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To cite this article: Dulcinea Pitagora (2016) The kink-poly confluence: relationship intersectionality in marginalized communities, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 31:3, 391-405, DOI: [10.1080/14681994.2016.1156081](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2016.1156081)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2016.1156081>



Published online: 04 Mar 2016.



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# The kink-poly confluence: relationship intersectionality in marginalized communities

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## ABSTRACT

There is little academic literature published on the intersection of kink- and polyamorous-identified individuals, though there are relatively frequent mentions of people who identify as both kink- and poly-oriented in the literature that focuses on one or the other of the two communities. The prevalence of intersecting kink and poly identifications tends to be acknowledged, accepted, and depathologized in both communities, and polyamory is sometimes considered a norm in certain kink subcultures. In order to help and give voice to this understudied population, a review of the literature was conducted on the characteristic commonalities in these communities, as well in kink- and poly-oriented relationships. Common themes in the intersection of these relationship types are identified; historical background is given for the respective communities; theories of identity formation are explored; clinical issues are reviewed; and recommendations for clinical interventions are made.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 October 2015  
Accepted 1 February 2016

## KEYWORDS

BDSM; kink; D/s relationships; polyamory; poly; consensual non-monogamy

## Introduction

There is little academic literature published on the intersection of kink- and poly-identified individuals, though there are relatively frequent mentions of both kink- and poly-identified individuals in the literature that focuses on one or the other of the two communities (e.g. Barker, 2005; Barker, 2013b; Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; British Psychological Society, 2012; Deri, 2015; Green, 2007; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Hinman, 2013; Klesse, 2006; Klesse, 2011; Labriola, 2010; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Sheff, 2013; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Taormino, 2008). The prevalence of intersecting kink and poly identifications tends to be acknowledged, accepted, and depathologized in both communities, and polyamory is sometimes considered a norm in certain kink subcultures (Barker, 2013b; Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015; Graham, 2014). In the following pages, “kink-identified individuals” will refer to those who self-identify as kinky or kink-oriented, and engage in kink as their main form of erotic and/or sexual expression; those who may or may not identify as kink-oriented, enjoy “vanilla” (i.e. non-kink-oriented, or heteronormative<sup>1</sup> or homonormative<sup>2</sup>)

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sex, but also incorporate kink into their erotic and/or sexual interactions; and those who identify as being in a kink-oriented relationship that extends the relational power dynamic beyond erotic and sexual interactions into lifestyle (Green, 2007; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Taormino, 2008). The term “kink” is used throughout this article as synonymous with BDSM (i.e. bondage and domination/dominance and submission/sadism and masochism or sadomasochism), in reference to the vast multitude of activities that fall under the umbrella of BDSM, including, but not limited to power exchange, the administration and receiving of pain, physical restriction, psychological humiliation, and the incorporation of fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and role play scenarios (Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001; Barker, 2013b; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, & Nordling, 2002; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; van Anders, 2015). “Poly-identified individuals” will refer to those who self-identify as polyamorous, and/or self-define their intimate, romantic, erotic, and/or sexual relationships as being or having the potential to be consensually non-monogamous (CNM)(Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, 2014) with the awareness and agreement of all partners involved (Klesse, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

It is important to note that polyamory falls under the umbrella term of CNM, though polyamorous individuals self-define their relationship structures in a variety of ways. The term poly is often used as an umbrella term as well, indicating a wide range of relationship styles and configurations, the common denominator of which is that they extend beyond purely physical sexuality into other forms of intimacy (Klesse, 2006). Some prefer to self-identify as poly as opposed to CNM because they prefer an identification not rooted in language that negates or excludes (Klesse, 2011). Kink-poly-identified individuals also self-determine their relationship structures in a variety of ways; however, the emphasis in successful kink-poly relationships tends to be on transparency, communication, consent, and a focus on cultivating emotional in addition to physical intimacy (Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Taormino, 2008). In the following sections, common themes in the intersection of kink- and poly-oriented relationship types are identified; historical background is given for the respective communities; theories of identity formation are explored; clinical issues are reviewed; and recommendations for clinical interventions are made.

