159 polyamorous and multi-partnered people’s reactions to imagining their romantic partner with another partner, monogamous partners reported greater emotional distress, whereas polyamorous and multi-partnered people reported thinking about their partner’s other partners more frequently and being more likely to report emotional responses consistent with compersion (see Mogilski et al., 2019 for complete findings, but see Hyde, 2005, for a critique of the kind of “gender differences” approach used by these authors). These findings substantiate the need for a polycule-centred vocabulary of emotions in therapeutic contexts.

Polyamorous communities around the world regularly invent new terms in their local languages to describe the nuances of polyamorous emotions, experiences, roles, and relationship configurations. Some of these neologisms begin as one person’s search to articulate their own experience; online fora often facilitate the swift transformation of these terms from creative personal expression into common parlance. For example, Ritchie and Barker (2006) documented the rapid spread of the term “frubbly,” which had already

generated over 700 separate online threads in the context of polyamory according to a Google search in 2005, only five years after its first appearance on the usenet newsgroup Alt.Poly in 2000. As noted by these authors, their findings cannot be seen as cross-culturally representative of all polyamorous communities, so these findings are shared here primarily to illustrate the diversity of polyamorous vocabularies of emotion even within the primarily UK-based communities.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive glossary of polyamorous vocabularies of emotion, identity, and relationship configuration. Numerous scholarly publications and community literature have already been available for over a decade to therapists with the genuine desire to address their own mononormative biases and gain the awareness needed for ethical, non-discriminatory practice. Unfortunately, some of the most popular introductory texts on polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships contain mononormative biases. For readers who wish to develop basic familiarity and understanding, I recommend a combination of the following five books and one television show as introductory sources:

- *A Therapist's Guide to Consensual Nonmonogamy: Polyamory, Swinging, and Open Marriage* (Orion, 2018);
- *Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma and Consensual Nonmonogamy* (Fern, 2020);
- *Stories from the Polycule: Real life in Polyamorous Families* (Sheff & Wolf, 2015);
- *The Polyamorists³ Next door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families* (Sheff, 2015);
- *Trigonometry*, a BBC Two television show available on iPlayer. This realistic and multi-dimensional portrayal of a triad relationship has received praise from polyamorous communities. The audio-visual format is highly effective in helping therapists to develop affective empathy for people in multi-partnered relationships; and,
- *When Someone You Love is Polyamorous: Understanding Poly People and Relationships* (Sheff, 2016).

In this article, my aim is to illustrate the relevance of polycule-centred awareness to all therapists, including those who may have failed to recognise that some of the people with whom they have already worked are polyamorous or multi-partnered. De-contextualised notions of empathy, “treating all people the same,” and active listening are inadequate substitutes for the specific knowledge, skills, and insights needed to provide appropriate therapeutic care for polyamorous and multi-partnered people. Therapists need to reflect on how the vocabularies of emotion we invoke in therapeutic contexts can enact monogamist erasure of some people’s emotional experiences (Cassidy & Wong, 2018).

Well-intentioned empathy cannot entirely replace the experience and skill that come with lived experience; for monogamous therapists, cultural humility⁴ is likely to create much safer therapeutic environments than unsustainable claims of cultural competence. Ritchie and Barker’s (2006) research findings highlight polyamorous and multi-partnered people’s need for therapists who are comfortable and familiar with using polyamorous vocabularies of emotion in clinical practice. This need may explain one of the reasons why many of the

polyamorous and multi-partnered people participating in therapy with me have reported better experiences with therapists who have polyamorous and multi-partnered lived experiences than with monogamous therapists. Instead of making unsustainable claims about their cultural competence and thereby failing to recognise the limits of their own lived experiences, then, monogamous therapists can be most successful when they initiate these therapeutic relationships by acknowledging early on in the therapeutic relationship that they do not have personal lived experience in this area, by communicating honestly about their relative familiarity and comfort with polyamorous vocabularies of emotion, by making an effort to educate themselves outside of sessions, and by expressing cultural humility through the recognition that polyamorous and multi-partnered people are the experts on our own lives.

Various terms have been used within polyamorous communities to transcend couple-centric methods of describing relationship systems. The term *polycule* is often used to describe a polyamorous relationship “molecule” that includes all people within a polyamorous kinship system (Creation, 2019; Fern, 2020; Sheff & Wolf, 2015). Polycules may include some people who are themselves monogamous partners of a polyamorous partner in the system. In addition to polycule, terms such as *pod*, *bubble*, and *House* are sometimes used in place of terms like “family,” and qualifiers such as *found*, *chosen*, or *bio* family are often used to distinguish the source of the familial bond (see also Kaldera, 2005; Kean, 2018). Whereas the term “family” may appear neutral and value-free to some therapists, some multi-partnered people consider this concept to have exclusionary and discriminatory connotations, due to its history of being weaponised in political campaigns targeting people who are not in heteronormative nuclear families. Indeed, polyamorous kinship systems, particularly polyamorous parents, have yet to be adequately addressed within the field of family therapy, despite some promising developments by polyamorous family and parenting researchers (e.g., Pallotta-Chiarolli, Sheff, & Mountford, 2020).

Some people practice *hierarchical polyamory*, in which partners are ranked in terms of their relative closeness and primacy (e.g., “primary partner,” “secondary partner”), whereas some polyamorous people practice *egalitarian polyamory*, often termed *non-hierarchical polyamory*, and consider hierarchical approaches to be inherently oppressive, stifling, or dehumanising. Some of the most intractable relationship conflicts can occur between polyamorous partners who disagree regarding whether their relationships should have a hierarchical or egalitarian structure.

Noting that “skirmishes” between contested forms of multi-partnered relationships can obscure oppressive ideology (Kean, 2018; Klesse, 2006), it is important to recognise that it is not the hierarchical or egalitarian structure itself that determines the relative quality or oppressiveness of a particular relationship sub-system within a polycule, but rather the extent to which the attachment needs of all polycule members are prioritised and adequately addressed. According to Fern (2020), when polycule members experience the multi-partnered relationship system as a safe haven and a secure base for attachment relationships, they can achieve the state of *polysecurity*.

Mononormative bias can also result in misconceptions that determine relationship quality based on quantity rather than quality of time together. In some polyamorous communities, the term *comet* is used to describe lovers who pass through people's lives "having elliptical orbits like comets in space" (Graham, 2019), with or without the expectation of romance or continuity. Comet relationships vary widely and may or may not constitute enduring emotional and/or romantic bonds. Comet relationships may involve only infrequent or occasional contact due to geographical distance, available time, or existing commitments. Although comet relationships are devalued in mononormative contexts, Graham describes one such comet connection as

deep and intense and wonderful. There is a beauty that comes with the knowledge that these moments of deep connection will last a relatively short time, and then we will return to being further apart. We spend most of our time much more distant from each other. Going on with our lives, other relationships, friendships and activities. This spaciousness does not diminish the importance of these relationships, rather it is their essence. Whilst there isn't constant contact or communication, there remains a continuity within them—of affection, attraction, interest and desire.

I have had comet relationships from before I knew a name for them. My longest relationship takes this form. It is nourishing and loving and a source of joy. All of my closest people know the delight I take in that relationship and its importance to me. The idea that it lacks continuity or romance is ridiculous. It has both in bucket loads. It also has love, spaciousness and connection. I do not expect that every return will be the same in its intensity, or what we do when we come together. That depends very much on what we each bring to those moments and what we want.

In addition to the diversity among polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships, polyamorous people do not necessarily maintain relationships with multiple or even any partners continuously throughout life. The terms *solo polyamory* and *single polyamory* are each used in multiple, sometimes distinct and sometimes interchangeable, context-dependent ways to describe a range of relational orientations. Depending on the situation, these terms may refer to people who may or may not wish to engage in any relationship commitments or sexual or romantic partnerships; people who wish to avoid "couple" status, cohabitation, and/or hierarchical relationships (e.g., *primary*, *secondary*, and other categories for rank-ordering one's partners); people who view themselves as their own *primary partner*; and people who prioritise emotional intimacy rather than romantic and/or erotic relational components when determining the value and primacy of their relationships (see Fern, 2020, p. 114-115 for discussion of some common misconceptions regarding solo polyamory).

The related but distinct term *relationship anarchy* (Nordgren, 2006) describes an adaptation of political anarchist principles to the context of interpersonal relationships. Although this term is often misused to describe all non-hierarchical multi-partnered relationships, many common forms of non-hierarchical multi-partnered relationships fail to meet the key components of relationship anarchy. Fern (2020) explained that

Relationship anarchists seek to dismantle the social hierarchies dictating how sexual and romantic relationships are prioritized over all other forms of love, and so people who identify as relationship anarchists make less distinction between the importance or value of their lovers over their friends or other people in their life, and they do not only reserve intimacy or romance for the people they have sex with. (p. 115)

Popular media representations of polyamory typically depict the concept solely in terms of romantic and sexual intimacy. Although some people who identify as being on the aromantic (aro) and/or asexual (ace) spectrum engage in romance and/or sexual activities under some conditions, definitions of polyamory that centre romantic and sexual intimacy can devalue or exclude people on the aro and/or ace spectrum who seek secure interpersonal attachments through emotional rather than romantic or erotic forms of intimacy. Relationship anarchy has the potential to subvert the social hierarchies that devalue aro and ace spectrum people's interpersonal attachments. It is vital for therapists to value polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships among aro and ace spectrum people, rather than presume that all people view romantic and erotic intimacy as indicators of relationship quality.

A reductionist definition of polyamory as being merely “the opposite” of monogamy is likely to rob polyamory of key elements valued by people for whom being polyamorous is a central ethos. Far from being a mere “opposite” in a relationship orientation binary or a matter of superficial accounting, polyamorous and polycule-centred approaches to relationships have the potential transcend the numbers game altogether. Anapol (2010) explains that “the form of the relationship is not so important... The form can change at any time. What counts is allowing *love* to dictate the form rather than attempting to force love into whatever mold the mind has decided is right” (pp. ix, emphasis added). For Anapol (ibid.), then, polyamory “is less about how many people you're having sex with, feeling love for, or both than it is about allowing love (not lust) to lead us into whatever form is appropriate.” However, this construction of polyamory may result in the devaluation of erotic desire and erotic pleasure as important components of people's lived experiences.

Whereas Anapol's (2010) definition prioritises “love over lust,” some polyamorous people define their polyamory in terms of erotic interactions and sexual experiences with more than one person. Kean (2018, 2015) critiqued the attempt to delineate sex versus love in consistent ways across diverse relationships and the politics of delineating interpersonal categories and relationship valuations. When discussing the many contested definitions and inconsistencies in what the author terms “sex/love skirmishes,” Kean's incisive analysis reminds readers that

It is crucial to recognise that while these inconsistencies within mononormativity become apparent in the context of the non-monogamous sex/love skirmishes described in this article, the skirmishes do not cause the inconsistencies. Practitioners of different kinds of non-monogamy jostling for position in relation to mainstream practices of sex, love, and friendship simply elucidate the fact that the relational logics that sustain those practices only ever partially cohere. (Kean, 2018, p. 13)

Challenging everyday monogamism means recognising the social relations of power at play in these naming and meaning-making processes and avoiding relational logics that grant therapists the authority to determine the relative value and meaning of other people's interpersonal experiences. When therapists usurp the role of evaluator in this way, we can impede therapy participants' ability to develop their own effective and congruent personal frameworks for evaluating their relationships. The imposition of therapists' own judgements about what constitutes a "meaningful relationship" that can result in "personal growth" can function as a gatekeeping tool that prevents or marginalises erotic forms of intimacy and exploration that people can experience as inherently valuable and beneficial. Consider how therapists might misconstrue the aforementioned comet relationships or fail to grasp the significance of a *queerplatonic relationship* (QPR), an intimate and intense relationship that cannot be adequately defined within a "friend versus lover" binary⁵.

Despite popular media's prurient fascination with the erotic permutations of polyamorous relationships, such relationships constitute genuine kinship bonds that encompass emotional intimacy and enduring partnership. As Anapol (2010) notes, "it is not a question of whether it's possible to have one partner or two or many or not but rather a question of whether to allow love to lead and to surrender to the direction that love chooses rather than surrendering to cultural conditioning, unruly emotions, peer pressure, or social censure" (pp. ix). Anapol uses the example of public discourse about the practice of having multiple *consecutive* partners, by contrast defining polyamory as having or seeking multiple *simultaneous* partners. Therefore, she explains, the primary distinction between polyamorous and monogamous relationships is not the number of one's partners, nor the degree of emotional investment and intimacy involved, but rather whether they are consecutive or simultaneous. Framing the discourse in this way may help therapists to reduce mononormative bias to some extent, although Kean (2018) indicated that the goal of achieving coherent relational logics and distinctions may itself be inherently problematic and unattainable.