## Methods

To find literature pertaining specifically to the intersection of kink and poly, Google Scholar and EBSCOhost databases containing published peer-reviewed academic journals and eBooks were searched using keywords *kink* and *poly*; *BDSM* and *poly*; *SM* and *poly*; *kink* and *polyamory*; *BDSM* and *polyamory*; *SM* and *polyamory*; *kink* and *consensual non-monogamy*; *BDSM* and *consensual non-monogamy*; and *SM* and *consensual non-monogamy*. The Boolean operator “and” was used in order to limit results to literature referencing both keywords. Search filters were set to exclude results other than literature from published and peer-reviewed academic journals or eBooks. Also excluded were articles that related to electronics, engineering, or molecular structures (e.g. from *kink* and *poly* and *SM* and *poly* searches), and articles pertaining to kink-oriented sexuality or poly-oriented relationship structure, but that did not reference their intersection.

## Interacting layered relationship identities

It is interesting to note that Google Scholar and EBSCOhost database searches for *BDSM* yielded 6850 and 4930 results, respectively; the same database searches for *polyamory* yielded 3070 and 3046, respectively; fewer than 20 were articles on either kink or poly that referenced an intersection of kink and poly; and four articles focused specifically on the intersection of kink and poly (Barker, 2005; Bauer, 2010; Green, 2007; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Two out of these four articles reported specifically on the intersection of kink and poly in the queer (Bauer, 2010) or lesbian and gay communities (Barker, 2005). Bauer's study on non-monogamy in queer BDSM communities (2010) showed a substantial majority of kink-poly-identified people: 80% of participants reported being in an actively non-monogamous relationship; 10% of participants reported being in a monogamous dyad, but with plans to become non-monogamous at some point in the future; and the remaining 10% of participants reported being in a monogamous relationship, but engaging in extra-dyadic kink. In contrast to Bauer's (2010) study of poly identifications among kink-identified participants, Deri (2015) conducted a study that reported kink identifications among queer- and poly-identified women – approximately 65% of the sample was kink-poly-identified. It is not possible to make a generalizable assertion across demographics based on these two studies, but it is interesting to note the indication that kink-identified individuals are more likely to also be poly-identified, than poly-identified individuals are to also be kink-identified (Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015; Labriola, 2010). There are no studies reporting on the prevalence of the kink-poly intersection among heterosexual-identified people; however, the frequent mentions of the kink-poly intersection in the literature related to either kink or poly indicate the likelihood of intersecting kink-poly identifications across demographics.

In the extant literature noting an overlap in the kink and poly communities, common themes include: (1) central tenets of transparency, negotiation, and communication; (2) openness to sexual and gender diversity and other non-mainstream identifications; and (3) willingness to challenge social norms (Bauer, 2010; Klesse, 2011; Sheff, 2013). The literature emphasizes consent as a defining characteristic of both kink and poly lifestyles – it is what distinguishes kink-related interactions from abuse, and polyamory from infidelity (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Pitagora, 2013). That is not to say that abuse never occurs in kink-oriented relationships and that infidelity cannot occur in a polyamorous relationship, but unless action is taken, the persistence of these behaviours indicates the potential disintegration of a functional kink and/or poly relationship (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Pitagora, 2015).

The literature also references common motivational themes in kink-poly-identified individuals. Because of the shared focus among kink- and poly-identified individuals on communication, transparency, negotiation, and consent, individuals who practice kink tend to have cultivated a set of ethics and skills that dovetail well with the practice of poly, and vice versa (Bauer, 2010). Other avenues for crossover can be described in terms of direction. For example, in the direction of poly expanding into an incorporation of kink, many poly-identified individuals decide to do so because they want to avoid constraining their capacity for love or eroticism (Klesse, 2011), and the kink-oriented relationship structure provides the ideal context in which to explore erotic or sexual interests that cannot be met within their current relationship(s) (Bauer, 2010; Labriola, 2010; Sheff, 2013;

Taormino, 2008). In the direction of kink expanding into poly, during kink scene negotiations, a discussion around shared common interests, hard limits, and logistics might organically, and in some cases necessarily, include how many individuals and who will be involved (Bauer, 2010). Kink-oriented interactions are designed to challenge conventional sexual norms, therefore the challenging of conventional relationship structure norms in Western culture, or mononormativity<sup>3</sup> (Bauer, 2010), seems a logical progression (Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2011).

The literature indicates that polyamory is more common in the kink community than kink-related behaviours are in the poly community (Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015; Labriola, 2010), and is common to the point of being a cultural norm in non-straight subsections of the kink community (Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015). For example, in leatherdyke and dyke + (i.e. self-identified dykes, queers, and trans individuals) kink communities, an individual who identifies as monogamous might have difficulty in finding another monogamous partner (Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015). This, combined with an abundance of role models in an environment of depathologization, might strongly influence a historically monogamous individual to entertain polyamory as viable and perhaps necessary (Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015).