Polyamory has a multitude of meanings that vary between people (Klesse, 2011, 2014b). Where polyamory is for some people a behaviour (e.g., Barker, 2005), for others it is a lifestyle and identity (e.g., Henrick & Trawinski, 2016) or a relational orientation (e.g., Jordan, 2018); other people view polyamory as a relationship philosophy, a political stance, or way of approaching the relational dimension of life (e.g., Anapol, 2010; Nordgren, 2006). Klesse (2013) contends that "polyamory circumscribes a relationship philosophy or an approach to intimacy and sexuality that is based on the belief that it is worthwhile and valid to have more than one loving and/or erotic relationship" (p. 4). However, in defining polyamory merely in philosophical terms, there is a risk of reducing our discourse to abstractions, to depersonalising human relationships and intimacies as disembodied constructs. For this reason, focusing on "polyamory" (a noun) can be fraught. By focusing instead on "polyamorous" (adjective) lived experiences and kinship bonds, our clinical formulations can facilitate better understanding of the massive diversity among polyamorous people, relationships, and communities.

Elements of Couple-Centric Bias in Counselling & Therapeutic Ideology

Counsellors and psychotherapists who are new to challenging everyday monogamism can have difficulty recognising mononormative biases in professional practice. Even experienced clinicians with our own polyamorous lived experiences can unintentionally reproduce couple-centric bias. In this section, I provide guidance to help clinicians to identify some common, taken-for-granted forms of everyday monogamism and to begin the shift from couple-centric bias to polycule-centred practice.

“Couples Counselling”

The term “couples counselling” is routinely treated as synonymous with relationship counselling. Many therapists involved in relationship counselling promote themselves on their websites and in their email signatures as “couples counsellors”. Many therapists appear unaware that this conceptualisation of their scope of practice is exclusionary and discriminatory toward people involved in multi-partnered relational systems. For example, I noted the incongruence between a therapist’s website that described her as a “couples counsellor” with a domain name that contained a couple-centric term, and the non-discrimination statement on her website declaring that she provides equal care for all people’s relationships.

When applied as a general umbrella term, the phrase “couples counselling” is insidious not only for erasing multi-partnered relationships, but also because it can impair therapists’ diagnostic reasoning and result in therapeutic missteps. Therapists are primed by such terminology with the implicit affective, behavioural, and cognitive bias that all people’s relationships are dyadic “couple” formations. This increases the likelihood that therapists will omit pivotal questions and considerations when taking a psychosocial history. The frame of “couples counselling” also embeds the monogamist assumption that only people’s designated relationship partners are relevant to the counselling sphere. By constructing the scope of relationship therapy as one solely concerned with “couples,” therapists are likely to overlook the often crucial need to include *metamours* (people who share one or more partner[s] in common without being designated romantic or erotic partners to each other) in psychosocial history taking, in relationship assessments, and in the core tasks of relationship therapy. Where metamours are included, therapists often marginalise or demonise them by relegating them to the status of being merely “the *other* woman/man/person”. Unsurprisingly, this categorisation of metamour relationships as different and inferior is *Othering*⁶.

Media misrepresentations of metamours as jealous rivals, enemy combatants, or awkward strangers belie the diversity of many polyamorous and multi-partnered people’s lived experiences. Some people treat their metamour relationships as equal in importance to their romantic and erotic partnerships, while others merely tolerate metamours or may avoid contact altogether. Some metamour relationships can shift into romantic and/or erotic partnerships while people continue their relationships with their shared partners. Some metamour relationships only develop and deepen following relationship dissolution

with a previously shared romantic and/or erotic partner. Given the diverse permutations within polycules, it is vital for therapists to consider each person's own understanding of the roles and quality indicators of their relationships with each person in their polycule.

Working with polycules more closely resembles family therapy than couples counselling. Instead of the "client" or participant being "*the* relationship," as in *couples* counselling, therapists working with multi-partnered systems need to understand that the participant is the *polycule*. Therapists who fail to work in a polycule-centred way may exacerbate systemic ruptures and struggle to facilitate essential repairs.

Genograms

In relationship and family therapy, genograms are widely used graphic tools through which therapists use codes and symbols to gain detailed information about the composition, dynamics, and patterns in kinship systems and the affective, behavioural, and cognitive components of those systems. Genograms have also been used as therapeutic methods of assessment and "intervention" (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). Genograms created *by* polyamorous and multi-partnered people typically prioritise information that is excluded from the mononormative, couple-centric genograms with which most therapists are familiar.

Mononormative genograms treat gender as a defining characteristic. In contrast, polyam-generated genograms often address gender only when noting which pronoun(s) to use for each person or omit gender entirely. Conversely, polyam-generated genograms often contain information missing from mononormative genograms. Polycule-centred genograms⁷ typically identify relationship dynamics such as *nesting partners* (a common polyamorous term for partners with whom one is cohabiting), metamours, former lovers, asexual romances, queerplatonic relationships, long-distance relationships, people who share finances or projects, and people who are considering becoming lovers. Some polyamorous genograms by people in hierarchical polycules delineate primary and secondary partners, relationships between monogamous and polyamorous partners, relationship anarchists, and people who practice solo polyamory. Some polyam genograms identify monogamous people within the polycule, whereas a mononormative genogram would treat monogamous status as an unmarked category. Several websites allow people to create their own polycule genograms⁸. It is common within polyamorous social networks for new and prospective partners to share polycule genograms or similar diagrams to facilitate clear communication about their existing relationship systems and kinship bonds.

Therapists who specialise in working with *couples* rather than with *relationships* more broadly may be unfamiliar with basic terminology used to describe polyamorous relationship systems. The term *triad* is commonly used to refer to three people who are all relationship partners to each other, the term *quad* describes four people in a relationship with each other, and the term *V* (also *pivot*, *anchor*, or *hinge*) describes a relationship in which one person has two partners who are each other's metamours. Whereas monogamist notions of relational systems presume that all sub-systems take the form of

dyads, some polycules consist of triadic, quadratic, or other structures and do not contain any dyads. When therapists who are unable to work in a basically competent way with any relationships beyond “couples” describe their limited scope of practice accurately, this clarity can be helpful to avoid wasting the time of polyamorous and multi-partnered people seeking therapists with genuine knowledge, skill, and understanding.