Another common motivator for the expansion of a monogamous relationship into a kink-poly-oriented relationship relates to the vastness of sexual diversity – individuals may find themselves in an otherwise highly functional partnership that cannot incorporate important aspects of their sexuality, such as in the case of partners who have unshared kink-related interests or conflicting sexual identities or power role orientations (Bauer, 2010; Labriola, 2010). Examples of such relationship configurations might include a kink-oriented and a non-kink-oriented member; two dominant- or submissive-identified individuals; a dominant- or submissive-identified individual and one who is a switch, i.e. fluid in their power role preference (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007); or a partner who identifies as monosexual (i.e. exclusively heterosexual or homosexual), and one who identifies as bisexual, pansexual, or queer (Sheff, 2013; Taormino, 2008). Additionally, a relationship might have a partner who remains monogamous while another partner is non-monogamous (Taormino, 2008). For example, because there tends to be more submissive- than dominant-identified individuals in the kink community, a kink-poly-oriented relationship might consist of a non-monogamous dominant with multiple monogamous submissive partners (Deri, 2015; Taormino, 2008). Alternately, in the kink-oriented/non-kink-oriented relationship, the non-kink-oriented partner may choose to remain monogamous, while the kink-oriented partner is non-monogamous, and seeks out other relationships only to satisfy their kink-related desires (Taormino, 2008).

Some kink-poly-identified individuals prefer hierarchical relationships, whereas some prefer more egalitarian relationships among partners (Bauer, 2010; Green, 2007). Hierarchies can be expressed in terms of more intimate or emotional connections taking precedence over purely sexual or erotic ones, or in terms of power role orientations (Deri, 2015; Taormino, 2008). In kink-poly-oriented relationships that incorporate kink into lifestyle, the hierarchical prioritizing structure of primary/secondary/tertiary/ancillary partnership structure is common, with priority contingent on a variety of factors, including seniority, legality (i.e. marriage), and/or emotional connection (Green, 2007). This is an interesting phenomenon to consider, as the prioritization of a primary dyad is perhaps one of the few ways that kink-poly-oriented relationships (if unwittingly) emulate

mononormative relationship standards (Bauer, 2010; Rubin et al., 2014). Not all hierarchical relationships devalue non-primary partners, however; the way that kink-poly-oriented relationships are defined is specific to the individuals involved, and might also be fluid (Taormino, 2008).

Another overlap in kink and poly communities is the concept of “family” or ongoing group connections. These configurations might be called a leather or poly family, and may include partners who share connections that are emotional, erotic, and/or sexual, as well as include partners who engage solely on an emotional, erotic, or sexual level (Klesse, 2011). Both leather and poly families are “chosen families,” though leather families may or may not consider themselves to be polyamorous, and vice versa (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007). Leather families are more often hierarchical than poly families tend to be, and are based on protocols and traditions originating around the 1950s from “Leather Culture” (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007).

### Converging histories

There is evidence in the literature noting the existence of kink-related behaviours long before the adoption of the terms “sadism” and “masochism” by Krafft-Ebing in 1886, though nearly a century passed before kink communities began forming in the early 1970s (as cited in Sisson, 2007). Similarly, references to non-monogamy have appeared throughout much of recorded history (Deri, 2015). Polyamory as a self-identification and community did not come into popular use until around 1990, and was finally entered into the Oxford English dictionary in 2006 (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Klesse, 2011).

A historical overlap between the kink and consensual non-monogamy communities can be traced to progressive political movements in the 1960s, when activism around these and other unconventional lifestyles and belief systems gained momentum (Klesse, 2011). Though stereotypical beliefs often assume a male-dominant/female-submissive structure in both kink- and poly-oriented relationships, this type of heteronormative relationship structure is less common in kink and poly communities relative to the general population; this may be due to the profeminist tendency among kink- and poly-identified individuals (Barker, 2005; Barker et al., 2007; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014). Similarly, egalitarian relationships not only exist in the kink community, but in some cases are intentionally enacted to allow for power exchange that takes place solely within heavily rule-bound, time-delimited scenes (Deri, 2015). McClintock’s (1993) exploration of the intersection between fetishism and gender power asserts that the parameters of a kink scenario provide a safe space where any gender can adopt any power role, challenging the constraints of stereotypical gender expression.