The use of “*couples* counselling” to describe all forms of relationship counselling in relationship therapy education and research often constitutes a deliberate enactment of mononormative bias. Internationally recognised “relationship experts” such as Dr John Gottman and Dr Sue Johnson have each developed explicitly couple-centric relationship therapy methods that lack the essential content needed to meet the specific needs of polyamorous and multi-partnered people (see Susan Johnson, Inc., 2020; The Gottman Institute, 2020). In promoting couple-centric practice, both fail to consider the distinct affective, relational, and attachment needs of polycule relational systems. Neither training program contains content that transcends a couple-centric framework. Merely mentioning the existence of polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships without equitable clinical depth fails to prepare relationship counsellors for understanding the unique emotional, societal, political, legislative, attachment, and erotic needs of polyamorous and multi-partnered people and polycules.

Johnson (e.g., 2013, 2014), in particular, has repeatedly asserted the superiority of monogamous dyadic relationships and propagated an extreme form of monogamism and couple-centric bias. Johnson’s claims read like a litany of everyday monogamism and couple-centric bias: humans are naturally monogamous; monogamy is biologically intrinsic; monogamous marriages are superior, healthier, and more “natural” than any other form of relationship; and polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships are pathological signs of damaged or insecurely attached relationships. These unsubstantiated claims disregard decades of actual scientific evidence on polyamorous people, relationships, parenting, and families.

Many professional codes of ethics in counselling and psychotherapy explicitly bar sexuality discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people and prohibit “conversion therapy” or “reparative therapy” that aims to make people become heterosexual and conform to heteronormative standards. Unfortunately, few professional codes have recognised that therapists’ discriminatory treatment of polyamorous and multi-partnered people and their efforts to change polyamorous and multi-partnered people into mononormative, monogamous people constitute similarly egregious violations of professional ethics. As van Tol (2017) explained, unexamined mononormative bias in relationship therapy creates risks of unconscious prejudice, unethical practice, and ineffective treatment. To my knowledge, despite a recent acknowledgement of systemic racism (Johnson, 2020), Johnson has yet to issue any public statement acknowledging the harm her approach continues to cause to the people, parents, relationships, and families subjected to the inevitably biased relationship counselling that results from her unfounded mononormative claims.

In her public acknowledgement of systemic racism, Johnson (2020) asserted that

As therapists, we know that when people are NOT HEARD, everything begins to fall apart, especially in face of such great injustice and the routine, brutal dismissal of those realities by [those in power].

I concur with Johnson's insights about the need for people to feel heard in the face of injustice and dismissal of their realities. Therefore, it is my hope that Johnson and other influential relationship therapists who have devalued, disparaged, or discriminated against polyamorous people and multi-partnered relationships will publicly acknowledge the reality of systemic oppression against polyamorous and multi-partnered people, take responsibility for gaining accurate information about polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships, and make reparations to the families and communities to whom their work has caused harm.

Some therapists have attempted to adapt the respective couple-centric methods developed by Gottman and Johnson to relationship therapy (e.g., Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2017). Despite the ingenuity of these attempts, approaches based on monogamous research fail to address key components that Fern (2020) identified as vital to establishing and maintaining secure multi-partnered relationship systems (see discussion later in this article). Despite their prodigious contributions to the field of *couples* counselling, neither Gottman nor Johnson has a track record that would qualify either of them as an "expert" on polyamorous or multi-partnered relationships. To my knowledge, at the time of this writing, neither has conducted a single piece of research focused on—or even adequately inclusive of—polyamorous or multi-partnered relationships or polycules. As the saying popularised by the South African disability rights movement goes, *nothing about us without us is for us*.

In addition to therapists with overtly couple-centric frameworks, some therapists promote couple-centric bias by conflating "open monogamy" with "polyamory". For example, one sex therapy certification program that claims to include polyamorous people uses the term "couples therapist" to describe its certification program. When I contacted the program to raise concerns, I received this response from one prominent clinical educator:

After much thought and years of deliberation with our advisory board, the certification program is called [...] Couples Therapist simply *because it is easier to say* (emphasis added, de-identified professional communication, 27th March, 2020).

I have since had many similar exchanges by email with a range of internationally prominent therapists and training programs in the relationship therapy field. Many of their responses have contained similar justifications for continuing to discriminate against polyamorous and multi-partnered people, such as that it is "too difficult" to do otherwise or would require too much effort to change. One clinical educator expressed hesitation when I requested that he use more inclusive terminology for a supposedly polyamory-inclusive group supervision in "couples counselling". I asked whether he would make the same excuse for racist or sexist terminology as he did for monogamist language. He suggested he would "need time to think about it," and the sessions proceeded as scheduled with the

exclusionary language intact. Do we as a profession believe it is acceptable to treat polyamorous and multi-partnered people, relationships, and families as less deserving of inclusive, non-discriminatory treatment?

Until leading therapists in the field of relationship and sex therapy move beyond mere lip service, stop dismissing polyamorous and multi-partnered people's concerns, and take action to end discriminatory practices, our profession will fail to achieve its beneficial and transformative potential. When therapists defend the decision to preserve monogamist practices simply because following the status quo is "easier," we become incongruent with the therapeutic values and priorities that underpin our work. Given that our work as relationship therapists often deals with helping relationship partners to become aware of the impact of their own behaviour and language and make changes to reduce and repair relational ruptures, it seems as vital for therapists to do our own corresponding work to acknowledge and address monogamism as it is to deal with colourism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, ableism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, and other forms of systemic oppression that can cause harm to therapy participants.

"Alternative Lifestyles"

Many therapists wishing to communicate inclusive and non-discriminatory messages to prospective therapy participants use language intended to sound welcoming and well-informed. Unfortunately, references to polyamorous people as living "alternative lifestyles" or as "non-traditional" are more likely to reveal the therapist's mononormative bias and failure to examine their monogamist privilege than they are to transmit the intended message of welcome. Contemporary dyadic relationships constitute a minority, cross-culturally and historically. The ethnocentric bias in referring to relationships with more than two people as "non-traditional" is evident when one considers cultures and societies where formal recognition of multiple partners has been and continues to be "traditional" (e.g., Benedict, 2017; Du, 2016; Legros, 2014; Zeitzen, 2020). Cross-cultural analyses reveal that monogamy is not merely a neutral and universally normative social construct, but a culturally specific, settler-colonial construct embedded with the racialisation, ethnocentrism, and ableism of its historical roots. When a therapist uses the phrase "alternative lifestyle," their assumptions that all people in polyamorous and multi-partnered relationship systems are living a particular "lifestyle," and that they are countercultural in some way, are less likely to convey acceptance and more likely to communicate ignorance of the many different ways of life found among people with multi-partnered lived experiences.

Researchers have documented diversity in age, income, gender, sexuality, culture, and racialised demographic category among polyamorous people and relationships (Moors, Rubin, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, 2014; Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, 2014). Some people in polyamorous kinship systems are part of particular religious, cultural, and subcultural communities, whereas others are part of the dominant cultural group in their region. Multi-partnered people come from across the political and socioeconomic spectrum. Multi-partnered people can experience unique socioeconomic inequalities due to the impact of intersecting racialised and class-based oppression on their options for

accessing and navigating intimacy and care, household formation, and spaces and institutions (Klesse, 2014a). Some polyamorous and multi-partnered people have experienced intersecting racism, classism, and other forms of systemic oppression within polyamorous communities (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Some multi-partnered people are parents; some are therapists. There is no single lifestyle or way of life common to people with polyamorous and/or multi-partnered lived experience. Therapists' own perceptions of dyadic relationships and monogamy as the standard, normative form of relationship can result in language that constructs polyamorous and multi-partnered people as "alternative". Instead of demonstrating an awareness of the therapist's own privilege and positionality, this framing is likely to come across as unwelcoming, exclusionary, and unhelpful.

"Marriage Equality"

Despite recent increases in the number of countries that recognise dyadic marriages for people with binary woman or man gender/sex designations—and, in some jurisdictions such as Australia, recognition for non-binary people's marriages—there is only limited and heavily gendered formal recognition for multiple relationships worldwide. For example, although a variety of countries recognise the right of men within particular religious and cultural communities to have multiple spouses as long as they marry women, fewer jurisdictions currently permit women to have multiple spouses of any gender (see Du, 2016). In 2012, in Rio de Janeiro, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, Public Notary Claudia do Nascimento Domingues provided official state recognition for the civil union between a trio of two women and a man, despite vocal criticism by some religious organisations (BBC News, 2012). In the United States, the suburban city of Somerville in the state of Massachusetts has provided formal recognition of simultaneous registered partnerships with multiple partners since June 2020 (Fox, 2020). Somerville is currently one of the only places in the world that offers something approaching—but not fully equal to—equitable relationship recognition for people in multi-partnered kinship systems.

Since at least the 1990s, the term "marriage equality" has become synonymous with the movement for legal recognition of civil marriages between two monogamous partners with the same gender marker on their government-issued identity documents (e.g., Marriage Equality USA, n.d., which was founded in 1996). As a result of the marriage equality movement's international successes, many therapists have learned to use gender-neutral language when asking questions about people's relationships or when taking a psychosocial history. Therapists who are familiar with struggles for dyadic same-gender marriage recognition sometimes use the phrase "marriage equality," when discussing people's legislative rights and options for relationship recognition. Unfortunately, this misleading phrase functions to erase the needs and lived experiences of people involved in or interested in polyamorous relationships and multi-partnered kinship systems. When therapists fail to acknowledge the possibility of other relationships outside of couple-centric assumptions, they reveal and enact monogamist privilege.

There is still profound marriage *inequality* and blatant, state-sanctioned discrimination against people in multi-partnered kinship systems throughout Australia and in many other jurisdictions. Many people in relationships with more than one partner face the agonising choice regarding whether to gain the legal protections and recognition of marriage with one partner while risking the devaluing of all other partners, or to forgo the benefits of marriage with any one partner in order to prevent discrimination against any other relationships. Polyamorous and multi-partnered people also experience immigration discrimination. Many countries have partnership visa eligibility requirements that deny access to people in polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships. In some countries, people with partner visas can face deportation, criminal fraud charges, and state-sanctioned abuse if they are discovered to be polyamorous or multi-partnered (Jenkins & Rickert, 2020; Klesse, 2016). In many countries, polyamorous people can lose or be denied custody of their children or face criminal charges and state-sanctioned abuse solely due to being polyamorous or multi-partnered people (Jenkins & Rickert, 2020; Klesse, 2019; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020). Therapists who recognise these legitimate concerns can prevent their own unwitting complicity with the state-sanctioned abuse of polyamorous and multi-partnered people. In such cases, it is important to recognise the anti-oppressive practice principle that advocacy is a professional duty when working with people with lived experience of oppression and marginalisation (Brown, 2019).

“Consensual Non-Monogamies”

The term “consensual non-monogamies” (or “CNM”) is widely used by polyamory-affirming researchers and practitioners seeking greater inclusion, including those with lived experience. Indeed, I also used this term until recently, when I reflected on the everyday monogamism enacted by this construct. Whilst use of the term CNM is not as overtly harmful as erasure or pathologising, this term defines multi-partnered affectional and erotic experiences, kinship ties, and orientations based on a monogamist reference point, yielding little that is informative and instead focusing on what they are *not*. The widespread use of “consensual” as a qualifier where a similar qualifier is not used to describe monogamy functions (however unintentionally) to obscure compulsory and coercive forms of monogamy (e.g., Wilkinson, 2012), while positioning all other forms of relationship as suspect and potentially non-consensual. This phrasing may subtly reinforce harmful stereotypes and negative moral judgements about polyamorous and multi-partnered people.

Although many polyamorous communities have cultural norms centred around ethical principles such as honesty, communication, consent, respectful negotiation, and integrity (Barker & Langdridge, 2010), these norms contrast with the assumptions inherent to the “monogamy versus consensual non-monogamy” relationship binary. A genuinely polycule-centred approach would recognise polyamorous relationships and kinship systems as distinct phenomena, not as part of a marked category that requires a moral qualifier (e.g., “consensual”) where none is used to describe monogamy, nor as relationships defined solely through comparisons with a monogamous reference point (e.g., “*non-monogamy*”).