An unfortunate historical overlap is the tendency for kink-poly-identified individuals to experience stigma and discrimination (Bauer, 2010; Sheff, 2013; Yost & Hunter, 2012). Individuals who practice kink-related behaviours and lifestyles have been pathologized since prior to the coining of the term sadomasochism by Freud in 1905 (as cited in Sisson, 2007). Pathologization and stigmatization continues today, recursively reinforced by socialization, media representation, and clinical and educational inertia (Pitagora, 2013). The authors of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* made an effort to depathologize kink in their emphasis on consent as the marker of difference between a (consensually enacted) paraphilia and a (non-consensually enacted) paraphilic

disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While it is heartening to note the focus on consent, the revised definitions remain problematic (Federoff, Gioacchino, & Murphy, 2013; Pitch, 2014). The *DSM-5* authors assert that genitally-focused sexual interactions by phenotypically normal participants are the standard for comparison, thereby reinforcing heteronormative sexuality (as cited in Federoff et al., 2013; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014). This type of definition implies that any sexual arousal not derived from heteronormative penile–vaginal penetrative sex can be considered a paraphilia, reinforcing the pathologization and social stigma of non-genitally-focused kink-related sexual behaviours, such as sensation play or power exchange (Barker, 2013b; Federoff et al., 2013; Hinman, 2013).

Though polyamory has not been pathologized in the literature to the extent that kink has been, academic, political, and popular discourses have historically presented essentialist mononormativity as the only morally correct relationship structure, and considerations for consensual non-monogamy are rare within mainstream psychology and therapy practices (Barker & Langdrige, 2010). Those who are out (or outed) about their lifestyles might face consequences such as the loss of employment, housing, and custody of children, and rejection by friends and family (Barker, 2013b; Sheff, 2013). Research on sexual-minority identity formation suggests that the tendency for a sexual-minority-identified individual to assert that their identification is an essential biological component of their identity might be an indication of and reaction to stigmatization, in that the assertion of essentialism may be an attempt at validation and social inclusion within their sexual-minority subculture (Yost & Hunter, 2012).

### **Identity formation: essentialism vs. social constructionism**

Similar to most sexual identities, some kink- and/or poly-oriented individuals consider kink and/or poly to be integral to their identity, while others consider kink and/or poly to be more behavioural and contextual activities unrelated to their conception of identity (Barker et al., 2007; Tweedy, 2010). Poly can indicate a sexual identity, preference, or practice, and other times indicating a worldview, philosophy, or discourse (Deri, 2015; Klesse, 2014). Some sexuality researchers (Kleinplatz et al., 2006) consider poly-oriented individuals to be members of a sexual-minority group, while others refer to poly as a relationship orientation (Barker, 2005). Theories of essentialism assert that kink and poly are inherent sexual orientations similar to heterosexuality and homosexuality; conversely, social constructionist theories contend that the fluidity and ambiguity among kink- and/or poly-identified individuals in terms of the way they self-identify indicate that kink and/or poly identifications are not necessarily fundamental to identity (Klesse, 2014).

Essentialist theories of identity assert that there are true essences in humans that originate internally, and can be detected and known directly and objectively (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Conversely, social constructionists argue that it is not possible to directly understand true essences, but that identifications such as gender and sexuality originate externally through the social construction of reality (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). In DeLamater and Hyde's (1998) literature review of essentialist and constructionist theories of sexual identity, the authors suggest that the possibility of a combined effect is unlikely. In contrast, many queer sexologists suggest an interdisciplinary approach that allows for a biological predisposition in sex and gender variance, and also emphasizes the important

role that culture plays in the expression of variance (Nichols, 2014). Dynamical systems such as this account for individuals who feel that their sexuality is innate and fixed, as well as individuals who feel their sexuality is more fluid and influenced by interpersonal relationships (Yost & Hunter, 2012). Because there is extraordinary diversity and fluidity in sexual expression within society, subcultures, and the individual, it follows that a wide variety of choices can be made in self-defining and expressing one's kink-poly-orientation. This notion of self-defined identifications could be seen to conflict with the essentialist suggestion that these identifications might instead be inherent (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Klesse, 2014; Yost & Hunter, 2012). A study exploring kink-oriented participants' initial awareness of their kink-related interests found more essentialist (at 43.4%) than constructionist (at 35.3%) narratives, with some of the participants reporting constructionist influences using essentialist language to frame their responses (Yost & Hunter, 2012). The authors noted that there was also an interactive effect, in that some participants believed their identification was inherent, but noted the influence of socialization prior to discovering an interest in kink (Yost & Hunter, 2012). The authors note that these proportions – more essentialist than constructionist and a smaller combined proportion – are common in research pertaining to sexual-minority communities (Yost & Hunter, 2012).

Researchers such as Klesse (2014) and Tweedy (2010) suggest that essentialist views on kink and poly identifications might have detrimental legal or political ramifications for the groups. The essentialist perspective argues that kink and poly identifications are fixed and durable sexual orientations, and therefore can be situated within the political and legal frameworks of sexual diversity in order to seek civil rights protections (Klesse, 2014; Tweedy, 2010). This stands in conflict with the idea that situating kink and poly identifications within rigid essentialist boundaries serve to downplay the diversity that exists within the kink and poly communities (Klesse, 2014). Tweedy (2010) suggests an expansion of the way “sexual orientation” is defined to include a choice of direction, relationship, association, connection, and/or disposition as they relate to libidinal gratification. The author asserts that this definition would better represent inclusivity and diversity in kink, poly, and other sexual-minority communities, and allow for the inclusion of all sexual minorities in anti-discrimination law (Tweedy, 2010).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to assert a stance on political and legal discourse around kink and/or poly, therapists working with individuals who are in kink and/or poly relationships might find that an awareness of the controversies that affect people in kink-poly relationships helpful to the therapeutic process. Regardless of how an individual's sexual identification is formed, those with non-mainstream identifications such as kink and/or poly face difficulties that those with mainstream identifications do not. Because kink and poly identifications are concealable, kink-poly-identified individuals may be perceived by those outside the communities as non-kink-oriented and mononormative, they may suffer effects associated with having a concealable stigmatized identity due to anticipated stigma (the fear their sexual interests will be revealed) and cultural stigma (the risk of social devaluation), which have been found to contribute to increased risk of depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms (British Psychological Society, 2012; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Fortunately, these symptoms can be mitigated by a strong social support network, which exist for kink-poly-identified individuals in online and many local kink and poly communities, as well as within kink-poly-oriented relationships themselves – when a kink-poly relationship is successful, it allows for and perhaps forces

personal growth by virtue of the high level of communication skills and self-awareness that such relationships require (Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006; Pillai-Friedman, Pollitt, & Castaldo, 2015).

## Clinical issues and treatment recommendations

Because of dominant pathologizing discourses that persist among providers, individuals with atypical sexualities may avoid seeking services, which can exacerbate depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms (Barker et al., 2007; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014; Kolmes et al., 2006). When individuals do seek help from therapists, they may either avoid disclosure of their identifications or try to suppress their desires after being pathologized by previous therapists (Barker et al., 2007; Bettinger, 2003; Graham, 2014; Kolmes et al., 2006). People newly aware of having kink-related desires often come to therapy because of shame and fear around their desires due to socialization or internalized stigmatization, and may ask a therapist to help to “cure” them (Barker et al., 2007). However, attempting to “cure” people of their kink-related desires is analogous to conversion or reparative therapy for lesbian-, gay-, bisexual-, and transgender-identified individuals, which is no longer considered an appropriate or ethical form of therapeutic treatment, and is found to be harmful (American Psychiatric Association, 2009).

It is important for therapists working with kink-poly-identified individuals to approach the work with care and an open mind, and to avoid common fallacies that influence the dominant negative discourses their clients may have internalized. These fallacies include: *those who enjoy kink come from a history of childhood trauma or abuse* (there is no reported evidence that people who enjoy kink are any different than those who do not in terms of histories of trauma or abuse); *kink is similar to addiction, in that participants will always want to try something more extreme* (there is also no such evidence of this phenomenon, though there is research suggesting that individuals may reach a plateau unique to themselves) (Barker, 2005; Barker et al., 2007; Nichols, 2006); *poly-identified people are promiscuous* (research indicates that some poly-identified people consider themselves to be promiscuous, while others reject the term promiscuity as culturally relative and pathologizing of sexuality, and still others have fewer lifelong partners than many monogamous-identified people); *poly-identified people run a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than monogamous-identified people* (research shows that while poly-identified people may have more lifetime sexual partners than monogamous-identified people, the former report greater condom use and more frequent STI testing than the latter, with no difference in STI diagnoses across relationship type) (Klesse, 2006; Lehmilller, 2015; Wosick-Correa, 2010). It is not uncommon for non-kink- and/or poly-identified therapists to be reported by clients as inadequate, or feel inadequate themselves in treating kink- and/or poly-identified individuals (Bettinger, 2003; Brandon, 2011; Graham, 2014; Kelsey, Stiles, Spiller, & Diekhoff, 2013). In a 2013 study assessing therapists' attitudes towards BDSM, 76% of the sample had worked with at least one BDSM-oriented client, though only 48% felt they were culturally competent enough to do so (Kelsey et al., 2013). Research indicates a gap in both kink and poly content in most mental health training programs (Bettinger, 2003; Graham, 2014; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015), highlighting the importance of therapists' self-awareness around cultural competency, and the need for therapists to self-educate, seek consultation or supervision, and promptly