“Open Monogamy”

Polyamory is often erroneously conflated with *open monogamy* by therapists wishing to claim expertise in working with multi-partnered relationships. As clarified by various scholars (e.g., Cohen, 2016; Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014), open monogamy is distinct from polyamory. The term “open monogamy” typically refers to couple-centric, dyadic relationships in which two partners formally agree to engage in romantic and/or erotic connections with other people, while maintaining couple privilege and primacy. This is distinct from polyamory, which does not automatically presume that any two people in a multi-partnered relationship agree or desire to privilege their dyadic bond as superior to, or more important than, their other partner relationships. As discussed by Fern (2020), polyamorous representations available in English language formats up to the early 2000s highlighted hierarchical polyamorous relationships and described multi-partner relationships in terms of “primary” and “secondary” partners. The focus on hierarchical polyamorous relationships and the use of couple-centric terminology to describe multiple partners (e.g., “extra-pair relationships,” in Mogilski et al., 2019) persists even in otherwise sophisticated contemporary research that includes polyamorous relationships. Regrettably, this hierarchical bias is evidence throughout some of the most commonly recommended introductory resources used to educate therapists and participants who are new to polyamorous and multi-partner relationships. In the foreword to Fern (2020), author Eve Rickert critiques the widely acclaimed text Rickert co-authored, *More than Two*, noting that although this text critiqued hierarchical approaches to relationships

what it offered in exchange fell short. It placed the onus of building security almost entirely on the individual who felt insecure. Despite the many people who were helped by the book, this inappropriate focus caused harm, and over time, I grew to understand there was something missing in our framework—I just didn’t have the words for what (Rickert, in Fern 2020, p. X, para. 3).

Many therapists demonstrate a concerning clinical inability to distinguish between polyamorous relationships and open relationships. Polyamorous relationships may have three or more partners without any core “couple” at their base, without any sub-system dyads, and with or without a hierarchy of partners. Open monogamy—that is, a monogamous dyad who “open up” their couple-based relationship to additional partners while preserving the original couple-based hierarchy and agreements that are not equally co-authored by chronologically newer partner(s)—is only one kind of polyamorous relationship. Therefore, being inclusive of open monogamy does not suffice to claim that one is inclusive of polyamory relationships.

Clinical education programs that fail to distinguish between a polyamory-inclusive stance and a couple-centric “open monogamy stance” can promote monogamism in relationship therapy education. As sex researcher Terri Conley explained to journalist Julia Naftulin (2019), “open relationships” are not the same as polyamory, and the conflation of the two can indicate that a self-proclaimed “expert” lacks adequate knowledge, understanding, and skill to identify accurately which type of relationship is being proposed or discussed.

Polyamorous relationships are not necessarily “open”; the term *polyfidelitous* is often used to designate a closed polyamorous relationship system or polycule. Having an “open monogamy stance” is not the same as treating people’s polycule relationships as fully equal in value to monogamous ones. Open monogamy may be an ideal relationship configuration for some people, but it is an inherently couple-centric approach that privileges monogamous couples and deprioritises other people in a relationship system in ways that have the potential to cause harm to all members of a polycule.

In order to avoid harming the people with whom we work, we must realise that many people’s relationships are not actually open monogamy but instead have a structure that differs from the heteronormative, couple-centric presumption that a relationship necessarily consists of two monogamous people who decide to “open up” their relationship. I have received referrals from many people who left their previous therapists because these therapists were unable to shift out of this discriminatory approach toward a polycule-centred understanding that many people do not have a dyad at their base and that they are polyamorous, not in monogamous “open relationships”. I respond to clinical educators who engaged in this kind of couple-centric assumption with what continues to be my hope that leading figures in relationship therapy will do the educational work needed to improve their basic therapeutic understanding (Kisler & Lock, 2019) and shift toward polycule-centric practice. This transformation will ensure that the therapists whom they train and supervise can demonstrate at least basic professional competency with polyamorous and multi-partnered people.

“Opening up the relationship”

One of the pervasive monogamist assumptions made even by nominally inclusive therapists is the concept that a monogamous dyad who wish to shift into a multi-partnered relational system can do so while maintaining the existing dynamic, core agreements, and boundaries of a pre-existing monogamous relationship. In these cases, therapists who claim expertise in working with “more than two” partners often use phrases such as “opening up *the* relationship,” which contain couple-centric biases that have the potential to endanger the wellbeing of all people in the relational system. In the foreword to Fern (2020), Eve Rickert noted that the hierarchical frameworks in media representations such as *Polyamorous: Married and Dating*

did a dismal job of honouring the attachment needs of partners who were considered “secondary”: those outside a primary, usually presumed to be nesting, couple, whose bond was presumed to be more valid or worthy of protection than the others “opened up” to (Rickert, in Fern, 2020, p. IX).

Fern (2020) further articulated the crucial elements that were missing from previous introductory texts on polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships.

The phrase “opening up *the* relationship” indicates an assumption that the original relationship can meet the needs of additional, newer polycule members without changing and without ever giving those new members an opportunity to communicate, negotiate,

and consent to the previously established dynamic. Indeed, this approach violates the previously mentioned ethical norms of the polyamorous communities documented by Barker and Langdridge (2010). Although some polyamorous people may experience satisfying multi-partnered relationships when entering a couple-centric relationship system, the hierarchical structure of these relationships requires specific attention to ensure that the attachment-related needs of newer partners are adequately addressed (Fern, 2020).

“Infidelity,” “Cheating,” and “Affairs”

When considering how vocabularies of emotion can operate as forms of social control, I return to the aforementioned discussion by Ritchie and Barker (2006) regarding how the construction of jealousy as a “natural” response to “infidelity” and a “negative” emotion functions to perpetuate mononormative bias. When we label all romantic and erotic connections outside of a person’s monogamous relationship as “infidelity,” we fail to engage in the essential therapeutic reasoning needed to differentiate between a monogamous person who is dissatisfied with their existing relationship *partner*, and an ostensibly monogamous but potentially polyamorous person who may be dissatisfied with their monogamous *relationship configuration*. Despite the central focus on “infidelity,” “cheating,” and “affairs” in relationship counselling, none of the major schools of relationship therapy have adequately acknowledged or addressed this concern. None have recognised the need to begin the therapeutic process with an investigation of whether the monogamous aspect of the relationship agreement itself was determined based on informed consent and awareness and consideration of alternative options or based on the coercive control dynamic of non-consensual or *compulsory monogamy* (see Heckert, 2010; Robinson, 2013). When working within those societies where monogamy is positioned as the only viable option for a “committed,” “meaningful,” and “faithful” relationship, within systems that fail to provide equitable relationship recognition to more than one partner, therapists working with “infidelity” need to consider whether people’s monogamous implicit arrangements and explicit agreements were chosen or imposed, desired or tolerated.