refer their clients to a culturally competent colleague as needed (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2004; Pitch, 2014).

Kink-poly-identified individuals who seek therapy often do so for issues not related to discomfort around their identifications (Bettinger, 2003; British Psychological Society, 2012; Hinman, 2013; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014). While it is not necessary for a therapist to be kink- and/or poly-identified in order to do good work, it is important to have the capacities to be: affirmative of and able to normalize alternative lifestyles; well-informed about atypical practices and lifestyles; comfortable in discussing atypical behaviours and lifestyles; self-aware and reflexive about countertransference; and able to avoid focusing on sexual practices that are not part of the treatment (Barker et al., 2007; Bettinger, 2003; Brandon, 2011; British Psychological Society, 2012; Hinman, 2013; Nichols, 2006; Pitch, 2014). Other clinical issues common to kink and/or poly identified individuals relate to relationship issues among partners with conflicting interests or identifications, or who are struggling with intimate partner violence (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Pitagora, 2015). Particularly in the case of abuse, it is crucial that a therapist have a clear understanding of the difference between a consensual kink-poly relationship and sexual coercion or assault, and, particularly when in treatment with people new to one or both lifestyles, a certain amount of psychoeducation may be necessary (Bettinger, 2003; Hinman, 2013; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013).

The most common kink-poly-oriented individual seeking therapy is one new to a kink-poly relationship (Barker et al., 2007), though people in any stage of lifestyle and identity development might face issues that would benefit from bibliotherapy and additional community support (Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014). The kink-poly relationship dynamic requires an understanding of the ongoing work and complex relationship skills involved. At the outset of treatment, Labriola (2010) recommends exploring whether an individual feels more kink- or poly-identified, and whether one of those identifications takes precedence or influences the other. Kink-poly relationships require honesty, with partners and oneself, which includes deciding whether the kink-poly dynamic is a good fit – a topic of conversation to be revisited from time to time, particularly upon the addition or subtraction of partners (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Taormino, 2008).

Taormino (2008) asserts that kink-oriented individuals tend to be more successful at sustaining poly relationships than non-kink-oriented individuals because the former tends to: have more clearly delineated roles and expectations for partners; want to articulate their needs and desires; be willing to negotiate, set boundaries, and compromise; and avoid making assumptions about their partners' desires, needs, or abilities. Those new to the kink-poly relationship may need assistance with thinking through what areas need strengthening, within themselves and perhaps also their partners. If an individual has issues with insecurity or self-esteem, this should be addressed before expanding any relationship into polyamory (Sheff, 2013; Taormino, 2008). Transparency and conflict resolution skills should be encouraged, as well as clarification of roles, and how those roles function in relation to different partners (Taormino, 2008). Those who identify as submissive may have an inherent tendency to want to please, sometimes to their own disadvantage, in which case a focus on clarifying roles and boundaries and improving negotiation skills can be helpful (British Psychological Society, 2012).

Compersion is a term often used in the polyamory community to refer to a type of relational empathy in which pleasure is felt when an individual's partner experiences love or

sexual pleasure with another partner, thereby overriding feelings of jealousy (Deri, 2015; Klesse, 2011; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Jealousy is a common reaction for many unfamiliar with or new to poly practices, and is often motivated by feelings of inferiority or fears of being replaced or losing a partner's connection or affection; though perhaps easier said than done, learning the art of compersion can be an antidote to jealousy (Deri, 2015; Labriola, 2010). Compersion can be particularly difficult to achieve when a relationship is expanded into a poly relationship structure before it is ready; for example, if the relationship's foundation is unstable or unclear, if partners are insecure in the relationship, or if one or more partners suffer from low self-esteem (Deri, 2015; Labriola, 2010; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). However, having a positive self-image does not preclude an individual from experiencing jealousy, which can be deeply rooted due to the internalization of mononormativity (Bauer, 2010; Deri, 2015). Achieving compersion can be aided by minimizing the potential for jealousy by reframing conceptions of love, what it means to be in a relationship, and expressions of sexuality and emotions (Deri, 2015).

Jealousy can be particularly problematic in a kink-poly dynamic due to unexpected relational developments, such as when interactions have been compartmentalized as purely kinky, erotic, or sexual, but become more intimate, or evolve into something else, for example an interaction that begins as a power exchange that leads to an emotional connection (Labriola, 2010). The most effective way to address these types of relational changes in a kink-poly relationship is in making continual efforts towards self-improvement, and a desire to support partner(s) in the same effort (Deri, 2015; Sheff, 2013; Taormino, 2008). It is generally not the erotic or sexual behaviour that is at the root of jealousy, but the communication around the behaviour, and the emotions or issues that the behaviour triggers (Deri, 2015; Hinman, 2013; Taormino, 2008). For example, a common phenomenon in kink-poly relationships that can incite jealousy is "New Relationship Energy" (or NRE), which can affect the amount of attention that a partner gives to existing relationships because the new relationship feels powerfully distracting (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Sheff, 2013). In this case, self-awareness and mindfulness are crucial in keeping a balance among and avoiding neglect of partners (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Sheff, 2013). Mindfulness is described as a way of increasing intentionality and compassion, and encouraging a present-focused, non-judgmental state in which individuals become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (Barker, 2013a; Boyd-Franklin, Cleek, Wofsy, & Mundy, 2013; Kozlowski, 2013). When conflicts arise, some will fight against distress, but mindfulness offers a means through which to observe and endure pain in order to find productive ways to improve relationships (Barker, 2013a; Boyd-Franklin et al., 2013; Kozlowski, 2013).

Many kink-poly-identified individuals have internalized stigma around mainstream sexuality, and problems in relationships may arise due to associated feelings of shame and guilt (Barker, 2013a; Hinman, 2013). Mindfulness allows for a different response to conflict and suffering, and a space to embrace difficulties and engage in self-examination instead of avoidance and defensive behaviour, and learn a perspective of interconnectedness and an ongoing process of self-reflection and growth (Barker, 2013a). Barker's adaptation of insight dialogue within the context of mindfulness could be particularly helpful in addressing the issues that surface in the kink-poly relationship (as cited in Barker, 2013a). The steps of insight dialogue include: slowing down habitual thoughts and responses; relaxing and accepting thoughts and feelings in the present moment; extending

awareness beyond the self to the environment and to others; interacting without an agenda and/or attempts to force or control interactions; actively listening and committing to learning; and speaking truthfully (Barker, 2013a).

Kaufman and Johnson's (2004) discussion of stigmatized identities in sexual-minority groups uses symbolic interaction and the processing of reflected appraisals as a framework for identity development, negotiation, and disclosure (see also Burke, 1991). The authors assert that a focus on interpersonal and romantic relationships is necessary in order to gain an understanding of stigma. Symbolic interaction is the process of comparing reflected appraisals (the impact that others' perceptions have on self-conceptualization) with one's identity standard (one's internal self-perception) in a reflexive way (Burke, 1991; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Individuals tend to experience stress from discrepancies in reflected appraisals, and through reiterations of this process, individuals adjust their behaviour so their reflected appraisals more closely match their identity standard, thereby reducing stress around their identity (Burke, 1991; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Disclosure (i.e. transparency and communication) and social support (from partners and community) come into play, as positive reflected appraisals are crucial for an individual's ability to successfully maintain a stigmatized (e.g. kink-poly-oriented) identity (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Interactions with those who share atypical identities can be of great importance, in order to learn alternative interpretations of the stigma in question, and prosocial ways to cope from sympathetic others (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004).