The acknowledgement of polyamory as a well-developed, emotionally mature approach to relationships can challenge the prevailing prejudice among relationship therapists that all polyamorous relationships are the result of poor impulse control, insecure attachment, or emotional immaturity. This stereotype is a factor in why therapists routinely presume that an ostensibly monogamous person who engages in romantic or erotic intimacy with anyone outside of their monogamous relationships has made “a mistake” or must have deficiencies in their monogamous relationship. Just as family therapists are trained to consider the situation beyond the so-called “designated patient”, who is constructed as the source of all relationship and family conflict, so too must therapists working with “infidelity” and “cheating” avoid assuming that they are dealing with a monogamous person who has “strayed” due to issues with their monogamous partner.

The primary therapeutic task of responding to “infidelity”—which can more appropriately be termed “*non-consensual non-monogamy*”—is not to convert the “errant” partner back into the monogamous fold. Instead, a crucial therapeutic task is to help the people in the nominally monogamous relationship to determine their expectations, wants, and needs. In some cases, this may result in the discovery that partners’ relational needs are mutually exclusive. This discovery is likely to be both painful and therapeutically beneficial. It is important for nominally monogamous partners to explore and communicate honestly with each other about whether their existing agreements constitute *non-consensual* or *consensual* monogamy. Although some people may engage in non-consensual non-monogamy as a result of dissatisfaction with something personal about the current partner who expects monogamy, other such acts are reactions to dissatisfaction with the *terms* of the monogamy itself rather than an issue of dissatisfaction with their partner. To put it another way: some situations of non-consensual *non-monogamy* occur within the context of non-consensual *monogamy*.

Even within polyamorous communities, norms about romantic and erotic intimacy and relationship status with more than one person vary widely. While noting that all relational logics involve categories that are inherently fraught, permeable, and contested (Heckert, 2010; Kean, 2018; Klesse, 2006; Robinson, 2013), language can often be a vital part of communicating and facilitating insight in counselling and psychotherapy. In my therapeutic practice, I have developed language to facilitate conversations between relationship partners about each of their distinct needs, values, and boundaries. I have found it useful to describe two prevailing ethical norms that often clash within polyamorous and multi-partnered communities and relationships. Some people’s relational approach aligns with the *autonomy norm*, which holds that all people have a right by default to unconstrained autonomy regarding their actions with multiple partners unless they have explicitly promised otherwise to any of those partners. This means that partners are free to engage in romantic and erotic intimacy and contract relationships in any manner they choose, unless they have given their explicit consent to limit this behaviour or consult with partners before making decisions. Conversely, partners whose relational approach aligns with the *permission norm* believe that all people have a right by default to set limits on their partners’ romantic or erotic intimacy with other partners. This means one partner expects another partner not to engage in romantic or erotic behaviour outside of their relationship unless they have given their explicit permission.

Therapists who have grown up within monogamist societies are likely to enact their bias by presuming the moral superiority of the permission norm. This presumption can undermine a key task of relationship therapists, which is to assist people in identifying and communicating about the norms underlying relational conflicts and ruptures. In cases where the terms of a monogamous relationship agreement have been violated, therapists need to assist people in considering whether the agreement is meeting the needs of both partners, and whether there is a value clash between partners or between the existing agreement and the desired arrangement with regard to the autonomy norm and the

permission norm. The multiple other essential tasks involved in non-discriminatory responses to relationship agreement violations are beyond the scope of this article (see resources provided earlier in this article).

Some Examples of Couple-Centric Bias in Practice

Professionals who espouse an ostensibly inclusive and non-discriminatory view of polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships often engage in incongruent behaviour that perpetuates monogamist tropes. For example, many trainings designed to challenge heterosexist behaviour recommend that therapists ask questions without presuming partner gender. This has often resulted in recommendations to ask gender-inclusive yet monogamist questions such as “do you have a partner?” when taking a psychosocial history.

When two partners present for relationship counselling, therapists with a couple-centric bias are likely to assume that all people who need to participate are present. However, this monogamist bias can reinforce existing problems in a polycule and further entrench unaddressed couple-centric bias that may be causing harm in the relational system.

Consider this couple-centric advice by a sex therapist on the Gottman Institute blog:

Instead of opening the marriage to other people, what if we open the marriage to each other? Since almost all of us want monogamy, but passion fades with familiarity, the challenge is to make monogamy hot again. (Fraser, 2019)

Fraser’s unfounded claim that “almost all of us” want monogamy is the kind of sweeping generalisation common in the field of relationship counselling (Grunt-Mejer & Łyś, 2019). Fraser’s advice may illustrate what William James (1890) termed “the psychologist’s fallacy,” in which a therapist assumes that all people are similar to themselves and those in their own social circle. Such assumptions and predictions are not based on any research findings, let alone on the lived experiences of the people participating in therapy with them.

Fraser’s presumption that the reason people seek additional partners is due to fading passion is a common variation of the factually unfounded explanations therapists make for the existence of polyamorous and multi-partner desires. Fraser is expressing a mononormative bias widely held among relationship therapists. Few therapists employing this monogamist rhetoric seem aware of how sharply their claims conflict with actual research findings. For example, in a study of 1093 polyamorous people, Mitchell, Bartholomew, and Cobb (2014) found that participants with two concurrent romantic partners reported high levels of need fulfilment and satisfaction, and that there was no association between need fulfilment with one partner and relationship satisfaction with another. This finding challenges the monogamist assumption by Fraser and other relationship therapists that people only seek more than one partner if they are unfulfilled or “passion fades” with their chronologically oldest partner(s). In fact, therapists who, like Fraser, have a couple-centric bias may be surprised, confused, or confronted by findings such as those by Muise, Laughton, Moors, and Impett (2019), whose study of 1054

“consensually nonmonogamous” people found that people who were more sexually fulfilled in their “primary” relationship reported greater relationship satisfaction with their “secondary” partner. Cohen’s (2016) experiment on perceptions of relationship satisfaction among monogamous, open, and polyamorous “couples” found that the monogamous couple was assumed to have higher relationship satisfaction than the “open couple”.