## Conclusion

Kink- and/or poly-oriented relationships are becoming increasingly more common and visible in the popular media, yet experts in the field of psychotherapy and sexology suggest that kink and poly curricula has been all but absent from training programs for mental health providers (Bettinger, 2003; Graham, 2014; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015). Because of dominant pathologizing discourses that persist among providers, individuals with atypical sexualities or lifestyles may tend to avoid seeking services, which can exacerbate depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms that are commonly found in those who experience social and/or cultural stigma around sexual-minority status (Barker et al., 2007; British Psychological Society, 2012; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014; Kolmes et al., 2006; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). The importance of therapists' self-awareness around cultural competency, and the need for therapists to self-educate, seeks consultation or supervision, and/or promptly refer their clients to a culturally competent colleague has been noted in the literature pertaining to clinical work with kink- and/or poly-identified people (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2004; Pitch, 2014).

In order to do clinical work with kink-poly-identified people that is beneficial – as opposed causing harm by reinforcing stigma (Pitch, 2014) – it is important that therapists are affirmative of and able to normalize alternative lifestyles, and are self-aware and reflexive about countertransference (Barker et al., 2007; Bettinger, 2003; Brandon, 2011; British Psychological Society, 2012; Hinman, 2013; Nichols, 2006; Pitch, 2014). The common themes in the intersection of kink- and poly-orientations – the central tenets of transparency, negotiation, and communication; an openness to sexual and gender diversity and other non-mainstream identifications; a willingness to challenge social norms; and the desire to engage in personal growth (Bauer, 2010; Klesse, 2011; Kolmes et al.,

2006; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015; Sheff, 2013) – are important for therapists to be aware of in working with this population in order to determine what course of treatment might best benefit the partners or individuals in question. Of primary importance to clinicians working with the kink-poly population is the awareness that kink-poly-identified individuals may face additional stressors from external sources outside of their relationships, as well as within their relationships. Fortunately, many kink-poly-identified people, simply by virtue of their lifestyle and the people around them, will already be aware of and in the process of strengthening their skills around transparency, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and self-awareness. Examples of clinical interventions provided by the literature include: a focus on how jealousy is triggered and affects individuals in a kink-poly relationship, and how it might be transformed into compersion (Deri, 2015; Hinman, 2013; Klesse, 2011; Labriola, 2010; Taormino, 2008; Wosick-Correa, 2010); a raising of self-awareness and mindfulness to improve access to and understanding of emotions and strengthen communication (Barker, 2013a; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Boyd-Franklin et al., 2013; Kozlowski, 2013; Sheff, 2013); and an exploration of internalized stigma and associated feelings of shame and guilt (Barker, 2013a; Hinman, 2013).

While there are no studies reporting on the prevalence of the kink-poly intersection among heterosexual-identified people, the frequent mentions of the kink-poly intersection in the literature related to kink and poly communities respectively indicates the prevalence of the kink-poly intersection across demographics, which represents a much needed area for future research. The extant research on kink and poly identifications shows that there are people of colour and of differing abilities with alternative sexual identifications, but also that they are rarely adequately represented, if represented at all (Rubin et al., 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Research teams are often comprised of people with privileged intersections of gender identification, sexual orientation, race, class, ability, age, immigration status, nationality, and education. All too often, participant recruitment strategies reflect this intersectionality of privilege, thus obscuring intersectionality of oppression, and distorting the public perception of alternative sexualities (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; van Anders, 2015). This paper reveals kink-poly to be a specific intersectionality of identifications prevalent enough to highlight the need for further research. It is also important to note the opportunity in such research to incorporate recruitment strategies more inclusive of intersectionally oppressed individuals (Haritaworn et al., 2006). The bottom line for kink-poly-identified people, as well as for non-kink- and/or non-poly-identified people, those with intersecting privileged and/or oppressed identifications, and the clinicians working with kink-poly-identified people, is to continue making efforts toward insight and self-actualization – in whatever means that will function best within the given relationship structure and power dynamic.

## Notes

1. Heteronormative sexuality refers to stereotyped heterosexual scripts, which include other-sex sexuality, but also includes high male sexuality/low female sexuality (van Anders, 2015).
2. Homonormativity refers to the stereotyped notion that people with same-sex attractions and intimate interests should follow homonormative intimacy scripts, e.g. are exclusively attracted to same-sex individuals and exclusively have same-sex intimate interests (van Anders, 2015).

3. Mononormativity refers to the notion that people should exclusively want to have intimate sexual connections with one other person (van Anders, 2015).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Dulcinea Pitagora* is a therapist licensed by the State of New York, with a practice that is LGBTQ, trans, poly, and kink affirmative. Pitagora is a sexual freedom advocate and conducts research, lectures, and seminars on the topics of alternative sexuality and gender diversity.

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