The contrast between actual evidence and the ubiquitous claims within the field of relationship counselling further demonstrates the need for therapists wishing to educate or provide services to the public and their therapy participants to have at least basic familiarity with key research findings in this field. Fraser’s approach, typical of many relationship therapists, also fails to consider the impact of compulsory monogamy in shaping people’s relationship agreements or the possibility that some partners might already be embedded within a monogamous relationship at the time when they discover they are polyamorous or desire multiple partners.

When gathering information about a relationship, therapists often enact couple-centric bias even when working with explicitly polyamorous and multi-partnered people. Therapists often use couple-centric indicators to determine the relative value and status of polyamorous and multi-partnered relationships. Some couple-centric indicators that therapists need to be aware are often unreliable indicators of relationship quality for polyamorous and multi-partnered people include:

- the age of relationship initiation (e.g., “met and married at 18”);
- the chronological duration of relationship (e.g., “married for 20 years”);
- whether they are cohabiting⁹;
- whether they have procreated or are raising children together;
- owning a home and/or other assets together;
- formal relationship recognition, particularly marital status;
- public and social recognition (including whether or not a particular partner has met their partner’s biological parents, work colleagues, or members of their spiritual and cultural communities);
- whether they are “sexual partners” (some polyamorous relationships are non-sexual);
- whether they are *fluid bonded* (a term for people who do not use barriers to prevent bodily fluid exchange during physical intimacy); and,
- whether they are a woman/man dyad.

Despite these markers being virtually uncontested within mononormative counselling ideology, all of these markers have been critiqued within polyamorous communities for imposing couple-centric assumptions that have limited utility or congruence with how multi-partnered people make sense of their relationships (Kean, 2018; Klesse, 2006).

An example from my own therapeutic practice illustrates this point. Malik (he/him)¹⁰ was in a three-year partnership with Sergei (they/them) that did not involve cohabitation or fluid bonding. Malik’s nesting partner Lissa (she/her) had been in a civil marriage with

Malik for 10 years. Sergei and Lissa were close metamours who frequently enjoyed shared activities such as jogging and watching horror films together; Malik did not enjoy either of these activities, so it gave Sergei and Lissa an opportunity to bond. When this polycule sought help with managing the emotional exhaustion they felt as a result of caring for Malik's mother, all of the relationship therapists with whom they participated in therapy made inaccurate assumptions about the relative importance and quality of the relationships within the polycule, based on an uncritical reliance on the aforementioned couple-centric markers. Several therapists made statements that displayed their own beliefs that relationship quality could be determined by couple-centric indicators such as cohabitation, chronological duration of the relationship, formal relationship recognition, chronological duration of the relationship, and fluid bonding. However, had these therapists identified their own couple-centric biases and asked Malik, Sergei, and Lissa about the relative importance and quality of their relationships, Malik would have had the opportunity to share that he viewed Sergei and Lissa as equal in importance and quality, and that the markers he used to determine the quality of his relationships were the quality of one-on-one time, the frequency of regular polycule time together with both Sergei and Lissa, and the ability both partners had to share soothing and joyous moments with him. By maintaining an explicit recognition of couple-centric bias, therapists can make the decision to shift toward deliberate polycule-centred practice and thus improve their therapeutic relationships and outcomes.

Therapists who wish to shift to polycule-centred practice can apply Fern's (2020) *HEARTS of being secure* (HEARTS) model, which is the first polycule-centred model for understanding attachment, trauma, and multi-partnered relationships. Fern's model constitutes a pioneering achievement in a field dominated by explicitly discriminatory and couple-centric approaches to attachment. According to Fern, the HEARTS model identifies "the different ingredients, skills, capacities and ways of being required for secure functioning in multiple attachment-based partnerships" (Fern, 2020, p. 173). In stark contrast to the aforementioned couple-centric indicators of relationship quality, Fern's model provides an evidence-based, polycule-centred set of indicators to evaluate relationship quality in multi-partnered relationships. These indicators are as follows:

- **H**ere (being here and present with me);
- **E**xpressed delight;
- **A**ttunement;
- **R**ituals and routines;
- **T**urning towards after conflict; and,
- **S**ecure attachment with self.

A key distinction between the couple-centric and polycule-centred indicators I have identified is that the couple-centric indicators focus primarily on external and societal markers, whereas the polycule-centred HEARTS model indicators prioritise affective experience, interpersonal skills, personal development, and relational dynamics. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain the intricacies of this sophisticated and innovative model. I encourage readers to familiarise themselves with this model.

Conclusion

Challenging everyday monogamism is both realistic and achievable. The paradigm shift from couple-centric bias toward polycule-centred practice is already underway. Counselling and psychotherapy—particularly relationship counselling and family therapy—have the potential to strengthen people’s relationships, improve their communications, and help them to meet their core emotional needs. However, everyday monogamism and couple-centric bias can damage people’s relationships, impede their ability to communicate and make sense of their emotional experiences, and undermine their ability to meet their core emotional needs. I urge therapists who are not already working in a polycule-centred way to reflect on which changes are needed to achieve genuinely inclusive, ethical practice, and to take the necessary actions to shift from couple-centric bias toward polycule-centred practice.

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Endnotes

1. For a longer list of 50 manifestations of mononormativity, see Kean (2015, p. 700-702).
2. See <https://www.tikvawolf.com/comics/>

3. This text is an excellent contribution by a prolific and insightful author. However, readers should be aware that the word “polyamorist” (noun) is a nominalisation that some polyamorous people find objectifying and offensive. For this reason, I have avoided its use in this article and would encourage therapists to avoid its use, except when people have stated their explicit consent to be described as “polyamorists” by their therapist.
4. See Tervalon & Murray-Garcia (1998).
5. See Coyote (2019) for a genealogy of the diverse and conflicting narratives and claims about how to define queerplatonic relationships.
6. See Canales (2000) to read about the theoretical framework of Othering and Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) for some strategies to resist Othering.
7. See Wolf (2013, 2015, 2016) for three examples of polycule genograms created by a person with lived experience within a polycule.
8. See <https://polycul.es/create> for an example.
9. In Mósuō society, it is traditional practice for partners to live in separate dwellings (see Du, 2016).
10. All names and potentially identifying details have been changed and composited as part of my ethical duty of care.

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